

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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"1 BIND UNTO MYSELF"

Saint Patrick was one of the greatest Christian missionaries. He took the Gospel to Ireland, allegedly drove out the spiritual and physical snakes, and saw a nation brought to Christ. Most missionaries don't see swelling numbers. Patrick did. His evangelistic efforts produced many converts that resulted in a heavy baptismal responsibility. Patrick baptized, and baptized and baptized. Perhaps his baptismal work sometimes went all day and into the night.

It is not surprising to me that Patrick wrote one of the great baptismal hymns, if not the greatest. It is called the "Lorica," meaning breastplate, probably referring to the central piece of armor that covered the vital organs of a soldier. It also points to Christian armor, the "breastplate of righteousness" (Eph. 6:14), Jesus Christ. After the candidate was baptized, he sung of "binding"¹ himself to Christ as follows.

Transcendence

I bind unto myself today the strong Name of the Trinity, By invocation of the same, The Three in one, and One in Three.

I bind this day to me for ever, By power of faith, Christ's Incarnation; His baptism in the Jordan river; His death on cross for my salvation; His bursting from the spiced tomb; His riding up the Heavenly way; His coming at the day of doom: I bind unto myself to day.

Hierarchy

I bind unto myself the power of the great love of cherubim; The sweet 'Well done' in judgment hour; The service of the seraphim; Confessor's faith, apostle's word, The patriarchs' prayers, the prophet's scrolls; All good deeds done unto the Lord, And purity of virgin souls.

Ethics

I bind unto myself today the virtues of the starlight heav'n, the glorious sun's life-giving ray, The whiteness of the moon at even, The flashing of the lightning free, the whirling wind's tempestuous shocks, The stable earth, the deep salt sea, Around the old undying rocks.

I bind unto myself today The power of God to hold and lead, His eye to watch, His might to stay, His ear to hearken to my need; The wisdom of my God to teach, His hand to guide, His shield to ward;

The word of God to give me speech, His heav'nly host to be my guard.

Christ be with me, Christ with-in me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Oath (Sanctions)

Against all Satan's spells and wiles, Against false words of heresy, Against the knowledge that defiles, Against the heart's idolatry, Against the wizard's evil craft, Against the death-wound and the burning, the poison'd shaft, Protect me, Christ, till Thy returning.

Against the demon's snares of sin, The vice that gives temptation force, The natural lusts that war within, The hostile men that mar my course – Or few or many, far or nigh, In ev'ry place, and in all hours, Against their fierce hostility, I bind to me these holy powers.

Succession

I bind unto myself the Name, The strong Name of the Trinity; By invocation of the same, The Three in One and One in Three. Of whom all nature bath creation; Eternal Father, Spirit, Word; Praise to the Lord of my salvation, Salvation is of Christ the Lord. Amen.

The "Lorica an" is an interesting example of how covenant thinking influenced the writings, in this case the hymns, of the early Church. I'm not the first one to make such an observation. Klaus Baltzer, one of the leading suzerain treaty scholars, has an entire section devoted to the subject in his ground-breaking *The Formulary: Old*

He convincingly proves the influence of the Mosaic covenant structure on the literature of the early Church.² In fact, I will be considering some of these early Christian works in other but in this issue, I am concerned with the *Lorica*.

Some versions of this early hymn have more stanzas, but these verses are the best documented. Notice that almost every stanza has included somewhere, most of the time at the beginning but often toward the end, the statement, "1 bind." The theme of "binding" indicates that baptism was viewed as an oath that actually bonded the candidate to Christ, the "breastplate of righteousness," as well

1. The *Scottish Psalter, 1929* of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland translates the Latin to read "1 raise up" instead of 'bind.' But the weight of evidence is in favor of sticking with the traditional translation, "I bind." See *Hymnology*, ed. John Julian, Vol. H (New York Dover Publications, 1907, 1957), pp. 884-885.

