

## **A COVENANT DIALOGUE ON BAPTISM**

by Stephen S. Bilynskyj and Stephen E. Pitts

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### **BELONGING TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

An Essay In Appreciation of Infant Baptism

By Stephen E. Pitts

*We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.*

*We thank you for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are renewed by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to you Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

-- From *The Book of Common Prayer* quoted in *The Covenant Book of Worship*

Let us consider the gifts that God has given his people. He has given the gift of freedom from oppression first realized through the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt and then manifested incarnate to us through the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. He has given his Spirit. He has given his Son's body which through sacred mystery comes to us as both Church and a simple meal of bread and wine. He has given us grace. He has given us faith

Through these gifts, we are liberated and enlivened; comforted and guided; forgiven and nourished; enabled and secured, None of these gifts or their resultant benefits were earned, merited or deserved and to say that they "belong" to us is to make a bold statement indeed. And yet all of them have been provided for us to enjoy like much desired presents under a Christmas tree.

Perhaps it is more accurate – not to say more humble – to state that the “belonging” in this schema more rightly should be thought of as coming from the “other side,” That is to say, rather than claiming that such gifts belong to us, it is more correct to say we belong to the one who has given them to us.

The concept of ownership, our notion of determining “what belongs to whom,” is a slippery one at best and often colored by cultural glasses. We Westerners take our physical possessions with a great deal of seriousness and tend to see them as inviolably ours. Sometimes such notions, built upon the shifting conceptual sands of property ownership, infiltrate our understanding of relationships as well – including our relationship with God. We use ownership language to speak rather glibly of Jesus as “my savior” or God as “my God.”

To a certain extent this is true. Our relationship with God is personal. But as much as he is our God, even more so, we are his people. We have been chosen by him. It was he who first reached out to us in love to give us the gifts of which we have spoken, In short, we belong to God. Ray S. Anderson captures this image perfectly when he refers to Christianity as the “gospel of belonging,” the gospel – the good news – of belonging to the people of God.

It is the sacrament of baptism that stands as the “ritual portal” to such belonging and such relationships. And like the gifts we have been considering, the portal is not of our own doing. We did not make it and we do not own it. We can only approach it with faith, It has been provided for us through the goodness of God’s love. It is, in fact, another of the gifts of God.

Jesus said, “Let the children come unto me,” and since the very inception of the church, infant baptism has been a point of entry into the community that “belongs to God.” Following the Old Testament practice of circumcision, it has been baptism that welcomes and incorporates the

child into the church – the “power field” of the Holy Spirit as Donald Frisk so wonderfully puts it.

In the Covenant’s ongoing dialogue regarding baptism – and please notice that Dr. Bilynskyj and I both use the word dialogue rather than debate – the theological foundations for each position are, or at least should be, thoroughly familiar to you. They need not be reviewed. Rather, from the parish context of *praxis*, I would have us think about this notion of infant baptism – the ritual portal to the church – as an active gift given to a passive recipient whose parents come in Christian faith. And here, baptism as a gift faithfully received is contrasted with Holy Communion where we are commanded to actively take, eat and drink to the meal of grace.

Baptism – even believer baptism – requires compliant submission as the waters are used for their holy purpose. No one who is baptized –either infant or adult – does it to himself. Even though a confession of faith is made to get to this point, remember that, as Geoffrey Bromiley has suggested, baptism is not so much concerned with what we do – our decision of faith – but rather with what has been done for us. Baptism is primarily related to that on which our faith has been set. Thus, although we might rightfully think of active adult belief in making our confession of faith, it is a mistake to think that such “activities” on our part constitute the meaning and purpose of baptism.<sup>1</sup>

No, the meaning and purpose of baptism has to do with it being an activity of and gift to us from God. We did not do our baptism nor do we own our baptism (although it might well be said that we ought to “own up” to our baptism). This sacrament must be far more than just a mere sign of our possession of belief worn like a lapel button to signify our faith as in “Here, took at my baptism!” There is the gift of grace in baptism and its direction flows from God to us – not vice

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<sup>1</sup>See Geoffrey Bromiley, *Children of Promise* (Grand Rapids- Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 31-35.

versa. He “owns” the grace and bestows it upon us. We are the recipients of this gift and as the water is poured upon us, it does something to and for us. This is the gift that is extended to the infant in the arms of the parents or pastor as that child’s family brings him or her to the church for the sacrament of baptism.

