

COVENANT BAPTISM

Covenant Baptism in the era of Secular Parental Apostasy

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Theological and Praxis Review of Covenant Adult Baptism, Covenant Infant Baptism, Covenant Lapsed Baptism, and Metanoia Repentance Preaching in Modern Secular Context.

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1. BAPTISM: AMOUNT OF WATER NOT CONTROVERSIAL

Neither the water nor the amount of water of baptism is magic. It is not the water, but the faith of the dying of the old life in Christ's death and the rising of Christ's resurrected life in new life in us by the Holy Spirit, which gives 'born again' regeneration. It is not our act of going through water which delivers. Christ's crucifixion-resurrection act two thousand years ago delivered and is the basis of faith which we should take on.

No baptismal regeneration or water legalism is indicated in Scripture. The baptisms of John the Baptist and Jesus (Mark 1.1-11 and parallels) in the full going under and coming up out of the water of the Jordan river are deliberately role-modelling, but not of water legalistic intent. For the purpose only of faith encouragement, Jesus makes the going under and coming up role-modelling deliberate in it's inclusive prediction of the saving reality of the cross and resurrection (Matthew 13.13-15 with John 2.19-22/4.2) – one's old life must go under with Jesus' death, one's new life must be of the resurrected new life of Christ. However, this role-modelling is kept as rather 'when practical'. The Ethiopian eunuch sees enough water for an immersion baptism and receives it (Acts 8.36-39). Yet the baptisms of Acts 2.41 as full immersion in the water scarce city of Jerusalem, short of commandeering some venue like the pools of Bethesda, is unlikely and not indicated. The same must be said for Acts 9.18/10.48/11.15-18/16.33-34/18.8. Neither is a 'water immersion' legalistic insertion into Acts 11.22-24/Acts 15.24-29 made, which would probably have been necessary for water legalism given the importance of the Antioch discipling event within the emerging global Christianity.

In the global mission sense which Jesus and all the apostles practiced, it is also important to consider both the practicality and problem with claimed water legalism in both extreme climate circumstances of human habitation on earth. Desert dwelling water scarcity peoples in conversion were a near at hand context for

Jesus and the apostles, and the demand for full immersion water baptism legalism looks rather like a fanaticism more than a genuine factor of Jesus' presence with such individuals in saving grace. The same must be said of the extreme cold climate situations of snowbound and polar regions in which sufficient water for full immersion water baptism legalism is not just a circumstance of difficult provision, but when available or provided, constitutes a cold extreme experience which is of such unpleasantness when compared to full immersion in the Jordan that one must dismiss any claim for it as legalistic fanaticism.

Alternative methods of water use in baptism - pouring (Isaiah 12.3/44.3/Lamentations 2.19/John 7.37-38) or sprinkling (Ezekiel 36.25) – in conjunction with a preached connection of the water use to the role-modelling type pointing to the saving crucifixion-resurrection experience of Jesus, is a 'whenever practical' use of baptism.

The claim "if you are not full immersion water baptised, you're not baptised" is legalistic fanaticism. Water baptism is not an extreme conversion event, but an inclusive celebration of the saving grace that is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2.1 COVENANT ADULT BAPTISM

Covenant Adult Baptism at the reality of repentant faith commitment was prefigured by the prophetic baptising carried out by John the Baptist (Mark 1.4-5 and parallels / John 1.19-23). Jesus' inclusion of himself in John's baptism, with the conditions of inclusion noted by both John and the apostles (Mark 1.7-11 and parallels / John 1.24-34 with 4.2), instituted repentance baptism as the prime entrance inclusion sacrament of the Church. John the Baptist, Jesus under John 4.2 condition, and the apostles when among the Jews, practiced baptism for individual adult repentant faith within the constraints of the known circumcision based covenant entrance inclusivity of the Jews. No baptism of Gentiles by John or Jesus is known, yet Jesus' Great Commission statement (Matt 28.19-20) that baptism is globally for Jews and Gentiles indicates the new global inclusivity of Christian faith. Jesus' statement of global inclusivity linked to Pentecost in Acts 1.8, and attested by the apostles in Acts 2.38-39, the Peter-Cornelius incidents of Acts 10-11, and Acts 15. John 21.1-11 presents the same Jesus of global inclusivity.

