

## DETERMINING THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

### OF COVENANT BAPTISM

#### Towards a Contemporary Context

Having examined the biblical foundations and historical background for covenant baptism, this study now seeks to gain a contemporary understanding of the practice of covenant baptism in the Presbyterian Church in America. It is the hypothesis of this dissertation that covenant baptism is a theological difficulty in many PCA churches. In order to determine the validity of this hypothesis, a survey concerning covenant baptism was conducted among PCA churches in September, 2004. This chapter will present the hypotheses being tested by the survey, the selection of the subjects, the method used in the survey, a summary of the respondents to the survey, the results of the survey, the results of the survey as a means of testing the hypotheses and the final observations gained from the survey.

#### The Hypotheses to be Tested

The following hypotheses will be tested for use in this project:

- 1) Covenant baptism is one of the more difficult doctrines, if not the most difficult doctrine, of the Reformed faith for prospective members to embrace.
- 2) Many members come into PCA churches from a non-covenantal background.
- 3) Most PCA churches have a substantial number of members who do not practice covenant baptism.

4) Most PCA churches have barred men from serving as an ordained officer because of the potential officer's refusal to except covenant baptism.

5) Unbelievers brought to faith through a PCA church are far more likely to embrace covenant baptism than those coming from "churched backgrounds".

6) Most churches have experienced individuals or families moving from a believer's only position to a covenant position on baptism.

7) Experience plays as strong a role as doctrine in determining the practice of baptism.

8) Many churches do not train their congregations concerning covenant baptism.

#### The Selection of the Subjects and the Method of the Survey

The subjects were selected at random from the 2004 Directory of the Presbyterian Church in America. The only qualifying provision was that each church or name must include an e-mail address. Eight hundred and fifty pastors or churches were sent a cover letter and twenty-question survey by e-mail.

#### The Characteristics of the Respondents

Of the eight hundred and fifty surveys e-mailed, about forty were sent back due to an invalid address. Of the remaining eight hundred and ten e-mails, one hundred and thirty-two responded to the survey. This gives the survey a return rate of sixteen percent.

The first three questions and the last question of the survey dealt with the characteristics and interest of the respondents. These questions will be addressed at this point in the study. The first three questions of the survey address the name, location and

size of the church. The last question asks if the respondent would like to get a copy of the results of the survey, thus giving some indication of interest.

Of the one hundred and thirty-two respondents, all were from a PCA background. This would be assumed based on the target group to whom the survey was sent. The church location of most of the respondents was in the south. This is possibly due to the demography of the PCA, which has a majority of churches in that region. Having said this, Pennsylvania and South Carolina had the most survey responses with thirteen. Maryland, Tennessee, and Texas all had nine survey responses. Alabama had eight. Florida, Mississippi, and Virginia had seven survey responses each. In all, thirty- four states were represented in the survey responses.

The size of the churches participating in the survey ranged from thirty members to nine thousand eight hundred. Of the churches that gave their size, twenty-seven had membership of fifty or less, forty-one had more than fifty but less than two hundred members, twenty-seven had more than two hundred but less than three hundred members, ten had three to four hundred members, six had four hundred to five hundred members and twelve had above five hundred members. This roughly parallels the PCA that is principally composed of smaller churches. A membership of five hundred will place a church in the top ten to fifteen percent of membership size in the PCA.

Based on question twenty, of the one hundred and thirty-two survey responses received, one hundred and two of the respondents asked to receive the results of the survey. This represents seventy-seven percent of the respondents. This percentage would point to a high degree of interest among those who responded to the covenant baptism survey.

### The Results Of The Survey

In this section, the results to questions four through nineteen will be given and discussed. The question will first be given as it appeared in the survey and the results will be stated.

**4. Has covenant baptism (the baptism of the infant or small children of believing members) ever been an objectionable or non-practiced doctrine for those who have joined your church?**

**Total responses: 132**

**18 (13%) 1) No**  
**44 (34%) 2) Seldom**  
**54 (41%) 3) Occasionally**  
**15 (11%) 4) Regularly**

Of the one hundred and thirty-two respondents to this question, eighteen or thirteen percent said no. Forty-four respondents, or thirty-five percent, said that covenant baptism has seldom been an objectionable or non-practiced doctrine. Fifty-four, or forty-one percent, of the respondents said that the doctrine had been occasionally objected to. Finally, fifteen or eleven percent of the respondents said the doctrine is objected to on a regular basis.