It is said that Martin Luther, one day when he was tormented by doubts and conflicts within and without, went to his writing table and with a piece of chalk wrote these words: *baptizatus sum* – I have been baptized! And then he promptly went about his work with the assurance that this was the final word concerning the state of his soul. The body of Christ dares to baptize that which is not yet whole and gives the bread and wine to those who are not yet what they will be. This is what it means to say that we are justified by faith.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1982). p, 204.

**BELONGING TO THE LORD**  
**An Essay in Appreciation of Believer Baptism with a**  
**Call for a Unified Theology of Baptism for the Covenant Church**

*There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6)*

One of the continuing strengths of The Evangelical Covenant Church is its willingness to believe *and* practice what Paul says about baptism in Ephesians 4:5. By our commitment to unity, despite differences in baptismal practice, we make concrete demonstration of the truth that there is one baptism in Jesus Christ. It is within that commitment that Dr. Pitts and I enter this dialogue which attempts to clarify and appreciate the two views recognized by our denomination.<sup>3</sup>

Believer baptism is practiced by a significant number within the Evangelical Covenant Church. It is the practice of baptism *following* repentance and confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Following Paul Jewett, I am using the term “believer baptism,” rather than “believer’s baptism,” recognizing Dr. Pitts’ point that baptism is not so much the possession of the believer as the believer is the possession of the Lord.

The sacrament of baptism carries with it the three-fold significance of a representation of *cleansing* from sin by the work of Christ, an *identification* with the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and a *welcome* into the Body of Christ, the Church. These three facets of baptism are identified in our baptismal liturgy and they constitute the basis of baptismal instruction. I would like to consider each of these facets in turn.

Scripture clearly links baptism to cleansing from sin. In fact the link is so strong in some passages, i.e., Acts 2:38 “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,’” that there arises the contention that forgiveness for sin takes place in the act of baptism. From that contention arises the Lutheran view (found also in other traditions, of course) that baptism is salvific. As I understand our theology and Pietist

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<sup>3</sup>I am grateful for the annual meeting’s recent action to clarify the Preamble to our Constitution with regard to this recognition of views of baptism.

heritage, this has not been the view of the Covenant. Indeed, Pietism appears to be, in part, a reaction against the view that mere participation in the sacraments is sufficient for Christian life.

In infant baptism my instruction to parents is that the baptism looks *forward* to the forgiveness available in Christ for that child when it will be needed. The joy of believer baptism is that the candidate may look both forward *and* backward, and thus have conscious experience of the cleansing displayed in baptism. For the candidate for believer baptism, forgiveness has in fact taken place and baptism is a celebration of that fact.

It is with regard to our identification or joining with Christ that believer baptism shines as a particularly beautiful practice of the sacrament of baptism. Paul frequently connects baptism with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. It is clear that baptism is a route to our participation in the key events of Christ's work.

A sacrament may be minimally described as a visible enactment of grace. When believer baptism is practiced, a mode of baptism is possible which allows a dramatic and powerful enactment of the grace of being joined to Christ. That is, believer baptism allows the immersion of the candidate, thus visibly portraying the burial (under the water) and the resurrection (coming up out of the water) of the candidate in identity with our Lord.<sup>4</sup> Again, the one baptized has the conscious experience of being baptized *into* Christ. In the sacraments we act out a drama, a drama both holy and true. Baptism of a believer by immersion is a vigorous and beautiful practice of the sacrament.

Baptism is also a rite of initiation. "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . , for you are all one in Christ." (Galatians 3:27, 28) Baptism is the route into the Church, into the Body of Christ. In baptism we welcome those whom Christ has called into His family. This brings us to the crux of the issue between infant and believer baptism. At this point, let us simply recognize that believer baptism

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<sup>4</sup>I am aware that baptism of infants by immersion is not only possible but has, in fact, been practiced in Covenant churches. (At least one such baptism has occurred at Libertyville Covenant in Illinois.) Nonetheless, immersion is a mode of baptism more frequently and perhaps more easily practiced in the context of believer baptism.

allows a very full expression of the welcome into the family of the Church. The baptized believer is immediately admitted to the Lord's Table and to a full sense of belonging to both the community and to the Lord.