2. Klaus Baltzer, *Formulary: in Old Testament, Early Christian Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 123-

as tied him to His creation. Covenantally speaking, the hymn concerns the fourth section of the covenant where God's sanctions are received by solemn oath. **But** in an unforced way, the entire hymn generally follows the covenant structure, what **Baltzer** calls the covenant **formulary**.

Transcendence

The first two stanzas fall in the transcendence/immanence category: stanza one speaks of the Trinity and stanza two describes the Incarnation.

Hierarchy

The third stanza talks about binding oneself to a specific hierarchy of Apostles and Prophets.

Ethics

The fourth stanza speaks of an oath to the "virtues" and "powers" of Christ, calling attention to the ethics segment of the covenant. It also discusses binding one's self to the stars, heavens, etc. The early Church believed that baptism in Christ bonded one to creation as well. Sin had made man antagonistic to the world around him, but Christ re-integrates man into creation.

Oath

The next stanzas turn to sanction and judgment language: "against." The one being baptized specifically takes an oath against Satan, heresy, and anything standing against Christ. In this case, the baptizand bound himself to Christ in such a way that a curse was made against evil doers.

Succession

Finally, the last stanza returns to the same language as the first, adding the successional words, "Praise to the Lord of my salvation, salvation is of Christ the Lord." As **Baltzer** points out, times of covenant ratification or renewal often end on the note of confession and praise (**Nehemiah 9-10**).³ True continuity with God is established through final confession of salvation in Christ, implying discontinuity is outside of Him.

The "**Lorica**" is a remarkable statement of what the early Church believed about baptism. Baptism is not some appendage to the Christian faith, an optional, "take it or leave it" event. Baptism "binds" the person to Christ. This is the theme that I want to concentrate on. More than simple identification was taking place at baptism. The candidate puts on, Christ like a "breastplate" of armor. Baptism is a real bond. The recipient is actually incorporated.

Incorporation

The New Testament uses language such as, "Baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (**Matt. 28:19**); "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death" (**Rem. 6:3**); "All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (**1 Cor. 10:2**); And, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (**Gal. 3:27**).

One little preposition wraps up what I've been trying to say. "Into" infers that baptismal water creates a bond. The doctrinal name for the idea is incorporation. **Incorporate** means "to make one body." Since baptism has this real incorporating power, John Calvin called it the

("that without which is not") of baptism. In other words, he believed that if baptism did not really incorporate or bond a person to Christ, there was no real baptism.

Calvin seems to be leading us down a dangerous path, bringing us to some difficult questions. If baptism really in-

corporate, aren't we saying that water baptism itself saves? But if baptism has nothing to do with our union to Christ, how do we explain the "incorporation" ("into") passages that are associated with water? They seem to be rather clear that Baptism somehow places a person in Christ, but how?

The responses to these questions vary. They can be put into basically three groups.

Realism

Realism is the belief that the physical elements of the sacraments become the physical depository of **grace**.⁴ The bread and wine of communion become the physical body of Jesus when they are sanctified. To eat the bread and drink the cup is real physical ingestion of Him. This doctrine is called **transubstantiation**, meaning the elements themselves really change (trans) in substance.

The same view is applied to baptism. The water of the baptismal font is infused with grace and not simply set apart for special use. Any person touched by the water receives the grace of God through a physical "conduit" of grace.

So, a realist interprets the "into" of all the above passages to mean "automatic" grace. Anyone baptized automatically receives salvation. Historically, the Roman Catholic Church has baptized whole cities. The priest would ride through the town and sprinkle everyone he saw. If he used a branch and dipped it in water, he could baptize large numbers at once.

The realist position has one main problem. The Bible says that baptism incorporates, but nowhere does it say that baptismal water is Christ. The Bible never obliterates this important Creator/creature distinction. Water is a symbol, and water is a seal, but its physical character does not change.