**5. Have you had individuals who have declined to join or left your church because of covenant baptism?**

**Total responses: 132**

**45 (34%) 1) No**  
**47 (36%) 2) Seldom**  
**37 (28%) 3) Occasionally**  
**3 ( 2%) 4) Regularly**

Of the one hundred and thirty-two respondents to this question dealing with church membership and covenant baptism, forty-five, or thirty-four percent, said that they had never had someone leave or decline to join their church due to covenant baptism. Forty-seven, or thirty-six percent, said they had seldom experienced loss due to covenant baptism. Thirty-seven, or twenty-eight percent, said this occurs occasionally and only three respondents, or two percent, said that church loss or refusal to join has occurred.

**6. Has the doctrine of covenantal baptism barred any of your men from serving as an ordained officer?**

**Total responses: 132**

**48 (36%) 1) No**  
**31 (23%) 2) Seldom**  
**44 (33%) 3) Occasionally**  
**9 ( 7%) 4) Regularly**

Concerning the barring of men from ordained office, forty-eight, or thirty-six percent, said that no one has ever been barred from office in their church. Thirty-one, or twenty-three percent, said it seldom happens. Forty-four, or thirty-three percent, said it occasionally happens. A regular occurrence of having to bar men from service was marked by nine respondents or seven percent.

**7. Do you require your ordained officers to believe and practice covenant baptism?**

**Total responses: 131**

**128 (98%) Yes      3 (2%) No**

When asked if their church required covenant baptism for the ordination of their officers, one hundred and twenty-eight responded yes and three responded no. This

represents respectively ninety-eight percent to two percent. There were one hundred and thirty-one respondents to this question.

**8. Has covenant baptism ever been a source of division within a church you have served?**

**Total responses: 131**

**10 (8%) Yes      121 (92%) No**

When the question of whether covenant baptism had caused division in their church, ten, or eight percent, said yes and one hundred and twenty-one, or ninety-two percent, said no. There were one hundred and thirty-one respondents to this question.

**9. Do you find new converts to be more receptive to covenant baptism than those coming from "churched backgrounds"?**

**Total responses: 118**

**98 (83%) Yes      20 (17%) No**

Of the one hundred and twenty-five that responded to question nine, ninety-eight, or eighty-three percent, said that they found it easier for new converts to embrace covenant baptism. Twenty respondents said no. This represents seventeen percent of the total. Seven responded by writing in that they did not know. This represents six percent of the total number.

**10. Estimated percentage of your congregation from a non-covenantal background. (This would include Reformed Baptist)**

**Total responses: 132**

**9 ( 7%) 1) 0 - 10%**  
**16 (12%) 2) 10 - 20%**  
**29 (22%) 3) 20 - 30%**  
**35 (27%) 4) 30 - 40%**

**43 (33%) 5) over 50%**

When asked how many in their congregation came from a non-covenantal background, only nine, or seven percent, said zero to ten percent; sixteen, or twelve percent, said ten to twenty percent; twenty-nine, or twenty-two percent, said twenty to thirty percent; thirty-five, or twenty-seven percent, said thirty to forty percent; and forty-three, or thirty percent, said over fifty percent of their congregation came from non-covenantal backgrounds. One hundred and thirty-two responded to question ten.

**11. Estimated percentage of your congregation that do not practice covenant baptism.**

**Total responses: 131**

**88 (67%) 1) 0 - 10%**  
**21 (16%) 2) 10 - 20%**  
**11 ( 8%) 3) 20 - 30%**  
**6 ( 5%) 4) 30 - 40%**  
**5 ( 4%) 5) over 50%**

Of the one hundred and thirty one responses to question eleven, almost sixty-seven percent, or eighty-eight respondents, said only zero to ten percent of their congregation do not practice covenant baptism. Twenty-one, or sixteen percent of respondents, said that ten to twenty percent do not practice covenant baptism. Eleven respondents, or eight percent, said that twenty to thirty percent do not practice the sacrament. This is followed by six, or five percent, who said their number of non-participants is thirty to forty percent. Finally, five, or four percent, said that over fifty percent of their congregation does not practice covenant baptism.

