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On to the Covenant

On a dark, rainy day in November, 1977, I got baptised in the old Lutheran church at Hesson, Ontario. We Mennonites had purchased the building, torn out its baptismal font, turned its Gothic windows into rectangles and were now using it for our meetinghouse. After my baptism and public testimony the bishop gave me a card. On it were the questions I had been asked and the vows I had made. The card's title was *Covenant Reminder*.

Many times since my Mennonite baptism I have been reminded of that covenant I made with Jesus. And the thought of a covenant in baptism, I have discovered, is not new. In the 1520s Balthasar Hubmaier wrote:

Oh my Lord Jesus Christ, reestablish the two bands with which you have outwardly girded and bound your bride into a covenant. Your bride is the church community. The bands are proper water baptism and the nighttime meal.¹

Ambrutz Spittelmayer told the court at Ansbach in Franconia: “We make a covenant with God in the Spirit, in water baptism, and in drinking the cup which the Word calls the baptism of blood.”²

¹ From *Balthasar Hubmaier Schriften, Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Gütersloh*, 1962.

² From the testimony of Ambrutz Spittelmayer, written in the castle prison at Cadolzburg in Franconia, October 25, 1527.

Leonhard Schiemer wrote: “Water baptism is the seal of our faith and of the covenant we make in our hearts to God.”³

Hans Hut, Anabaptist messenger through southern Germany and Austria, said:

Baptism follows preaching and believing. Whoever is willing to accept the suffering that God will place on him when he joins himself to Christ, and whoever is willing to stay with Christ and forsake the world, makes a covenant in baptism before his church community.

The community of Christ may open the door of the covenant to those that desire it with all their heart, just like he said: “What you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.” The person who makes this covenant (in baptism) may be sure that he has been accepted as a child by God, and as a brother or a sister of Christ, a member his body and church community.⁴

“Believers wed and bind themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, publicly, through the true sign of the covenant, the water bath of baptism,” wrote Melchior Hofman.⁵ And to this Menno Simons added, “When we are inwardly cleansed by faith we bind ourselves in the outward sign of the water covenant (*Wasserbund*). We bind ourselves to the Lord Jesus in his grace when we bind ourselves in baptism to live no longer in sin.”⁶

Saved Through the Covenant

Within a few days of the first baptisms in Felix Manz’s home at Zürich, dozens more “bound themselves in baptism” in that city and its surrounding countryside. Within a matter of months these had baptised hundreds and thousands more in the German

³ *Von dreyerley Tauf* . . . 1527

⁴ *Vom Geheimnus der Tauff*, ca. 1527.

⁵ From *Die Ordonnantie Godts, De welke hy, door zijnen Soone Christum Jesum, inghestelt ende bevesticht heevt* . . . 1530.

⁶ *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers* . . . 1539

cantons of Switzerland, in Austria, in Bavaria, in Württemberg, and down the Rhein into the Netherlands and Belgium.

Baptism followed teaching. But because they tied faith, repentance and baptism together, the first Anabaptists did not consider postponing one of the three. They did not wait to baptise until a convenient time after the new birth took place. There was no convenient time. They baptised at once—even though it might cost them their lives—because they took baptism for the sealing of their covenant with God.

Eucharius Binder, baptised and ordained by Hans Hut at Königsberg in Franconia in 1526, travelled at once through Nürnberg and Augsburg to Steyr in Austria, baptising hundreds of people along the way. The following year they caught him at Salzburg and locked him in a house with thirty-seven other Anabaptists. The authorities then set the house on fire and all of the prisoners perished in the flames.

Leonhard Dorfbrunner baptised more than three thousand people in less than a year's time after his conversion. Many young men like him travelled from city to city and from house to house, meeting with those who longed to follow Jesus, as described years later:

Usually the service began with the reading of a passage from the New Testament and ended with the baptism of such as desired it, and with a general participation in the Lord's supper. Baptisms took place at any time and at any place, in the morning or in the evening, in the house or at the stream. The water was the symbol of the washing of repentance and the putting off of sin, the outward sign of the decisive entrance into a new and holy life. He who received it was henceforth no longer the master of his own life, but a servant of Jesus Christ, ready to do his will at whatever cost.⁷

In the Netherlands and northern Germany, spontaneous baptisms caused new congregations to spring up, as one

⁷ Harold S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel*, (Goshen, 1950), pg. 138

historian put it, “like mushrooms.”⁸ Many Anabaptists testified on arrest that they did not know who baptised them. Those who baptised avoided revealing their names, and those who believed avoided it too, for safety’s sake. But a few men like Leenaerdt Bouwens kept numerical records. For thirty years he baptised, on the average, more than three hundred people a year.