The reformers used this point. They criticized the Roman Catholic Church for denying the sacraments (signs and seals of God's covenant). If the sacraments really become the thing they signify, then they cease being sacraments. Moreover, the Humanity of Christ is made ubiquitous (everywhere). Remember, the Humanity of Christ is at the right hand of God. To say that the waters physically become Christ means His Humanity is everywhere, unless one wants to say that the waters of baptism become the Deity of Christ. Either way, it seems that the Creator/creature distinction ends up being violated.

Scripture teaches incorporation not infusion. Baptism joins to Christ in some sense, but baptismal water always remains water. The water does not contain grace. Salvation is not automatic.

Nominalism

Nominalism says that there is no relation between cause and effect. What man does on earth has no eternal connection, in principle or practice. Man's acts are only nominal and have no real meaning. The sacraments are not a means of grace. Baptism, in particular, does not effect union with Christ. It is only symbolic.

But what about a clear passage like **Remans six**? The passage says we are baptized "into" Christ. A nominalist's approach empties the passage of any reference to water baptism. It refers, instead, to "Holy Spirit" baptism. Calvin's comments on **Remans 6** speak to such an interpretation.

Paul, because he is speaking to believers, connects the reality and the effect with the outward sign

4. The Roman Catholic Church commonly holds the doctrine of realism. But since Vatican II, some leading Roman Catholic scholars have broken from this historic doctrine. No longer can we say that "all" Roman Catholics believe in realism. For the most part, however, this doctrine is still accepted by most Catholic thinkers.

(**substantium et effectum** externo signo **coniungit**) in his usual manner. We know that whatever the Lord offers by the visible symbol is confirmed and ratified by their faith. In short, he teaches us what the truth of baptism is, when rightly received. Thus he testifies that all the **Galatians** who had been baptized into Christ had put on Christ (Gal. 3:27). We must always use these terms while the institution of the Lord and faith correspond, for we never have naked and empty symbols (**nuda et inania** symbols), except when our ingratitude and wickedness hinder the working of the divine **beneficence**.⁵

Calvin is right. If the passage has no reference to water baptism, then the sacrament is an "empty and naked symbol." Baptism truly becomes an empty ritual only symbolizing one's identification or commitment to Christ. In other words, the symbol is oriented toward man because it signifies man's actions.

But the Apostle Paul says nothing to indicate that he is not referring to water baptism. His description of his own baptism (Acts 22:16) proves that he had no difficulty seeing a cause and effect relationship between baptism and salvation. For him, **baptism was Christ-oriented**. The water pictured all the benefits of salvation. To receive baptism was to receive Christ.

Those who want to take any reference to water out of Remans 6 reject an "incorporation" idea. But, it is interesting that most "**non-incorporationists**" will go to this same Remans 6 passage to define "water" baptism. Some like to point to the fact that Paul says we are "buried" with Christ to prove immersion. The nominalist cannot have it both ways. If Remans 6 is talking about Spirit baptism, it should not be used as a proof text for immersion. If the passage talks about water baptism, then the sacrament really incorporates a person into Christ.

We saw that the realist replaces the doctrine of incorporation with infusion. Now we have seen that the nominalist substitutes identification for incorporation.

Covenantalism: Dual Sanctions

Baptism incorporates. The question is, "In what sense?" The best way to answer this question is in terms of God's covenant, because the covenant teaches that a person is bound to dual sanctions at baptism. They are blessing and cursing. I have discussed this idea in my book, *That You May Prosper*,⁶ but I should elaborate, expanding on some of Meredith Kline's thoughts.⁷

Biblical covenant theology teaches that baptism actually does incorporate into Christ. Real union results. Scripture also says that the bond can culminate in death or life on the basis of two sanctions: blessing and cursing (Deut. 28). Obedience results in blessing and disobedience in cursing.

Consider an interesting statement of Jesus in view of the dual-sanctions-principle. He says to His disciples in the Upper Room, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire" (Jn. 15:5-6). According to Paul, a person is covenantally "in Christ" at baptism. If this is so, how can he be in Christ and then thrown into the fire?