**12. What aspects of covenant baptism have been particularly objectionable to your visitors or members? (If multiple objections have occurred, please place a tally next to the answer.)**

**75 1) It has not been their previous experience or practice.**

**62 2) It is not explicitly commanded in Scripture.**

**78 3) Saving faith is not present in infants.**

**25 4) The New Covenant is only for believers.**

**Other - Please state:**

**Not meaningful, too similar to Catholicism, mode is issue, grandparents Upset.**

When asked what aspects of covenant baptism are particularly objectionable to their visitors or members, seventy-five respondents marked that it had not been their previous experience; sixty-two marked that it is not explicitly commanded in Scripture; seventy-eight marked that saving faith is not present in infants; and twenty-five marked that the New Covenant is only for believers. Since respondents were allowed to mark more than one answer, no percentages were calculated on this question.

Other responses given to this question included that covenant baptism is not meaningful to the child (two), it is too catholic, immersion cannot be performed on an infant, and that the extended family would be offended.

**13. Has anyone in your congregation ever moved from a position of "believers only baptism" to covenant baptism?**

**Total responses: 127**

**121 (95%) Yes      6 (5%) No**

When asked if anyone in their congregation had moved to a covenant baptism position, one hundred and twenty-one, or ninety-five percent, said that at least one person had changed their belief on this sacrament. Six, or five percent, said that they had never

experienced a person who changed their position. One hundred and twenty-seven responded to this question.

**What was their doctrinal reason? (If multiple position changes have occurred, please place a tally next to the answer.)**

**102 1) Covenant unity of Scripture**

**58 2) Covenant unity of the sacrament**

**89 3) Covenant view of children**

**45 4) Covenant (household) baptism in the New Testament**

**Other - Please state:**

**Want to be part of the church; emotional issue**

This question also asked for any specific reasons as to why the person changed their position. The four reasons suggested in the survey are the four presented in the doctrinal section of this dissertation. One hundred and two cited the covenant unity of Scripture as a reason for a change of position. The covenant unity of the sacrament drew some fifty-eight responses. Eighty-nine marked the covenant view of children. Finally, forty-five marked the covenant baptisms in the New Testament. Due to the fact that multiple responses could be made, no percentages were calculated on these numbers.

Other responses to this question included that people simply wanted to be part of the church and that some change due to wanting a benefit for their children based on emotional.

**14. Do you provide any type of instruction for prospective members on covenant baptism?**

**Total responses: 130**

**128 (98%) Yes      2 (2%) No**

When asked if they provide any type of instruction for their prospective members on covenant baptism, one hundred and twenty-eight, or ninety-eight percent, said yes and two, or two percent, said no. There were one hundred and thirty responses to question fourteen.

**15. Is there any book or booklet you regularly recommend to those interested in this doctrine?**

**Total responses: 129**

**110 (85%) Yes      19 (15%) No**

One hundred and ten, or eighty-five percent, said that they did use a specific book or booklet on a regular basis to inform their prospective members about covenant baptism. Of the one hundred and twenty-nine respondents, nineteen, or fifteen percent, said that did not have a specific source of information.

**Name of material:**

There were approximately thirty-eight different resources named by the respondents. The top five of these responses will be reviewed later in this paper. The resource most named was John Sartelle's booklet, *What Christian Parents Should Know About Infant Baptism*. Sixty-two respondents named this book as either their primary resource or one of the books they use. Nineteen of the respondents named Richard Pratt's video on infant baptism as one of their primary resources. Seventeen named Francis Schaeffer's booklet *Baptism*. Fourteen named Robert Booth's book, *Children of the Promise*. Wilson Benton's booklet, *Your Baby's Baptism*, was named by twelve respondents.

Several other books or videos were mentioned. Among these, alphabetically, would be Jay Adam's book, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism, Children of the Promise* by Geoffrey Bromiley, James Chaney's book *William the Baptist*, John Murray's *Christian Baptism, Infant Baptism* by Kenneth Gentry, Robert Rayburn's *What About Baptism*, and Harry Reeder's video series on *The Covenantal Nature of Baptism*. Five different pastors mentioned books or pamphlets that they have written and use in their congregation.

