

## BAPTISM AS A COVENANT SIGN

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The meaning of Christian baptism generally is identified with the outward symbol for this rite. The ritual application of water to a person may depict a cleansing,<sup>1</sup> as well as a new spiritual beginning from death to life (Col 2:12-13).

Beyond these basic meanings, the Bible's usage of the word "baptism" broadens out to include the concepts of initiation, empowerment,<sup>2</sup> identification and spiritual union,<sup>3</sup> and trial by ordeal.<sup>4</sup> This article will review some of these meanings in connection with ceremonial baptism, particularly the concept of a symbolic "trial by ordeal" within the framework of God's covenant with His people. As such, baptism should be understood as a sacral sign of the New Covenant.

### ***The Sweep of the Covenant***

God's covenant is the unifying message and over-arching structure of biblical revelation. Grace, salvation, and judgment are key themes of the Bible, but they all are proffered through the covenantal arrangements that God initiates.

The idea of covenant runs from the early parts of Genesis and appears hundreds of times in the OT. New Testament history begins with Zacharias' confession of the imminent outworking of God's "holy covenant" (Luke 1:72), and the Book of Hebrews explains the climactic revelation of the New Covenant that was enacted at the last supper and sealed at the cross.

### ***God Brings Man into Covenant***

The first explicit reference to "covenant" is significant. It occurs before the days of the flood. Whereas the wicked world will be judged by water, Noah's family will be saved through the waters because God promises to bring him into the binding relation of the covenant: "...everything that is on the earth shall die. But *I will establish my covenant* with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you."<sup>5</sup>

Whenever an OT covenant was made, whether by God or by men, a special descriptive formula normally was used. The technical phrase in Hebrew for establishing a bi-lateral covenant was "to cut a covenant." This language was used because a ritualistic splitting of a sacrificial animal was involved, as was the case when God made a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15).<sup>6</sup>

In God's covenant with Noah, however, scholars<sup>7</sup> have noted that the phrasing for making that covenant (in Gen 6:18) is not the usual technical form. Rather, God promises to "establish" or "make firm" his covenant with Noah. This unexpected language may imply that

the divine covenant had been initiated before the days of Noah, who was about to become the new father of humanity. That covenant, of course, would have been the same covenant that God had made with the first father of the race.<sup>8</sup>

After Noah, the next key covenant representative was Abraham. Abraham as the human mediator of the covenant became the new representative head of God's people. So much more than being an example of faith, the Jews referred to him as "Father Abraham," and the NT writers identify him as the father of all the faithful.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Continuity of the Covenant***

With Abraham God's promises and covenant conditions are most clearly delineated thus far. Here are some key elements of the covenantal arrangement with Abraham:

- The gospel is revealed to Abraham in the promise of a Kinsman-Redeemer.<sup>10</sup>
- A perpetual rite of initiation into God's covenant community is established with circumcision.
- This community dedicated to God's service is charged with policing its members, even to the degree of excommunication.<sup>11</sup>

Most students of ecclesiology recognize the foregoing three elements as the requisite essentials for the organized church. These three essentials definitely are found in the NT church. Unbiased eyes will see them also from the days of Abraham, when the primitive church of the OT was established. With this recognition comes a realization of the continuity of the visible church from the OT into the NT, as well as a knowledge of the unfolding of the Abrahamic Covenant into the New Covenant.<sup>12</sup>

Galatians 3 is a clear bridge between these two promissory covenants. The coming of Christ is at the center of both (3:16, 18, 29). The Gentiles come to God through Christ, an evident blessing promised to the Father of the faithful (Gal 3:14), and all who belong to Christ are Abraham's seed by faith (3:29).<sup>13</sup>

Galatians 3 draws this close connection between the two covenants. The Redeemer and the beneficiaries are the same, yet there are some key differences. The difference brought by the New Covenant is that there are no longer any outward, distinguishing differences for membership. According to Gal 3:28 there now is no difference between believing Jews and Greeks, between slave and free, between male and female. Outward distinctions have passed away under the universal operation of the New Covenant.

Significantly, no new distinctions are mentioned in this context of continuity and discontinuity of the covenant, particularly no distinction based upon age. This would have been the text where Paul might have revealed that children of believers are no longer in the covenant, since they clearly had been under the Abrahamic Covenant. What Paul does reinforce is the entrance of all covenant members by way of baptism (3:27). Not only will circumcision not be required of Jew nor Gentile, the New Covenant broadened to extend the rite of initiation to

women. And if circumcision is not required of Gentile converts, neither will it be required for children of believers. But baptism will be required for children of believers under the gracious—not narrowed—terms of the New Covenant. There are fewer distinctions under the New Covenant, not more than the Abrahamic Covenant.