Remember, the oath of the covenant receives double sanctions of blessing and cursing. One is bound unto the blessing of life if he is faithful to the covenant. He is also bound unto the cursing of death if he does not abide in Christ. This view avoids the automatic grace view of realism and the token grace position of nominalism. Instead, Old and New Covenants have dual sanctions. Baptism effects union with Christ, but it is in terms of the covenant. It is a covenant that really bonds and that has two sanctions. One leads to life and the other leads to life. There are real consequences for persevering and equally real consequences for falling away (**Heb. 6:1ff.**).

The Visible/invisible Church

An interesting view of incorporation that comes close to a dual sanctions position is the visible/invisible church concept. This view says that there is a visible and invisible Church. The invisible Church consists of all true believers. The visible Church is the group of professing believers, and their children, when applied by those who believe in infant baptism.

The Institutional Church, therefore, consists of people who are "**truly**" saved and those who are **only** saved outwardly. Baptism may or may not be nominal. If a person has "**real**" faith, the baptism really incorporates. But if the faith is "false," the baptism does not "take." Baptism is nominal.

Now, I have no problem with the visible/invisible distinction if one simply means that the invisible Church is the "eschatological" Church that will stand with Christ after Judgment Day. Nor do I have a problem if this distinction is made to explain the fact that some people who come to Christ fall away (Mt. 13:1ff.). But when this language is applied in terms of **real vs.** unreal categories, a strange view of the Church emerges.

The Bible speaks **covenantally** of the visible Church and it does not speak of an invisible church of the elect except in an implicit fashion; even the word **elect** is **covenantally** qualified in Scripture. For example, Scripture says that baptism is so closely connected with faith that the one baptized can be told that his sins are forgiven (Acts 22:16), making baptism in some sense the **first covenantal** act of faith. And, in another sense, we can say that one who is baptized is "elect."

The Bible also refers to baptism as the place where regeneration occurs: "He saved us not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the **washing of regeneration and** renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5), the "washing" being a reference to baptism. How? Scripture harkens back to creation language where water is created by God first, and as God creates ex nihilo, the symbolism is that life emerges (raised up) through the water from the hand of God (Genesis 1). In baptism, it connects the water with Christ; He is the One who cleanses with His death and so forth. But all of this is covenantal language, and covenantally speaking, the person baptized is to be treated as and counted as a believer until he demonstrates otherwise. The problem, however, is that the word **regeneration** is often explained only in an internal sense. On the one hand, there is a legitimate theological basis for doing so; the internal work of the Spirit occurs before true conversion (John 3:5). The language of systematic theology points out this "order of **salvation**."⁸ But the language of Paul clearly

Calvin's Commentary on Remans 6:3-4.

6. Ray R. Sutton, *That Prosper* (Tyler, Texas: I. C. E., 1987), pp. 78-79.

7. Meredith Kline, *By Oath* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968, 1975), pp. 55ff.

8. Richard Gaffin, *Centrality the* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), pp. 135-143. As a leading Reformed scholar at Westminster Theological Seminary, he makes the distinction between the use of regeneration in systematic theology and its use in Biblical theology.

ties the regeneration of Titus to covenantal baptism. The one who is baptized can be considered regenerated.

So what's the point? In a very real sense, the Bible speaks only in terms of a visible covenant, so baptism is truly the sign and seal of the covenant. If baptism is not a "real" sign of having union with Christ, baptism quickly loses its meaning. Then, if you think about it, something else can easily take the place of baptism as one of the signs and seals.

What replaces baptism? It could be a conversion experience, speaking in tongues, or learning a catechism. I'm not saying that any of these activities is necessarily bad, or that they are not real. It so happens that I think they are. But all of them can become **replacement sacraments**. They become the source of real assurance. And once a person finds assurance of salvation outside of the Church, that which becomes the source of assurance becomes the new institution. Maybe an evangelist comes to town and people are genuinely converted; so, often the "evangelistic organization" becomes the new sacrament. History has proven time and again, however, that God has appointed the sacraments. Nothing can surpass them as signs and seals of God's covenant. Anything that attempts to or accidentally becomes a replacement sacrament is destined to fail.