**16. Have you devoted a sermon or teaching series to covenant baptism in the last year?**

**Total responses: 123**

**56 (46%) Yes      67 (54%) No**

When asked if they had devoted a sermon or lesson series to covenant baptism, fifty-six of the one hundred and twenty-three respondents, or forty-six percent, said yes. Fifty-four percent or sixty-seven respondents said no. Others (three) wrote in that they explained the sacrament carefully before each administration. Others (three) noted that they taught the doctrine in the Inquirers' class. One noted what has been mentioned earlier in this paper, that he preaches through books of the Bible and has not come upon the subject in the book he is currently systematically expounding.

**17. Would you rate covenant baptism as one of the more difficult doctrines of the Reformed faith for prospective members to embrace?**

**Total responses: 127**

**86 (68%) Yes      41 (32%) No**

Of one hundred and twenty-seven respondents to question seventeen, sixty-eight percent, or eighty-six, said that they would rate covenant baptism as one of the more

difficult doctrines in the Reformed faith to embrace. Thirty-two percent, or forty-one, said that it was not one of the more difficult doctrines.

**18. Would you rate covenant baptism as the most difficult doctrine for prospective members to accept?**

**Total responses: 127**

**14 (11%) Yes      113 (89%) No**

Only eleven percent, or fourteen respondents, said covenant baptism was the most difficult doctrine to embrace. Eighty-nine percent, or one hundred and thirteen respondents, said that another doctrine was more difficult.

**If not covenant baptism, the most difficult Reformed doctrine for prospective members to embrace would be :**

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**Predestination – 64**

**Limited Atonement – 29**

**Sovereign Grace – 9**

**God's sovereignty and man's responsibility – 4**

**Total depravity – 2**

Sixty-four of the respondents said that predestination is the most difficult doctrine to embrace. Twenty-nine stated that limited atonement is the most difficult. Other responses to this question included sovereign grace, nine responses, God's sovereignty and human responsibility, four responses and total depravity, two responses. Percentages for this answer were not calculated due to multiple answers by the respondents.

**19. (Optional) The current growth rate of your congregation is:**

**Total responses: 106**

**5 ( 5%) 1) in decline**

**20 (19%) 2) stable**  
**52 (49%) 3) 1 - 10 %**  
**21 (20%) 4) 10 - 20%**  
**8 ( 8%) 5) above 20%**

Of the one hundred and six churches responding to this optional question concerning growth rate, five, or five percent, said they were in decline, twenty, or twenty percent, said they were stable, fifty two, or forty-nine percent, said they were growing by one to ten percent a year, twenty one, or twenty percent, said they were growing by ten to twenty percent and eight, or eight percent, said they were growing by twenty percent.

#### Test of the Eight Hypotheses

The eight hypotheses that were used as the foundation of the survey resulted in questions four through eighteen. In order to answer some of the hypotheses, several questions were used to ascertain their validity.

The result of the first hypothesis, covenant baptism, is one of the more difficult doctrines if not the most difficult doctrine of the Reformed faith for prospective members to embrace, was determined by the responses of pastors answering questions four, five, eight, seventeen and eighteen.

The validity of second hypothesis, many are coming into PCA churches from a non-covenantal background, was determined by the responses of pastors answering question ten.

The validity of the third hypothesis, most PCA churches have a substantial number of members who do not practice covenant baptism, was determined by the responses of pastors answering questions eleven and six.

The results of the fourth hypothesis, most PCA churches have barred men from serving as an ordained officer because of the potential officer's refusal to accept covenant baptism, was determined by the responses to questions six and seven.

The validity of hypothesis five, unbelievers brought to faith through a PCA church are far more likely to embrace covenant baptism than those coming from "churched backgrounds", was determined by the responses of pastors to question nine.

The result of hypothesis six, most churches have experienced individuals or families moving from a believer only position to a covenant position on baptism was determined by the responses to question thirteen.

The validity of hypothesis seven, experience plays as strong a role in determining the practice of baptism as does doctrine, was determined by the responses to question twelve.

The result of hypothesis eight, many churches do not train their congregation concerning covenant baptism, was determined by the responses to questions fourteen, fifteen and sixteen.

### The Validity of the Eight Hypotheses Based on Results of the Survey

#### Results of Hypothesis Number One

The first hypothesis states covenant baptism is one of the more difficult doctrines, if not the most difficult doctrine, of the Reformed faith for prospective members to embrace. This hypothesis proved to be true concerning it being one of the most difficult. It proved to be false concerning it to be the most difficult. This answer was determined by the responses of pastors answering questions four, five, eight, seventeen and eighteen.

