

The Covenant Question

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V. THE COVENANT AND BAPTISM:

1. Especially is the question of baptism of importance in connection with the covenant. This is evident when we notice that baptism is the sign of the covenant. All the errors and misunderstandings about the covenant that one has will appear in the treatment of baptism.

We all ought to be informed about the doctrine of baptism. Not merely because it has been a subject of debate, but especially because it is a very practical matter. We all celebrate the sacrament of baptism and some must at some time present their children in baptism, which requires that we do so consciously and intelligently, understanding the doctrine of baptism.

2. It is not our purpose to enter into a discussion of infant baptism, whether we ought to baptize children. We differ with the Baptist churches on that question and it has been settled in all of our minds that we are called upon to baptize our children and it is a blessing of the Lord that He establishes His covenant with us and with our children. Nevertheless, it is profitable to know why we baptize our children. This we ought to consider in connection with the doctrine of baptism at this time.

3. We ought to make a study of the Baptism Form. Although it is very familiar to all of us it would be very profitable for our societies to analyze the form with the question as to what are the doctrinal implications.

a. The form mentions that there are three parts to the doctrine of holy baptism and that the first part is that it points us to our impurity. This is the doctrine of total depravity. And it points us to the need to seek for salvation outside of ourselves.

b. In the second place the Form instructs us that baptism witnesseth and sealeth unto us the washing away of our sins. This is because we are baptized into the name of the triune God. The reasons are then given (you can read them) to show why being baptized into the Name of the triune God witnesseth and sealeth the washing away of our sins. In that connection is found the statement that God the Father witnesseth and sealeth unto us that He doth make an eternal covenant of grace with us. Thus the sign of baptism is considered as a sign and seal of God's covenant. The work of the Son and the Holy Spirit also must be considered as the one work of God triune and our salvation. The washing in the blood of the Son and the sanctifying of the Holy Spirit is also the blessing of the covenant which is signified

c. The third part of the doctrine of baptism points us to our obligation in the covenant.

d. Notice that these parts of the doctrine of baptism are the necessary things which we must know to enjoy the comfort that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. These parts correspond to the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism as it points out that we must know our sins and miseries and our salvation in Christ, and how we shall express our gratitude. Notice too that these parts also correspond to the answer of the Heidelberg Catechism's question 81, "For whom is the Lord's Supper instituted?" Again notice that these elements of the doctrine of baptism appear in the form for the administration of the Lord's Supper when it states what are the three parts of a true examination of ourselves.

Such an examination of all these points of instruction of our fathers will impress us with the importance of them not only but with their interrelation. If we err on our conception of the doctrines of our salvation as taught us in the catechism we err again in our understanding of the

sacraments. The same error which separates the teachings of the catechism, especially teaching or leaving the impression as if in the third part we are concerned with man's work, which man of himself, or the Christian of himself is able to perform appears in some views of baptism and the covenant. It is so evident in some instruction in connection with the Heidelberg Catechism that it is Arminianism all over again. Therefore the vital question for all of us is not whether there is a certain preaching out of the Catechism and a baptism with the form in the present day Reformed churches, but whether it is according to the fundamental principles of the same as derived from the Word of God. In the majority of Reformed churches this same Catechism and form that we use has a place but is corrupted by present day humanism.

4. After such a doctrinal study we are ready to examine some erroneous conceptions in connection with baptism and the covenant.

a. First of all we reject the teaching which says that all that are baptized are saved. This conception derives its error from the teaching about the sacraments itself. (In this connection it would be interesting for a member of the society to report on the teaching and method of the Roman Catholic Church on baptism).

b. There is the problem that arises from the doctrine which says that Baptism is not only a sign but a seal of God's covenant. The question is: if baptism is a seal, that is an assurance or guarantee from God, and if baptism is always valid baptism (the sign and seal always remaining the same for all who receive it),—how can we explain it otherwise than that salvation is for all who receive it?

c. In answer to this problem there is the interpretation that the sign and seal are not always "real". There is the distinction of an outward and an inward baptism. This is not clear, however, whether the sign is distinguished from the spiritual significance or that the sign itself is distinguished into baptism that is real and that which is only appearance. Thereupon it is also explained that from our point of view we must suppose that there is always regeneration in the one who receives the sign of baptism. This then is further made the basis of baptism, that is, that the recipients are considered as God's children, for the purposes of baptism.

Although we can suppose that God usually regenerates His children in their earliest infancy upon the basis of examples in the Scripture, (which are they?), we cannot make this a basis for baptism. For it is the wrong supposition in the first place. We may not suppose that all infants are regenerated when they are not all regenerated. It cannot be a basis for baptism for it is also God's purpose that those who are not His children in the church should bear His sign of baptism, the real baptism which speaks the same language for all those who receive it. For the education of our children we must, to be sure, treat them all as if they were regenerated children of God. We train the man of God and not the man of the world. (That, however, is more for a discussion on the Covenant and Education).

d. Another answer to the problem raised in point b, is that it is true from God's side that salvation is for all who receive the sign of baptism, all believers and their children. They do not say that there is an operation in the sacrament itself which transmits salvation to all, that for the time being that particular baptized child is saved. This answer which we are considering in d, maintains that all are not saved by the baptism itself, but that God thereby declares His intention to save all. It is their obligation to take it and if they do not they are not saved.

This is evidently not Scriptural and Reformed. We say that Christ assures us (believers) by this sacrament of His salvation for us (believers), of all the covenant blessings which he

speaks in His Word. But we cannot say that baptism assures everyone who is baptized that Christ speaks this to him personally. On the basis of Romans 4:11 and the fundamental line of sovereign election preaching in the Bible we can only say that the promise of salvation is assured to every believer that is baptized. To everyone that receives the sign the same language is solemnly spoken, righteousness is by faith. Everyone who receives this baptism and is instructed in it certainly possesses this promise intellectually, just as he possesses the Bible as is pictured in the parable of the pounds. According to the parable of the Sower and Hebrews 6 and the entire Scripture we can also say that many in the church who are reprobate also possess the promise with their emotions. This possession increases their responsibility. And it is the intention of Christ that all should hear and understand the speech of the sign and His Word in that sense of possessing it. However, amazing though it may seem to us, many do not possess the promise by a true and living faith.

e. Another answer seeks to formulate the proposition by: emphasizing that the promise is for all. It is denied by some that it is intended for all, for it is explained that the Lord intends to have the promise given with the demand for repentance.

If we would debate with those who maintain the promise is for all, we must recognize their insistence that they define their terms differently. They define that by the promise is meant the promise as it is announced, or as it is addressed, not as its content is eternally determined by the election of God. If it is meant that it is not thought and intended by God as grace to all, that they even receive this “promise”, then we can say so far so good.

Our issue should be to show whether in the preaching of the Word and in the administration of baptism the intention of Christ is that the grace of the Gospel is particular, to those whom the Father gave Him. It also should be brought out that even in this administration of the Word and the sacraments there is a twofold effect, also according to the good pleasure of God. After we have made this issue clear it can also be made clear that the terminology “the promise for all”, is not language for instruction, and is questionable whether it is scientifically correct. In this way we can avoid the error of condemning someone by our definition.

5. There remains the question, how do infants receive the strengthening of their faith, which the sacraments accomplish according to their intention, since they have no conscious faith?

In answer to this we can say that infants are to be baptized to have them distinguished from the world as also of the church of Jesus Christ. And they receive the blessing through the sacrament when they come to conscious faith.

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