### ***Circumcision and Baptism***

Reasons for recognizing a primitive OT church from the days of Abraham already have been given. One of the necessary elements of the church is standardized rituals. The NT church has two, baptism and the Lord's Supper. One is a rite of initiation, the other a rite of renewal.

There should be no surprise that these same two kinds of rites were found in the OT church: circumcision, the rite of initiation for adult and juvenile males, and Passover for all Israelites. Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, instituted the NT form of these two sacraments, and the OT forms were instituted through God's covenant mediators, Abraham and Moses.

The NT confirms the connection between circumcision and baptism, as well as the Passover and the Lord's Supper.<sup>14</sup> Colossians 2:11-14 is the NT bridge from baptism to circumcision. While the exact mode of baptism may not be in view in this passage,<sup>15</sup> Paul shows that the meaning of circumcision and baptism is the same.

That unified meaning has to do with the Christian's spiritual death in Christ and his vivification sealed by Christ's resurrection. Now it is easy for an immersionist to see a meaning of burial and resurrection behind the outward form of immersion, but why does Paul bring up circumcision in the same context with the same symbolic meaning of putting away sin and being made alive through the circumcision of Christ? Here is the text from Colossians 2:

“<sup>11</sup> In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, <sup>12</sup> buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. <sup>13</sup> And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” (NASB)

The repetition of the phrases “in him” and “with him” emphasizes the believer's spiritual union with Christ. That union, of course, is publicly sealed at one's baptism (or circumcision in the OT). In relation to the question of the symbolism of circumcision, just how can someone who is “dead in the uncircumcision of the flesh” be made alive through Christ's circumcision? The answer turns on the meaning of Christ's circumcision.

This “circumcision of Christ” does not refer to his sacramental circumcision on the eighth day after birth, but rather is a symbolic reference to his death by crucifixion. As his divine Representative, God worked out in Christ everything symbolized by Jesus' circumcision and his baptism. As our appointed Sin-bearer, not a token portion of the flesh, but his whole body was

given over to the circumcision of death “to put off the body of sins of the flesh.” God’s purpose in this truth, symbolized by the covenant sign of circumcision, is that Christ’s people must die to themselves and be made alive in Christ.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Baptism as a Symbolic Ordeal***

Colossians 2:11-13 speaks of our identity with Christ through the circumcision of his death and our baptism into his representative death. There are passages that also describe Christ’s atoning death as a baptism: “But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50).<sup>17</sup> This particular use of baptism cannot mean initiation or identification. It clearly means an impending personal trial.

There is biblical background for baptism depicting passage through a trial. A good starting point is 1 Cor 10, where the Israelites faced a terrible ordeal. Behind them were the swords of the Egyptians, and before them were the waves of the Red Sea. When God opened a way in the sea, there still were life-threatening conditions as the Israelites passed between two ominous walls of water that could kill them as easily as their pursuers.

God could have led his people out of Egypt through a rose garden, but he took them out in the midst of trial. God was testing their faith, and they passed this first test. This trial is called a baptism: “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:1-2). More than a passage through the sea, this event was a “rite of passage” to prove God’s care for the Israelites, as well as to prove their fidelity to the God of their fathers. It was an OT type of covenant baptism.<sup>18</sup>

The other OT baptism that enlarges our understanding of NT baptism as a covenant sign is the ordeal that Noah’s family went through. Like the Israelites at the Red Sea, Noah’s passage on the ark also occurred in a life and death situation. 1 Peter 3:20-21 links that diluvian ordeal to baptism:

“...in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

The great flood judgment brought God’s judicial ordeal upon all the world. The flood waters, likened to baptism by Peter, executed judgment upon rebels, while these same waters lifted Noah’s family out of a corrupt world and brought deliverance. Thus can Peter say that Noah was saved (“delivered”) through the threatening waters of baptism.

Note Peter’s clarification that the symbol of baptism in his argument is not that of purging the world or cleansing Noah’s family. Rather, Peter teaches that deliverance from death during the flood is a type of the Christian’s public baptism in which God promises deliverance from death in the resurrection of Christ. In this way baptism is an antitype of God’s judicial

ordeal that the Christian undergoes when he publicly identifies with the ordeal of Christ's death (Christ calls his passion a "baptism" in Luke 12:50) and with the vindication and deliverance of Christ sealed by his resurrection. The Christian's "good conscience" undergirds Peter's argument that baptism must also be viewed forensically as a judicial acquittal before God as God passes over in judgment to bring deliverance.

### ***Promises and Threats in Covenantal Signs***

What should not be lost in the foregoing discussion of circumcision and baptism is that the NT often speaks of baptism as a symbolic ordeal through which its objects may be condemned or delivered. This concept has been lost to the church because baptism has been studied apart from its covenantal purpose, especially by disregarding its OT parallel, circumcision.