Question eighteen asked the question, would you rate covenant baptism as the most difficult doctrine in Reformed theology for prospective members to embrace. In response to this question, only eleven percent responded in the affirmative. Some sixty-four respondents almost half, stated that predestination is the most difficult doctrine in the Reformed faith to embrace.

This does not mean that covenant baptism is not a difficult doctrine to understand and accept in the PCA. In response to question seventeen, would you rate covenant baptism as one of the more difficult doctrines of the Reformed faith for prospective members to embrace, sixty-eight percent of the pastors said yes.

This response is substantiated by the responses to questions four, five, and eight. Question four asked, has covenant baptism (the baptism of the infant or small children of believing members) ever been an objectionable or non-practiced doctrine for those who have joined your church? In response to this question, only thirteen percent of the PCA pastors said that covenant baptism had never been objectionable to people in their church. Some seventy-five percent said that it had occurred seldom or occasionally and eleven percent said that objections were often.

When asked in question five, have you had individuals who have declined to join or left your church because of covenant baptism, sixty-six percent said that at least one person had declined to join their church because of covenant baptism. Some thirty percent said that it occurred on an occasional or frequent basis. Only thirty-four percent said that they had never had a person refuse to join their church because of covenant baptism.

Finally, question eight asked the gravest question concerning the difficulty of their congregations with covenant baptism. Question eight asked, has covenant baptism ever been a source of division within a church you have served? Interestingly enough, eight percent said they had experienced a church division due to covenant baptism. Considering the number of pastors who have ever experienced a church division in their ministry, eight percent is a high number for a single doctrinal issue.

The responses to questions seventeen, four, five and eight point to the fact that covenant baptism is one of the more difficult doctrines to embrace in the Reformed faith. The response to question eighteen, however, would point to predestination as the most difficult doctrine for prospective members to embrace.

#### Results of Hypothesis Number Two

The second hypothesis states many are coming into PCA churches from a non-covenantal background. This hypothesis proved to be true. The answer was determined by examining the responses of pastors answering question ten.

Question ten asked for the estimated percentage of your congregation from a non-covenantal background. When asked this question, seven percent of the respondents said zero to ten percent, while twelve percent said ten to twenty percent, twenty-two percent said twenty to thirty percent, twenty-seven percent said thirty to forty percent and thirty percent said over fifty percent came from non-covenantal backgrounds. In other words based on this survey, almost sixty percent said that at least over thirty percent of their congregation came from non-covenantal backgrounds.

The response to question ten shows clearly that the PCA is reaching individuals and families who have no background or training in covenant baptism.

#### Results of Hypothesis Number Three

The third hypothesis states most PCA churches have a substantial number of members who do not practice covenant baptism. This hypothesis proved to be false. The answer was determined by examining the responses of pastors answering question eleven.

Question eleven asked the respondents to give the estimated percentage of their congregation that does not practice covenant baptism. Sixty-six percent of the respondents said that only one to ten percent of their congregation does not practice covenant baptism. Another sixteen percent said that only ten to twenty percent do not practice covenant baptism.

For the purposes of this study, above twenty percent would be considered a substantial number of members. The response to question eleven would state that only seventeen percent of churches have a substantial number of members who do not practice covenant baptism. Hypothesis three must be answered in the negative.

#### Results of Hypothesis Number Four

The fourth hypothesis states most PCA churches have barred men from serving as an ordained officer because of the potential officer's refusal to accept covenant baptism. This hypothesis is valid. This answer was determined by the response to question six.

In the Presbyterian Church in America, ordained officers must subscribe to the doctrine of covenant baptism. When asked question six, has the doctrine of covenantal baptism barred any of your men from serving as an ordained officer, sixty-four percent

said that the situation had occurred in their churches. Of the total number responding, some forty percent said that they had to bar men from being officers either occasionally or regularly.

The hypothesis that most PCA churches have had the experience of barring men from ordained office due to a lack of acceptance of covenant baptism is true.

#### Results of Hypothesis Number Five

The fifth hypothesis states unbelievers brought to faith through a PCA church are far more likely to embrace covenant baptism than those coming from “churched backgrounds”. This hypothesis proved to be true. This answer was determined by the responses of pastors to question nine.