Too Young

The first Anabaptists asked people to wait for baptism only when they found the “document” to which the seal was to be applied incomplete.

In a letter “written in the dark with poor materials” in the dungeon of the castle at Gent in Belgium, Jannijn Buitkijns, burned at the stake on July 9, 1551, tells of nine other Anabaptists who were interrogated with him. One of them was an adolescent boy.

The boy confessed that he thought the baptism of believers was right and good. He had gone to the teacher once to be baptised, but he was not baptised yet.

“Why did the teacher not baptise you?” the interrogator asked.

The boy answered, “My lords, when the teacher explained the faith to me and asked me questions, he noticed that I was still immature in my understanding. He told me to go and search the Scriptures some more. But I wanted to be baptised. The teacher then asked me whether I knew that the world puts to death and burns those who are baptised. I told him that I knew that well. Then he said to me that I should be patient until he came the next time. He told me that I should search the Scriptures and ask the Lord for wisdom because I am still so young. Then we parted.”

⁸ Carl Adolf Cornelius, the Roman Catholic historian.

“Are you sorry that you did not get baptised?” asked the interrogator.

“Yes, my lords.”

“If you were not imprisoned would you be baptised?”

“Yes, my lords.”

For these words they sentenced him to death, and Jannijn did not see him again.⁹

Not Ready

Lauwerens van der Leyen, imprisoned at Antwerp in 1559, faced the question: “Are you baptised?”

Lauwerens answered: “No.”

“Is baptism necessary then,” the interrogator asked.

“Yes,” said Lauwerens. “It is necessary for perfection.”

“Why then are you not baptised?” asked the interrogator.

“I was not good enough yet.”

“Why?”

“Because I was involved too much in this world. I was, and still am, deeply in debt. I thought that if I were caught, people could say I was a hypocrite. Many could be turned away from the truth. Therefore I declined to receive baptism. But I consider it good and right and I want to live and die in this belief. Though I have not yet become baptised, the Lord in his mercy will save me because of his sufferings and precious blood. I believe all that a Christian is bound to believe, and I will stand firm in it. You may do further with me as you please for I am in your power.”

⁹ *Martelaers-Spiegel*, 1660



Antwerp, from the Scheldt (one of the mouths of the Rhein), home to a large “underground” fellowship of believers in the 16th century. Many Anabaptist prisoners, including Lauwerens van der Leyen, lay in chains in Het Steen castle, centre foreground.

They beheaded Lauwerens at Antwerp in Belgium on November 9, 1559.¹⁰

Exceptions to the rule were common in the sixteenth century. Some believers fell into the hands of the authorities before they got baptised. Some, arrested during meetings, got converted during the incident or in prison. Some missed baptism for other reasons. But the question of their salvation did not become an issue. The Anabaptists had no doubts about God’s mercy on the faithful.

Children

Roman Catholic and Protestant authorities often tried to rescue Anabaptist children from their “heretic” parents to baptise them. They accused the Anabaptists of murdering infants’ souls. But

¹⁰ *ibid.*

the Anabaptists, resting on the Word of God, did not worry. Conrad Grebel wrote:

All children that have not come to know the difference between good and evil, who have not eaten from the tree of knowledge, are surely safe through the work of Christ.¹¹

Menno Simons wrote:

Little children, especially those born in Christian homes, have a special promise. It is a promise given to them by God with no rites involved. It comes to them through pure and abundant grace, through Christ who says: "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." This promise makes glad and assures all the saints about their children.

Christian parents have in their hearts a sure faith in the grace of God concerning their beloved children. They believe that their children are sons and daughters of the kingdom. They believe that their children are under grace and have the promise of eternal life, not by any ceremony but through Christ. As long as they are mere children they are clean, holy, saved, and pleasing unto God, be they alive or dead.

Christian parents thank God for his love to their children, so they train their children in godly ways. They correct, chastise, teach, and admonish them. They exemplify to them the irreproachable life until the children are able to hear the Word for themselves, to believe it and obey it. Then is the time, and not until then, that they should receive Christian baptism as Christ and the apostles practiced and taught. . . .