God's covenant with his people is a binding relation.<sup>19</sup> Whether in the OT or NT, he has given outward seals<sup>20</sup> of his blessing that comes by walking with him. Those same seals depict a threat of punishment for covenant breakers.<sup>21</sup>

To be explicit, circumcision, the initiatory rite of the old covenant, promised blessing to its recipients in the following symbols: 1) removal of outward corruption, and 2) a daily reminder in a most mundane way that God's "...covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant,<sup>22</sup> and 3) a promise of a posterity and that Abraham's Seed<sup>23</sup> would deliver his people. On the other hand, the foreboding symbolism of circumcision is the threat of being "cut off." This involved expulsion from the covenant community and even loss of posterity.<sup>24</sup>

The OT rite of covenant renewal was the Passover. More than a didactic memorial of historical deliverance, this annual observance re-consecrated God's people to him and his service. The Israelite forefathers should have been dead, cut down in Egypt when the destroying angel passed by. That threat of the Passover hung over succeeding generations that might refuse to obey the terms of observance.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, God promised the blessing of life and deliverance to those who earnestly partook of the substitutionary Passover lamb of innocence. The elements of threat and promise in the observance of Passover reveal its sacramental nature as a covenant sign.

In the NT the two covenant signs are bloodless due to the finality of Christ's sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> The Lord's Supper, like the Passover, brings the promise of life through the life-giving symbols of God's perfect provision—the innocent Lamb of God who gives his life for the guilty.

Beyond the promise of life in Christ, however, many have failed to understand the warning of death in the Lord's Supper. Because this sacrament is a binding sign of covenantal renewal in Christ, Paul warns that the curse of the covenant will fall upon those who are not sincere in their observance. Nothing less than the curse of death<sup>27</sup> that Christ underwent will fall upon partakers of the covenant meal who will not personally appropriate Christ's atoning substitution in the symbols for his shed blood and broken body. As a covenantal sign, the Lord's Supper conveys a threatened curse besides its known blessings.

## **Baptism as a Covenant Sign**

The continuity of circumcision with baptism as parallel rites of covenant initiation has already been developed in this article. Both signify a promised blessing and a threatened curse under the two dispensations. More than its apparent symbolism of washing, the NT makes plain that the word “baptism” often conveys the idea of a life-threatening situation.

Water is essential to life and is life-giving, but too much water at the wrong time or in the wrong way brings death. From the days of its ceremonial uses in the ancient Near East, water, as a “two-edged sword,” has been used to symbolize both cursing and blessing. In the context of ancient covenants, water ordeals communicated a threat for infidelity, but a promise of life for integrity.

Christian baptism brings its recipients into close identification with the judicial ordeal that Christ underwent at the cross. That ordeal he called his baptism<sup>28</sup> which is proclaimed as his followers’ own baptism when they undergo the symbolic ordeal of water baptism.<sup>29</sup> This forensic understanding of the ritual portrays an official entrance into Christ’s New Covenant.

Covenant theologians view baptism as the authoritative seal<sup>30</sup> that displaced circumcision in guaranteeing the terms of the covenant. Baptism, the New Covenant parallel to circumcision, reveals more of what God is saying at the rite of initiation than what the passive object of baptism is testifying. This covenantal perspective of the sacraments easily and expectedly fits the Bible’s emphasis on the sovereignty of the God who is the First Cause in issues of soteriology and ecclesiology. At the same time, the passivity of the recipients of baptism accords with the biblical teaching of recognizing children of believers as covenant members.

## **Conclusion**

Before time the members of the Trinity jointly determined a plan of salvation for God’s elect. Because of the binding nature of the agreement and because the Son of God is given a reward in carrying out the Father’s will, some theologians have observed a covenantal construct that they have labeled the Covenant of Redemption.<sup>31</sup>

How fitting it is that the beneficiaries of Christ’s work should be baptized, not just in His Name, but in the Names of Father, Son, and Spirit. Trinitarian baptism in obedience to Christ’s Great Commission is the beginning of life-long obedience in everything that Jesus has commanded his disciples. As such, New Covenant members who receive baptism as the sign of the covenant are sharing in the benefits of the Covenant of Grace that God first promised to Adam and Eve, that were sealed to Abraham and his seed through the sign of circumcision, and that now are secure to the Lord’s people because of the baptism of Jesus in his passion and death.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 22:16: “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:16.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor 10:2; Rom 6:3.

<sup>4</sup> “I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50).

<sup>5</sup> Gen 6:17b-18.

<sup>6</sup> Gen 15 does not contain the technical language of “cutting a covenant”—still it does portray God in the form of a smoking lamp binding himself to the terms of his own covenant by undergoing the execration ritual among the foreboding pieces of the slaughtered substitute. Secondly, even though an initiatory ritual is acted out on God’s part, it is best to take this event as God’s confirmation of bringing Abraham into his pre-existing covenant, rather than God’s establishing a brand new covenant at this point.