The consistency across the New Testament of repentant baptism as the entrance sacrament of regenerate inclusion is also so evident across the baptism doctrine of all churches that a listing of New Testament references suffices for support. (The "Quaker" Society of Friends exception uses different inclusion theology basis). So, Mark 1.7-11, 10.38, 11.30 and parallels / Matt 28.19-20 / John 1.24-34 with 4.2 / John 3.1-8 / Acts 1.5, 2.36-41, 8.14-17, 10.44-48, / Rom 6.1-11 / 1 Cor 1.17, 10.2, 12.13 / Gal 3.27 / Eph 4.3-5 / Col 2.12 / 1 Pet 3.18-22 / 1 John 5.5-8 / Rev 22.1-3 all preach that each individual must know and receive the 'going under crucifixion-coming up resurrection' experience. Because faith in Jesus is public confession at repentance (1 Tim 6.12), the instituted 'sign' of conversion before Jesus and his Church is baptism. What then of those who grew up included in the covenant of Christian belief?

2.2 COVENANT INFANT BAPTISM

Mark 9.33-37 and parallels, Mark 10.13-16 and parallels, and Matthew 11.25-27 and parallel, and Acts 2.37-39, are indicators of Jesus' and the apostles' inclusive covenant understanding towards children, as much as was child circumcision in the Old Testament. Even though these readings are not directly indicative of infant baptism, and neither were they applied apostolically to make circumcision a Christian basis-of-faith practice, their sense of child inclusion remains.

However, Acts 16.15 / 16.33 / 1 Cor 1.16 with Mark 10.13-16 / 1 Cor 7.14, 1 Cor 10.1f, even if only Pauline originated, indicate an apostolic baptism practice that appears to be a covenant missionary inclusion of children in baptism in line with the covenant inclusion teaching of circumcision of the Hebrews. Flowing out of Jesus' fulfilment of the Old Covenant in the New Covenant, it also indicates both Hebrew and Gentile inclusion in household baptism. Paul's missionary zeal tweaked both circumcision teaching in including Gentiles, and baptism practice in including children, giving missionary method among Gentiles in particular a major boost in gaining believers by virtue of including their children.

The related issue of the individual adult faith commitment of the baptised children then became the accepted infant baptism-covenant confirmation of most major church denominations globally as church history unfolded. It remains a global Christian practice trend that most people of global Christianity are infant-baptised, though statistics of baptism practice are now changing under the influence of both increased secularisation and the huge power of American 'FOMO' (Fear Of Missing Out) socio-cultural pressure.

2.2.1 Seal of Baptism Not Magical Superstition

Both covenant infant baptism and believer baptism theology use the concept of the seal of baptism as the sacrament of the Holy Spirit presence in the believer's life. However, their claims of use are usually about the grace status of either infant or believer having received baptism, and how theologically they endure for resurrection despite any adversity of circumstance, for the Holy Spirit has acted. Usually baptism is part of the concept of being sealed, sealed by the Holy Spirit given public act in baptism.

σφραγίς, *sphragis* 'seal', with verb σφραγιζω, of literal sense from signet ring and clay or wax sealing of letters (Rev 7.4-8), has figurative use of closed up/protected/authenticated in God purpose. So 2 Corinthians 1.22, Ephesians 1.13/4.30, all have probable applied link to the Son of Man of John 6.27 who is 'sealed' by the Father. The deep Holy Spirit meaning of 'seal' is theologically correct. God 'seals' the individual's salvation in Jesus, baptiser in the Holy Spirit.

Correctly noble as this noble theology is, this does not override practical circumstance, however. What is the God status of the adult believer who lapses their faith? Sealed, because of baptism? Lapsed because of a deserted faith (2 Timothy 4.10)? Standard theology is that it is Jesus who discerns or judges, and not us. Therefore we regard a believer sealed as just prodigally far off (Luke 15.11-24). But what then of a parent 'covenant' confessed in baptism of the infant under infant household baptism, but since then both parent and child just secularised and left so far off, or 'lapsed', that the child's faith is never given the covenanted support? What should direct our theologising and pastoring about this increasingly prominent context among global believers?

'Sealing' legalism in baptism, just like water legalism, needs new Reformation '*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*' review.

2.3 COVENANT LAPSED BAPTISM

The apostolic New Testament roots of Covenant infant baptism as a wider mission applied 'household' baptism practice have been presented. However, most baptismal theologies of infant baptism (for example, Berkhof, Calvin, Cullmann), almost exclusively focus on showing apostolic validation of the inclusion of children into the covenant and their entrance into the Church. Very little attention has been given to a most vital corollary aspect of covenant baptism which has become a major mission and pastoral crisis in covenant baptism churches. What theologising applies concerning those who have taken or received baptism (infant or adult) and then lapsed their own faith, or worse, lapsed their own faith which was given as the basis of covenant infant baptism of their offspring?