Question nine asks the question, do you find new converts to be more receptive to covenant baptism than those coming from "churched backgrounds"? Eighty-three percent of the respondents answered this question in the affirmative. This high number would point to the fact that prior indoctrination or experience is a major hurdle to overcome in presenting covenant baptism.

Hypothesis five is clearly answered in the affirmative by question nine.

#### Results of Hypothesis Number Six

The sixth hypothesis states most churches have experienced individuals or families moving from a believers only position to a covenant position. This hypothesis is valid. This answer is determined by the response to question thirteen.

When asked question thirteen, has anyone in your congregation ever moved from a position of “believers only” baptism to covenant baptism, only five percent said that they had not. Ninety-five percent said that there were people in their churches that had moved toward a covenant baptism position.

Question thirteen also asked what doctrinal reasons were given for their change in belief. One hundred and two cited the covenant unity of Scripture as a reason for a change of position. Eighty-nine marked the covenant view of children. The covenant unity of the sacrament drew some fifty-eight responses. Finally, forty-five marked the covenant baptisms in the New Testament.

The sixth hypothesis stating most churches have experienced individuals or families moving from a “believers only” position to a covenant position is valid based on the overwhelming positive response to question thirteen.

#### Results of Hypothesis Number Seven

The seventh hypothesis states, experience plays as strong a role as doctrine in determining the practice of baptism. This hypothesis is true based on the responses to question twelve.

Question twelve gave a series of reasons people do not accept covenant baptism. The reasons were: it has not been their previous experience or practice; it is not explicitly commanded in Scripture; saving faith is not present in infants; and the New Covenant is only for believers. Of these responses the first is the only response that is not doctrinal. The second and third responses are common responses. The fourth response is principally

used by Reformed Baptists who still believe in the continuation of the covenant but do not believe in its application to children.

When asked what aspects of covenant baptism are particularly objectionable to their visitors or members, seventy-five respondents marked that it had not been the individual's previous experience. This response is second in frequency only to the seventy-eight responses received by the familiar response that saving faith is not present in infants. Only three responses separate past experience and the most common doctrinal reason given. Sixty-two marked that it is not explicitly commanded in Scripture and only twenty-five marked that the New Covenant is only for believers.

Based on the response to question twelve, it can be said that experience plays as strong a role in determining the practice of baptism as doctrine. Hypothesis seven is correct.

#### Results of Hypothesis Number Eight

The eighth hypothesis stated many churches do not train their congregation concerning covenant baptism. The validity of this hypothesis is inconclusive. This answer is determined by the responses to questions fourteen, fifteen and sixteen.

Question fourteen asked do you provide any type of instruction for prospective members on covenant baptism? Ninety-eight percent of the pastors provide some type of information for their prospective members. This is the highest percentage marked in the entire questionnaire.

When asked in question fifteen if there is any book or booklet they regularly recommend to those interested in this doctrine, eighty-five percent had a regular resource in mind or at hand to give to those interested.

Though instruction is given on a regular basis to prospective members, regular teaching or preaching is not as frequent. When asked in question sixteen, have you devoted a sermon or teaching series to covenant baptism in the last year, only forty-six percent said that they had specifically preached or taught on covenant baptism in the past year.

The cumulative result of questions fourteen, fifteen and sixteen is that almost all churches instruct prospective members on covenant baptism and have in mind material that can be given to those interested but that less than half of the churches have had a sermon, teaching lesson, or series on covenant baptism in the last year. Based on the responses to questions fourteen, fifteen and sixteen, hypothesis eight must remain inconclusive.

#### Observations and Conclusions

The survey points to the fact that covenant baptism is clearly a difficult doctrine or practice for many to accept. In fifty percent of the churches, it is objectionable on an occasional or regular basis. In thirty percent of the churches, individuals or families have declined to join or left the church over this one doctrine. And in almost ten percent of the churches, this doctrine has been at the center of division in the church.

On a more positive note, covenant baptism is a position that many are embracing. Though eighty-two percent of the responding churches have at least twenty percent of

their congregation coming from a non-covenantal background, sixty-seven percent of the churches have ten or less than ten percent of their congregation who do not practice covenant baptism. A change of position is clearly occurring within the PCA churches. This is in harmony with the fact that ninety-five percent of the pastors state that they have had a person or several person move from a “believers only” position to a covenantal position on baptism.