The theology of baptism is very practical. Thus it is well to note that the alternative between infant and believer baptism is not one of complete exclusion in practice. Even in a context where infant baptism is the sole practice for those born to families in a particular church, the baptism of a new, unbaptized believer, coming from outside that church, would be a welcome and joyful event. Thus the alternative of infant or believer baptism is not at all an alternative about how to deal with those coming to faith. It is a question for Christian parents regarding the practice of baptism for their children. Believer baptism, then, is the choice, as a parent, to live in the hope of the gift of faith for one's child and to look for the baptism of the child at the point of that gift.

It is the experience of living in hope for one's children that the believer baptist and infant baptist may share within the Covenant Church. Recognizing the necessity for a personal reception of the gift of faith in Jesus Christ is a part of our Pietist background. With our characteristic freedom, we recognize both the experience of the gift of faith at a specific time and the experience of growing into that gift in the context of a Christian home and local church. Yet in both cases we know that a person *comes* to faith in Christ. No one is born a Christian. Thus both the baptized and unbaptized infant are the objects of hope, hope that the work of Christ will be made complete in their lives.

Yet even in the Covenant we live surrounded by evidence of the disappointment of the hope that *all* our children might come to Christ. As we pastor, we are very aware of the apparently unbelieving baptized *and* unbaptized children of Christian parents. Such children, grown into adults, become some of the most difficult individuals we pastor. In particular, if infant baptism is the conviction of Christian grandparents, we may find ourselves faced with the

dilemma of a request for the baptism of an infant belonging to unbelieving parents who are the children of believers.<sup>5</sup>

Believer baptism has its own dilemmas. For instance, Covenant pastors frequently deal with those who feel that their “first” baptism was not accompanied by genuine faith and thus was not a genuine baptism. Here Covenant baptismal practice shows wisdom in discouraging “rebaptism” and in encouraging the recognition that the sacraments are not effective by virtue of any act of our own, including the act of faith.

The agent of the action of baptism is frequently discussed in regard to believer baptism, with the suggestion that, in believer baptism, the sacrament is made somehow to rest on the action of the candidate, an action of faith, let us say, rather than on the action of God. Let us be very clear that neither sacrament excludes human action. It is an extension of the fact of the Incarnation that God acts in what human beings do. Moreover, the Covenant has always practiced “believer communion,” with no fear that the grace experienced in that sacrament might be thought the product of the action of the individual recipient. In believer baptism we joyfully affirm that the sacrament is the work and gift of God through the grace of Jesus Christ, which is received in faith.<sup>6</sup>

It is my hope that we in the Covenant may continue to progress toward a theological understanding which supports the unity to which we have committed ourselves. This will mean continued exploration of the theology of baptism and the scriptural basis for freedom in the matter of baptism, as well as genuine appreciation and respect for both infant and believer baptism as we find them practiced in the Covenant.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>This dilemma is not a new one. Early in the history of this country, the Puritan church See Geoffrey Bromiley, Children of Promise (Grand Rapids- Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 31-35. faced the question of those who were called, ironically, “the half-way covenanters.” That is, pastors had to deal with the baptism of infants belonging to those who had only entered “half-way” into the covenant, i.e., who had been baptized but had not experienced faith in Christ.

<sup>6</sup>Note that faith *is* a condition for infant baptism, according to the *Covenant Book of Worship*, which asks that parents or sponsors of baptized infants be believers.

<sup>7</sup>A slightly different version of this paper was read in a dialogue at a meeting of the Southeast Nebraska District Covenant Pastors in 1991. My thanks is extended to those who were present for their comments and to Dr. Stephen Pitts for the opportunity for this exchange.