If children die before coming to the age when they can decide between good and evil, before they have come to years of understanding and before they have faith, they die under the promise of God and that by no other means than the generous promise of grace given through Christ Jesus (Luke 18:16). If they come to the age where they can decide for themselves and have faith, then they should be baptised. But if they do not accept or

¹¹ *Ein Brief an Thomas Müntzer*, September 5, 1524.

believe the Word when they arrive at that age, no matter whether they are baptised or not, they will be damned, as Christ himself teaches (Mark 16:16).¹²

Infant Baptism

“*Simia semper manet simia, etiamsi induatur purpura* (a monkey stays a monkey even though you dress him in purple),” wrote Menno Simons. “In the same manner infant baptism will remain a horrid stench and abomination before God, no matter how finely the learned ones adorn it with garbled passages from the Scriptures.”¹³

Then, in a more serious tone he added:

Because true Christian baptism involves such great promises, among them the promise of remission of sins (Acts 2:38, Mark 16:16, 1 Cor. 12:13, 1 Peter 3:21, Eph. 4:5), some would like to baptise their children. But they fail to notice that the above promises are given only to those who believe and obey the Word of God.¹⁴

Conrad Grebel wrote:

The baptised are dead to the old life and circumcised in their hearts. They have died to sin with Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and arisen with him. . . . To apply such things to children is without and against the Scriptures.¹⁵

The Mode of Baptism

The first Anabaptists did not write about the mode of baptism. They baptised by pouring or immersion, in rivers or ponds, or in the houses, barns, caves, mills, or forests where they had their services. Shortly before Conrad Grebel baptised Wolf Ulimann

¹² *Verclaringhe des christelycken doopsels* . . . ca. 1542

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *op. cit.*

in the Rhine River, Felix Manz baptised Hans Bruggbach¹⁶ in a house at Zürich in Switzerland. This is the account:

After Hans confessed his sins and requested baptism Georg Cajacob (Blaurock) asked him, “Do you desire baptism?”

Hans replied, “Yes.”

Then Felix Manz asked, “Who will forbid me that I should baptise him?”

“No one,” answered Georg.

Then Felix Manz took a metal dipper (of the kind commonly found in Swiss kitchens) and poured water over Hans’ head saying: “I baptise you in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”

The first Anabaptists saw no conflict between baptising by either pouring or by immersion. Menno Simons, who no doubt baptised mostly by pouring, freely spoke of “burial in baptism.” Conrad Grebel, who baptised by immersion after the example of Christ and the apostles, wrote about the apostles themselves:

After that, they were poured over with water. Just as they were cleansed within by the coming the Holy Spirit, so they were poured over with water, externally, to signify the inner cleansing and dying to sin.¹⁷

Einverleibung

Jesus is the head of the body of believers. The first Anabaptists believed that in water baptism we become members of that body. They called it an *Einverleibung*, literally a going into and connecting onto a body, or a growing into each other. That

¹⁶ Hans Bruggbach (Brubacher) appears to have been the ancestor of Peter Brubacher of Wädenswil, mentioned in the *Ausbund* and in the *Martyrs Mirror*—and as such, of the Brubachers (Brubakers) now living in Pennsylvania and southern Ontario.

¹⁷ *Protestation und Schutzschrift*, 1524.

body, they believed, is one, glorious, universal body consisting of all those who have committed themselves unconditionally to Jesus, the head.

An *Ausbund* writer wrote:

Those of us who have been washed with the blood of Christ and made free from sin, are tied together in our hearts. We now walk in the Spirit who shows us the right way and who rules in us. The Spirit rules in our sinful bodies, that are now dead. And in Christ we become members of his body (*einverleibt*), and buried with him through baptism in his death. Now we live for him and keep his commandments.¹⁸

Menno Simons wrote:

Those who hear and believe the Word of God are baptised into the body. They have a good conscience. They receive remission of sins, they put on Christ and become members of the most holy body of Jesus Christ. . . . All who hear the Gospel and believe in it, all those who are made alive by the Holy Spirit within them, no matter of what nationality or speech they are, Frisians, or Hollanders, Germans, Belgians, Jews, Gentiles, men or women, all are baptised into one spiritual body of which Christ is the head—that is, they are baptised into Jesus' church community (Col. 1:18).¹⁹

Noah's Ark and Jesus' Community

The story of the flood held symbolic significance for the first Anabaptists. Noah was Jesus. The ark was Jesus' church community, and the door into it was baptism. Jakob de Keersgieter, burned at the stake at Brugge in Belgium wrote:

Baptism must be received upon faith for a burial of sin, a washing of regeneration, a covenant of the Christian life, and a putting on of the body of Christ. It is an ingrafting into the true olive tree

¹⁸ *Ausbund*, 114:4-5

¹⁹ *Verclaringhe des christelycken doopsels* . . . ca. 1542

and vine of Christ, an entrance into the spiritual ark of Noah, which belongs to Christ.²⁰

After baptism the Anabaptists found themselves within the body of Christ, breaking bread together and sharing their material things. Whoever took part in the life of the body showed himself to be a member of it, but beyond this, “church membership,” in the beginning, did not exist.