In moving toward a covenant position on baptism, the survey points overwhelmingly to the covenantal unity of Scripture as being the main doctrinal reason that individuals change their position. When the covenantal unity of Scripture is understood the other aspects of covenant baptism, the unity of the sacraments, the unity of God’s care for the children of believers, and the practice of household baptism find their support. The fact that covenantal unity is the major reason for accepting covenant baptism means that covenant baptism cannot be effectively taught apart from an understanding of the covenantal framework of Scripture. Covenant baptism cannot be taught in an isolated fashion. The results of the survey would point to a need for the systematic presentation of covenant theology before the doctrine of covenant baptism can be fully applied and accepted.

It should also be noted from the survey that the covenant view of children is the second major reason that covenant baptism is practiced. This aspect of covenant theology is often neglected or given only a cursory treatment. God’s benefits for the children of believers should be emphasized more. In our family obsessed Christian culture, it is God’s covenantal care for the children of believers that give depth and balance to the relationship of families to the body of Christ.

The survey also underscores two interesting factors that speak to the instruction of congregations. The first factor is that the past or emotional considerations play as much a role in a person's belief about baptism as doctrinal considerations. When asked what is objectionable to people about covenant baptism, almost exactly as many responded that it was not their previous experience as responded with the common statement, saving faith is not present in infants. The second factor is that the survey would point out that the experience of most pastors, eighty-three percent, have not been indoctrinated and are far more receptive to covenant baptism than those with a church background.

These factors would point to the need of a less polemical method of explaining covenant baptism than possibly is currently being used. Many times in explaining covenant baptism, pastors get caught up in polemics. Detailed theological arguments are used to rebut the even more detailed arguments of the Baptists. Casuistry becomes the order of the day. Interestingly, only twenty-five pastors noted the New Covenant position of the Reformed Baptist as a noted objection.

With the high level of biblical illiteracy, the rate of the number of people coming from un-churched backgrounds and those whose only issue is experiential, the polemical teacher may find himself answering questions no one is asking, rebutting arguments no one has thought of and confusing his people in the process. As Titus 1:9 commands, the Reformed pastor must be ready and able to instruct and refute those who contradict, but the foundational instruction in the area of covenant theology and baptism should be in teaching the positive truth of the Word.

In regard to instruction, the survey further notes that the pastors surveyed seem to place an emphasis on covenant instruction toward prospective members, ninety-five

percent, but less than half, reported to have given any form of detailed instruction on covenant baptism to the congregation in the last year. This includes not even one sermon or Bible study. As noted above, a clear presentation of covenant baptism must be done in the context of teaching on covenant theology. It raises the question of how often is either covenant theology or covenant baptism being systematically presented in PCA churches.

Finally, it should be noted that the survey seems to be self-contradictory. When the response to question eleven, estimate the percentage of your congregation that do not practice covenant baptism, is compared with the response to question seven, has the doctrine of covenant baptism barred men from ordained service, the answers seem incongruent. A full eighty-three percent of pastors state that eighty percent or more of their people practice covenant baptism. Yet, forty percent of the pastors state that they exclude men from office on an occasional, thirty-three percent, or regular basis, seven percent.

How can so many men be refused ordination in such a monolithic group? The answer is not that the “believers only” men are nominated for office more often than those who hold to the covenant. The answer is possibly that the barring of a man from office is a far more memorable event than the number of member families that practice covenant baptism. The answer to question seven concerning ordained officers is probably a better indication of the number of non-covenantal people in the PCA than the high percentage answer given in question eleven. Based on the number of men who are being barred from service as officers, for eighty percent of the pastors to say that eighty percent or more of their congregations hold to covenant baptism is possibly more of a wishful estimate than reality.

In summary, the doctrine of covenant baptism poses difficulty in many PCA churches. It is seen as one of the more difficult doctrines for new members to embrace. Almost ten percent of respondents said that they had experienced church division over the issue. Positively, many churches are prepared to answer their visitors' questions. Also, many are coming to embrace covenant baptism once they join the PCA.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the survey indicates that the doctrine of covenant baptism should not be isolated from the foundational teaching of covenant theology. The survey also indicates that the doctrine of God's special concern for the children of believers is a primary influence in the thinking of those considering the doctrine. Finally, the survey would point to experience as much as doctrine being the primary hindrance for many coming to this position.

Jeff Lowman, 2005