<sup>7</sup> See Dumbrell in *Covenant and Creation*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>8</sup> Many theologians recognize a covenant relation between God and Adam. The elements of covenant are manifest in the garden, such as 1) a Sovereign and a vassal, 2) a threat and curse, and 3) a promise and blessing implied in access to the tree of life. Careful Bible students believe that God’s messenger, Hosea, corroborates this Adamic covenant in his proverbial remark that Israel, “like Adam...transgressed the covenant” (6:7, NASB).

<sup>9</sup> “...Abraham, who is the father of us all” (Rom 4:16). Rom 4:12 says Abraham is the father of believing Gentiles.

<sup>10</sup> Gal 3:8 indicates that Abraham had the gospel in the promise of his blessed Seed: compare Acts 3:25 with Gal 3:16.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham will disciple his children (Gen 18:19) in the fear of God. Those progeny refusing to circumcise their children will see their children excluded from the covenant (Gen 17:14) in fulfillment of the covenantal symbolism of circumcision.

<sup>12</sup> Besides having similar promises, one argument for the continuity of the Abrahamic Covenant with the New Covenant is the thrust of the opening book of the NT. Matthew’s gospel introduces Jesus as “the son of David, the son of Abraham,” and ends with the promised Messiah’s command to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...” The target nations in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19) are the same nations promised to Abraham, who would become “the father of many nations” (Gen 17:4-5; cf. Rom 4:17-18 and Gal 3:8, 14). Rather than initiating these Gentiles into the household of faith through Abrahamic circumcision, they will be baptized under the more universal terms of the New Covenant.

<sup>13</sup> Recognition of this spiritual continuity of the Abrahamic with the New Covenant helps answer the charge of anti-covenant theologians that the Abrahamic Covenant was largely a national/political type of covenant.

<sup>14</sup> “For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7-8).

<sup>15</sup> Col 2:11-13 is not speaking of the two rituals, but of the one spiritual meaning. This is clear from the introductory phrase, “in Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands...”

<sup>16</sup> “When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth” (Col 3:4-5); “yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight” (Col 1:21-22).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Matt 20:22-23 and Mark 10:38-39 for Christ’s prediction of his approaching passion as a baptism.

<sup>18</sup> Some non-covenant theologians who insist that βαπτίζω always means “immerse” have difficulty in explaining the OT baptism in 1 Cor 10:2, especially since the Israelites came through the sea on dry ground while only the Egyptians were submerged. Covenant theologians will grant that the Egyptian enemies did receive the threatened curses of this baptism (being overwhelmed by the ominous outward substance). At the same time, the Israelites (including their children), survived this trial by ordeal and received the covenant blessings of deliverance and new life, even though the outward substance was not ceremonially applied to them. The larger event of passing through the sea on a dry path must be seen as their baptism, an ordeal by water.

<sup>19</sup> Covenant treaties of the ancient Near East involved graphic rituals that promised blessing for obedience and threatened death for infidelity. The Hebrews were familiar with these covenant arrangements, and when God spoke in terms of the covenant, his people understood.

<sup>20</sup> In Rom 4:11 the apostle calls the covenant rite of circumcision both a “sign” and a “seal.” As an outward sign it symbolizes inward spiritual grace, and as a seal it confirms the divine promises of the covenant secured by the Mediator of the covenant (see WLC 162 & 165).

<sup>21</sup> For example, God executed his threats of the covenant by scattering the bodies of covenant breakers in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:5).

<sup>22</sup> Gen 17:13.

<sup>23</sup> Gal 3:16.

<sup>24</sup> Gen 17:14 calls for excommunication based on the symbol of circumcision. Paul, who threatens anathemas in Gal 1:8-9 for those who promote an anti-gospel, focuses that threat in Gal 5:12 on the Judaizers when he calls for their emasculation, apparently in keeping with the curse image of circumcision.

<sup>25</sup> The mandatory requirements for Passover observance are found in Exod 12:14-15.

<sup>26</sup> "...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. <sup>14</sup> For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified" (Heb 10:10, 14).

<sup>27</sup> 1 Cor 11:29-30 relates the judgment of illness and death upon those that abused the Lord's Supper.

<sup>28</sup> Luke 12:50.

<sup>29</sup> The covenantal perspective of Christ's baptism/ordeal at the cross helps shed light on how the waterless baptism of Rom 6:3-6 gives the covenant child a stake in Christ's death and resurrection.

<sup>30</sup> "And [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith" (Rom 4:11).

<sup>31</sup> For a fuller development of the Covenant of Redemption, see what Charles Hodge says at <http://www.mbrem.com/covenant/covchod4.htm>.