The invisible/visible distinction produces another effect in the life of the Church. The parishioners are viewed in question. The sermons are aimed at exposing the false Christians instead of feeding and nourishing God's sheep. The Church is not understood as God's elect. Within the Church there are the "truly" committed, and the non-committed, the lost. The "truly" saved have special Bible studies and prayer meetings. Only the "really" saved people can go to them. So, an elitist approach to ministry develops.

In Reformed Churches, a "halfway covenant" mentality has been a historical problem. This terminology originated during the Puritan Era. But behind this concept lay the **visible/invisible** distinction. Since baptism was not a "true" sign of salvation, it was easy to justify using "emotional" experiences for the basis of salvation. In other words, a person could be visibly in the Church but not invisibly connected to Christ.

Church leaders pushed too far the visible/invisible distinction. They would not simply rely on the signs and seals of the faith that God had appointed. They started requiring conversion experiences of their children. Even if the children were baptized, but could not produce a "credible experience" with Christ, they were not permitted to be part of the Church and take communion. Then came the grandchildren, children of the falsely excommunicated previous generation. What should be done with them? They were baptized on the basis of the grandparents' faith. The "Half-way Covenant" was born. They were considered to be members of the Church, but not the "faith."

This procedure was an attempt to reclaim the grandchildren. But it was a failure to operate on the visible cove-

nant language of the Bible. The Bible says that God's claim is **on the children** of believers through baptism. A generation had been skipped. But if baptism had not been weakened, it could have been reasoned that the grandchildren had God's claim on the basis of their **parent's** baptism. But this solution never occurred because the whole problem started when another standard for Church membership – a conversion experience – was substituted for baptism.

The "Half-way Covenant" created more problems. How were these grandchildren going to be revived? Again, it was believed that baptism was just a mere form.⁹ So, when they were baptized on the basis of the grandparent's faith, the children still needed to be "revived." The idea of a conjured up revival entered the picture. Ironically, the second sacrament, the Lord's Supper, was used to "prepare" the children for grace. Again, we see that the sacraments were only nominal, or preparational; all they could do is "prepare." They were not means of actual incorporation.

So how was grace brought? Through "revivals." Ministers like Solomon Stoddard implemented "open communion" to which the citizens of New England could come whether they were baptized or not. The Church utilized evangelists to come around and "really" save the members of their churches. Revivalism resulted and this approach only reinforced the visible/invisible idea. It "proved" that one could receive the sacraments and not "really" be saved. But instead of explaining this phenomenon in terms of a dual sanctions view of the **sacraments**, the sacraments were left out of the explanation entirely. When this happens, the Church ends up being left out. Eventually, this non-institutionalized kind of religion goes nowhere; it doesn't really change people and certainly not their culture.

Now after hundreds of years of using this "revivalistic" approach in American life, the Church has been all but completely crippled. No other institution in American society has as many members, but it cannot mount enough moral force to stop the killing of babies. What has happened? It began by minimizing the sacraments. A Church is only as strong as its view of the sacraments. In other words, if baptism does not really incorporate, then what the Church says on earth does not bind in heaven (Matt. 16:19; Jn. 20:23). To be thrown out of the Church is no longer equated with "being given over to Satan" (1 Cor. 5). So, the Church's words are only nominal, visible expressions, and have nothing to do with invisible realities. It cannot discipline, nor can it exercise dominion.

The invisible/visible distinction is inadequate. This position is an overlap of the nominalist and correct view of incorporation. It sounds good and in a very qualified sense can be useful in explaining theology. But care should be taken because it can avoid the reality of covenantalism as much as the other false views of incorporation.

9. Kenneth S. Latourette, *of Christianity* (Row, 1953), p. 955.