In our modern secularising global era, the decline of Christianity and proliferation of secular atheism or agnosticism or pluralist humanism in replacement, has occasioned vast numbers of lapsed disciples like at no time in Christian history. Consequently numbers of infant baptised adolescents and adults, who have been raised without the covenant faith, now find their praxis is of parents of lapsed faith and without faith. Some come to conversion faith. Yet when they seek covenant believer baptism, this is denied to them for they have already been 'infant baptised' and should not be 're-baptised' and so are referred to 'Confirmation' even when this is nothing more than a magical notion without genuine spiritual reality. In theology and praxis, these are the adolescents and adults of covenant lapsed baptism - those who came to repentant faith despite parental covenant lapse, and who can express that their parents lapsed their covenant. Whether adolescent or adult, these individual repentants should should take up their own covenant lapsed baptism in signed up recognition of their parents' lapsed faith. For any magical water or 'sealing' approach wrongly applied to them is as fanatical a water or 'sealing' legalism as full immersion baptism or excessive 'sealing' theology can be. Neither the water nor theologising saves.

2.3.1 Biblical Basis for Covenant Lapsed Baptism Recognition

Esau of Genesis 25.29-34 / 26.34 – 28.9 is the first covenant lapse person of the Old Testament, dispensing with the conditions of covenant loyalty for utilitarian convenience even of faith in his life choices. One consistent Old Testament reality from then on is that there were circumcised members included in the covenant who lapsed their faith, either by deliberate idolatry or the same backsliding utilitarian convenience taken as life choice by Esau. Thousands of circumcised and baptised (1 Corinthians 10.2) covenant participants in the Exodus lapsed their faith for the idolatry and ‘fleshpots’ of Egypt and had to be removed from God’s people by the forty years wandering in the wilderness before God’s people could enter the promised land. This continued throughout the cycles of covenant opportunity, sin and oppression, repentance and return to covenant of the Judges, and the time of the Kings with their prophetic cycles. During the time of the Kings and Prophets, the reality of what is meant by the “lost Ten Tribes of Israel” also occurred, obviously including a majority who had been circumcised.

The presence of those in ‘inclusion but of lapsed covenant’ stayed among the Hebrews until Jesus the last prophet, and the fall of the temple in AD 70, and stays as a praxis reality among Christians of Jesus’ new covenant inclusion. It is a known apostolic era praxis with Judas the most unworthy, but also known in the Galatian legalists, the so-called ‘pre-Gnostics’ of Colossians, the Demas of Colossians 4.14 / Philemon 1.24 / 2 Timothy 4.10, and outlined in the various contexts of John’s seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor in Revelation.

Both the Old Testament (Jeremiah 3.8 with a different use of imagery of ‘divorce’ from Isaiah 50.1), and the New Testament in individualised use (Hebrews 10.26-29; 12.16-17 and Jude 1.23 reality) know of the reality of covenant lapse. The standard response among the Hebrews was a repentance and re-

commitment to the Covenant when such was practical. The New Testament 'individualised' faith response is less clear, depending on the lapsed person 'unlapsing' in order to remove the Hebrews 10.26-29; 12.16-17 and Jude 1.23 persistence in unbelief problem. This 'unlapsing' would also have to be timeous to the upholding of covenant infant baptism vows, or else the infant of the covenant infant baptism in question remains effectively unfaithed.

The use of σφραγίς *sphragis* 'seal' also offers no further discernment into the parental lapsed covenant context which their adolescents or next generation adults face. Both covenant infant baptism and believer baptism theology use the concept of the seal of baptism as the sacrament of the Holy Spirit. However, whether it is the lapsed parent or the next generation lapsed infant baptised now adult, no magical sealing notion is genuine theology.

Within covenant theology and Covenant baptism churches, a 'straying away' from the original intent of all entering into covenant, inclusion and baptism basics, and into a more magical 'accommodationism' has crept in. A parent or set of parents may have made their own adult confirmation and then had their next generation offspring 'infant baptised' - all the while drifting through a relativistic attendance at a Christmas service, family funerals or weddings, but having no real discipleship. As has become widespread euro-centrally, secular rather than faith based lifestyle is drifted into without covenant return so that the infant baptism covenant is actually just deserted. Yet the parent or parents, family and next generation child or children are magically 'accommodated' as covenant real, in a cheapening and deserting of the covenant for secular choice and lifestyle has become their real truth of faith.