Stephen S. Bilynskyj  
Lincoln, Nebraska, Pentecost 1992

### Reply to Dr. Bilynskyj

Thanks to my friend and colleague, Steve Bilynskyj, for his essay and for his call for a unified theology of baptism within the Evangelical Covenant Church. Affirmation of one another's convictions – if not viewpoints – it seems to me, is a Covenant hallmark and is well served by the recent change in the Preamble to our Constitution. It is within that necessary spirit of mutual respect and appreciation that both of us have engaged in this dialogue. It is our hope that these essays will encourage similar exercises among our peers and within our congregations,

A unified theology of baptism must – at its very heart – take baptism seriously. As Dr. Bilynskyj has stressed, shallowness under the guise of tolerance serves no one and ultimately can only weaken the theological fabric of the church. Doctrinal disagreements are important and are worth discussing – perhaps especially in a denomination such as ours where theology is not something abstract, but rather something that is worked out in the concrete setting of parish life.

It is that parish life that I believe has been increasingly infiltrated by a growing secularization. We see it in weddings where the sanctuary is often seen as a facility for rent, the clergy as a “hireling” with whom a contract is established for this specific function alone; and the *diakonal* element of the congregation dismissed entirely as totally irrelevant in the whole matter. Surely, the term “Christian wedding” rings hollow under such circumstances. Such secularization may then be repeated when it comes time for infant baptism – if that baptism is viewed as more of a social rite established by family tradition rather than the substantive theological reality it is. Indiscriminate baptism of children whose parents have no intention of living within the realm of the church is not taking baptism seriously. Nor is baptism by immersion of someone professing faith but not intending to become a part of the church upon administration of the sacrament. And failure to take baptism seriously is capitulation to the secular over the sacred.

The antidote to secularization and the foundation for a serious understanding of baptism is faith--faith that is built upon new life in Christ which must, in its final analysis, be the requisite for baptism. It is incumbent upon pastors, families and congregations to ground themselves in this living reality as baptism – whether infant or believer – is taught, practiced and lived out.

### **Reply to Dr. Pitts**

In essence, my entire essay is a reply to Dr. Pitts, since I received his essay before the writing of my own. Nonetheless, let me reiterate my agreement with him on one point and renew the call for continued study of baptism within the context of Covenant unity in Christ.

I very much agree that baptism is not primarily a possession. Speaking of “my baptism” can and does lead one directly into the privatism which Dr. Pitts fears. That is why “believer baptism” is the term I advocate for the practice of baptizing at the point of confession of faith. In the term there is a description of the recipient of baptism, just as there is in the term “infant baptism,” but there is no claim to possession. So I would call for an enlightened rejection of the term, “believer’s baptism,” which incorporates the possession notion. However, I am sure that Covenant people will not always describe their positions with theological precision. So both “believer’s baptism” and the regrettable term, “adult baptism,” will probably continue to be used.

In the practice of both types of baptism we will do well to use the term “sacrament,” which is the Covenant’s chosen terminology for both baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The concept of sacrament carries with it the sense that these events are gifts of grace and not only human acts of obedience.

It is my conviction that we will enhance Covenant unity by continued theological reflection on baptism which seeks to show that the “same thing” happens in both infant and believer baptism. The three-fold explication of baptism which we find in the Book of Worship is an excellent step in that direction. It is admirably suited to accounting for both infant and believer baptism as different versions of the same sacrament of the same Lord Jesus Christ. We will want to take pains to show that identity with Christ, cleansing from sin and incorporation into the Church are, in fact, an adequate summary of the *biblical* witness concerning baptism. Theological reflection will want to move toward the goal of unity of thought in the truth we find in the Gospel.

Moreover, in the interest of genuine unity and not just a disinterested tolerance, we will need to take seriously the fact that there is a genuine disagreement among Christians about the

sacrament of baptism. The Christian who takes baptism seriously will want to have biblical and theological support for whichever practice is chosen. Such seriousness about one's own position will also give the alternative position the respect it deserves.

It is not genuine tolerance or respect which claims that genuine differences do not matter or even that they do not exist. In our unity in Christ we must not be shallow. It is a greater display of Christian love and unity to sit down in fellowship with one who passionately believes I am wrong about an important doctrinal issue than it is to rest easy in a shallow conviction that doctrinal differences do not really matter or that they are illusory. Unity in Christ which is maintained in a church where people seriously disagree about baptism is a glorious witness to the reconciling power of Jesus Christ and to the fact that He does break down the walls of separation among His people.