Thousands of converts were baptised into the Anabaptist movement at meetings among people they never saw again. The believers (above all, the servants and messengers) moved about continually, and congregations that numbered several hundred people at one meeting might well number fifty or less in the next—and vice versa. Only in Moravia, at the beginning, did congregations become stable units. There they lived on the *Bruderhöfe* (also known as *Haushaben*, communal households in rented buildings in town) but their teaching on baptism remained the same. Messengers from the *Bruderhöfe* still baptised converts spontaneously wherever they travelled, and only those who decided to move to Moravia actually became part of the settled congregations there.

Bundesgenossen

Grown into each other through baptism into the body of Christ, the first Anabaptists called one another companions of the covenant (*Bundesgenossen*). To this teaching, Martin Luther and the translators of the first Dutch (Biestkens) Bible made a contribution. They translated 1 Peter 3:20-21 like this: “A few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the *covenant* of a good conscience with God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

²⁰ *ibid.*

Baptism as a covenant and the resulting “society of the covenant” (*Bundesvereinigung*) brought the first Anabaptists to say like Jakob Kautz and Wilhelm Reublin in a letter to the town council of Strasbourg in 1529:

When the merciful God called us by his grace to marvellous light, we did not reject the heavenly message but made a covenant with God in our hearts to serve him in holiness all our days. . . . Then we reported our purpose to the companions of the covenant.

Pilgram Marpeck addressed his major book, published in 1542, to “the Christian society of the covenant (*Bundesvereinigung*) of all true believers.”

Menno Simons’ addressed his earliest Anabaptist writing to “all the true companions of the covenant scattered abroad.”

Loyalty

Brothers and sisters deeply conscious of their covenant with Jesus become deeply loyal to him and to one another. In a letter to me, a friend once mentioned “the Anabaptist emphasis on corporate discipleship” as the “centrepiece of our great heritage.” He was partially correct. The first Anabaptists spoke of corporate discipleship, but they revolved around Jesus, not around “corporate discipleship.”

Jesus was the centrepiece.

The first Anabaptists did not bother writing about loyalty to the church, loyalty to the brotherhood, or loyalty to God-ordained leaders. They did not make two commitments, one to the head and one to the body. Their covenant with Jesus made all other relationships conditional.

The oneness, the love and the community that resulted from the Anabaptists’ covenant with Jesus made their enemies suspicious. The Catholics and Protestants began to suspect that the Anabaptists had sworn themselves to one another with some

secret and terrible oath. But when questioned about this, Ambrutz Spittelmayr said:

I know of no other commitment we make to one another than the covenant we make in baptism. . . . We bind ourselves to God and become one with him in love, in spirit, in faith, and in baptism. At the same time God binds himself to us and promises to stay with us through thick and thin.²¹

Married to Jesus

The first Anabaptists spoke often of being “married to Christ.” At baptism they did not bind themselves to a congregation or denomination, not to rules or constitutions or human authorities, but to Jesus—like a bride binds herself to the groom. Wherever their fellow believers followed Jesus, they were committed to supporting them. Wherever they did not, they were committed to oppose them.

Hans Betz wrote:

Faith comes from hearing Christian preaching, then when a person believes, he must be baptised. Baptism in Christ is the covenant of a good conscience. . . . the promise to live from this point onward in the will of God.

We make a promise to God in baptism that we are bound to keep. Like a wife is subject to her husband here on the earth, so we become subject to Christ when we marry him in baptism.²²

The “rose red blood of Christ” was unspeakably precious to the first Anabaptists. It released them from the debt of sin that they could not possibly have paid. But logic told them that Jesus who bought their debt had the right of claiming them as his bond servants.

This covenant with Jesus led them . . .

²¹ From the written testimony of Ambrutz Spittelmayr, of October 25, 1527.

²² *Ausbund*, 108:5-6