3. METANIOA PREACHING IN A COVENANT LAPSE CONTEXT - RETURN TO REPENTANCE ADULT COMMITMENT

Covenant Theology congregations are two sacrament churches – baptism (infant, adult, covenant lapsed) and Communion. Yet a modern two-fold effect unbalances this. Modern secularist members are increasingly lapsing discipleship in faith, worship and tithing attendance, and lapsing ‘in faith child-rearing’ of their children. Add to this the modern younger generation preference (whether fashion trend or not is irrelevant) for ‘American’ multimedia Christian spiritual culture with online media spiritual culture, in which the place of the conversion and commitment ‘call to salvation’ has priority that mainline churches do not give. This two-fold change has seen some Covenant theology congregations so age in membership, as well as fail to reach the modern younger generation, that the sacrament of baptism is falling into disuse.

3.3.1 Metanoia Preaching in Covenant Theology Churches

Baptist and Pentecostal insistence on *μετάνοια metanoia* repentance adult response based baptism has had profound impact in this secular era. From Mark 1.4 / Acts 2.38, this remains the biblical trend of baptism, and should be of Confirmation. This remained so until the modern secular era of ‘myth Jesus’ preaching in largely mainline traditional churches with a relativised ‘lapsed repentance’ Confirmation/Adult Baptism for consensus commitment to the ‘woke’ secular spirit of common humanity that claims to trend inclusivity of all human spirituality. The simultaneous rise of American multimedia Christian spiritual culture and online Christian media spiritual culture, in which the place of the conversion and commitment ‘call to salvation’ has priority that mainline churches do not give, has seen a much greater uptake among the next generation and much greater drift of disciples from mainline churches into metanoia spirituality than would have occurred should the mainline churches have retained metanoia preaching.

Despite the FOMO (fear of missing out) 'concert entertainment' value of call to commitment / altar call / conversion and adult baptism practices within American multimedia Christian spirituality, one reality is that such calls have found widespread prominence over Confirmation acceptance among the global media culture next generation. Churches not giving participation in the 'conversion and adult baptism' experience are losing disciple members in great numbers as 'covenant accommodationism to the secular' is expressed as 'mainline churches are betraying the gospel' and only repentant baptism is the Holy Spirit measure remaining for disciples to keep the faith. When the Holy Spirit factor is accentuated to include 'conversion, adult baptism and Holy Spirit baptism/infilling', the church 'drift' is even stronger. Covenant theology churches face a kairos moment of "two sacrament" truth of their own making.

3.3.1 An UPCSA Issue Unattended To

UPCSA Manual 1.6-7 / 2.8.1-7 (2.8.4-7) / 3.1-24 omit any discussion of how a lapsed parental covenant impacts on the adolescent, reducing the water to something magical but also unscriptural, and offering no pastoral support to ministers, Sessions or adolescents as to how to proceed. As has been seen in section 2.3 of this paper, this is a typical covenant baptism theology oversight. These sections of the Manual are inadequate in being dogmatically noble concerning 'inclusion', dogmatically legalistic of 'one baptism' and magical concerning 'sealing' - when modern 'world come of age' secularist parenting has left many adolescents and young people stuck out on a limb when it comes to making their own adult faith commitment. Baptist/Pentecostal 'concert, media and web based' discipleship celebrates their form and order taking the place of the covenant theology churches' inadequacy. How easy it has become for Baptist/Pentecostal pastors to say of the infant baptised "As far as we're concerned you're not baptised". Infant baptised adolescents/young people of modern 'secularised discipleship' background have neither parenting, worship or role modelling which would mean anything more than covenant lapsed.

3.3.1 A Possible UPCSA Covenant Theology Approach

When approached by a prior infant-baptised adolescent or young person for their 'own faith' baptism, neither Minsters nor Sessions have to make judgment calls about the status of the 'discipleship of covenanting parents' or have to choose between parents and adolescent or young person.

Should the adolescent or young person consider that they did not receive 'covenant parenting discipleship' in terms of the parents' own faith, worship and tithing attendance and lapsing 'in faith child-rearing' of their children, then that is the applicants' perception. The relationship between the adolescent or young person and their parent/s can then be pastored on from there.

The choice to 'uphold' the prior-mentioned dogmatic 'inclusion', 'one baptism' or 'sealing' legalism or magicking is not a real but false choice. The kairos of salvation is with the adolescent or young person, and not any perception regarding the parent/s discipleship. Should the adolescent or young person have come to Jesus in metanoia repentance, and have expressed that the status of their 'covenant raising' was 'lapsed' by their parent/s, then there should be no hesitation in granting permission for the baptism.

Most Confirmation or Baptism applications are made by form. The inclusion of a simple 'lapsed parental covenant' question in the form, and answer gained, would then allow Minister and Session to pastor the adolescent or young person and the parent/s accordingly. An example question would be:

"Why do you consider the infant baptism covenant made by your parents to have been lapsed by your parents"?

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