INTRODUCTION

Entering into an everlasting covenant with a holy and eternal God is a very serious matter. So serious, in fact, that a soul intending to erect such a covenant must possess a clear understanding of its enormous substance, importance, meaning and enduring quality.

Webster's New-World Dictionary defines the word "covenant" as follows:

1. The promises made by God to man as recorded in the Bible.
2. The binding or solemn agreement made by two or more individual parties, etc., to do or keep from doing a specified thing.
3. An agreement among members of a church to hold to points of doctrine, faith, etc.

Reducing the definition to its most simple form, a covenant is an agreement and a promise. Both in a secular and religious sense it is an agreement between two persons, both of whom intend to keep their end of the bargain.

In everyday life, agreements and contracts between individuals are very common. In large part, the legal profession has grown out of the need to officially write and record agreements among men. Further, the court and appellate systems spend a good portion of their time settling the disputes of broken promises (covenants).

Probably one of the most popular covenants in modern life is that made in marriage when two persons in love pledge their lives and fidelity to each other - a two-way promise.

Another type of covenant is loyalty to country. By staying within the law and "pledging allegiance", a citizen is guaranteed "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" - a two-way promise.

In the spiritual realm we find the most important covenant of all: that in which God promises eternal life through Christ Jesus unto all who will turn to Him in repentance, live in obedience to Him, and hold fast by His grace until life's end – a two-way promise.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the covenant made in baptism, its significance, its relationship to the old covenant, and to the believer's everyday walk of life.

DISCUSSION OF BIBLICAL COVENANTS

Essentially, there are two major Biblical covenants. The old covenant found in the Old Testament, and the new covenant found in the New Testament. The old covenant gave way to the new because Christ our Lord came to fulfill the law.
The old covenant was God's promise to faithful Abraham and to his seed in succeeding generations. In Genesis 12:2-3, God spoke to Abraham saying:

"And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee; and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed"

The old covenant is further conveyed in Exodus 19:5:

"Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine".

The old covenant is also elaborated on in Deuteronomy 7:9:

"Know, therefore, that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, who keepeth covenant and mercy with them who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations".

Other instances of God's covenant with His chosen people of Israel are found in Deuteronomy 30:3 and 2 Samuel 7:16:

"That then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations where the Lord thy God scattered thee".

"And thy house and thy kingdom shall be established forever before thee; thy throne shall be established forever".

Notice that the old covenant is conditional, predicated on the faithfulness of the people. In Exodus 19:5, God uses the language, "if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant". In Deuteronomy 7:9, He says, "with them who love him and keep his commandments". Thus, it is easy to see that on one side of the covenant are great and precious promises; on the other, is man's obligation to be faithful and to keep God's commandments. God will be faithful so long as the people will be faithful and obedient.

From time to time the Israelite nation broke their covenant with God and the fruit of disobedience resulted in fierce retribution from God. It is evident that Israel failed as the Apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 10:5, "But with many of them God was not well pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness".

God's reaction to covenant-breakers was chastisement. In Leviticus 26, His wrath was manifested on the children of Israel in the form of distress, drought, wild beasts, disease, famine, and finally dispersal. Yet, even though he exercised stern punishment, he still said he would remember His covenant, to Jacob, to Isaac, and to Abraham (the father of faith).
The "sign" or evidence of the old covenant was the Jewish Law. These were statutes and judgments given to the Israelites to obey and to live by.

In time it became evident that the law was not sufficient for salvation. Men simply could not keep the law. A new and better way - a new covenant - was instituted of God in the form of His beloved and only begotten son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who came to shed His blood for the atonement of the sins of fallen mankind. Thus, the era of the law yielded, according to God's pleasure, to the era of grace. The new way of salvation in and through Jesus Christ is spelled out in, among others, the following Scriptures: Romans 3:21-27, 6:14-15; Galatians 2:16, 3:10-14, 3:14-16, 3:24-26, 4:21-31; and Hebrews 10:11-17.

Specific New Testament references to the new covenant are:

- **Hebrews 8:8**: "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah".
- **Hebrews 8:10**: "For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days saith the Lord: I will put my laws into their mind and write them in their hearts; and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people".
- **Hebrews 8:13**: "A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth away is ready to vanish away".
- **Hebrews 8:6**: "But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises".
- **Romans 11:27**: "For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins".
- **Hebrews 10:9**: "Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, 0 God. He taketh away the first that he may establish the second"

Regarding the new covenant, two things stand out as being quite significant. First, God's covenant evolved from a national one into an international one. Initially, the covenant was national in scope (for the nation, Israel), but later became international (for the whole world). Second, the new covenant has a mediator, the Lord, Jesus Christ. This is a clear implication that the covenant is made up of two parties - God and man. It is "two-way". This is the reason the Apostolic Christian Church refers to the covenant as a "two-way" promise.

The essence of the new covenant is salvation and eternal life through Jesus Christ to all who turn to the Lord in repentance and remain faithful to their life's end. The new covenant, like the old, is contingent on obedience and faithfulness:

- **Hebrews 10:23**: “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering (for he is faithful that promised)".
- **Hebrews 10:38**: “Now the just shall live by faith; but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.”
- **Hebrews 10:26**: “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no
more sacrifice for sins"

**Hebrews 3:14**: “For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end

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**Baptismal Covenant as Practiced in the Apostolic Christian Church**

Just prior to baptism by immersion, as a convert stands in the baptismal waters, the officiating Elder asks several questions which allow the convert to testify publicly before many witnesses that he believes Jesus Christ is the only begotten son of God; that he is indeed ready for baptism; and also that he is ready to renounce the world and its vanities, and promises to be true and faithful to God until life's end.

The latter proclamation constitutes the establishment of a covenant with God in that the promises of God to the convert (already spelled out in the Scriptures) will remain in effect so long as the believer remains true to Him. This is the precious covenant between God and man - between mortality and immortality - which is made by the new believer in Christ Jesus with the Lord Himself.

One may be prone to ask if there is any Biblical injunction to warrant the making of a covenant with God in a public forum just prior to the rite of baptism.

Although there is no specific Scripture regarding the public making of a covenant, there are, of course, countless Scriptures alluding to the existence of the new covenant. By virtue of turning to Christ, one gives evidence of his recognition of the covenant. By repenting of his sins and living anew in Christ Jesus, the intent itself reveals one has accepted his part of the covenant - that of being true and faithful to God.

As soon as one turns to God, through Christ, in a sense the heart has already inwardly vowed to be true and faithful and obedient. Too, prior to baptism, the old man has symbolically become dead, and the burial in baptism serves as a symbol of what has already happened in the new pilgrim's heart (i.e. the new birth process). Thus, too, the outward and official covenant pledge to God before many witnesses is an official and final statement that reflects what has in a measure transpired beforehand - namely, the convert's desire to be true and faithful to God.

In the church, as in the world, important and pivotal events are verified by official rite and ceremony. The act of marriage is performed although no Scripture spells out the form of ceremony. Likewise, deaths are marked by funerals, even though no Scripture teaches the specific form of ceremony. Also, there is no precise Biblical guideline on how to conduct holy communion.

The same is true regarding the outward form of the covenant making. Although no Scriptures allude to the explicit form of the ceremony, it is still worthy to conduct such a
ceremony. As one is baptized into the death of Christ, and enters into the body of Christ - the church - he then becomes a partaker of the new covenant.

The public act of making a covenant reveals the believer's recognition of the covenant and his readiness to keep his side of it. Because there is a possibility, through carelessness, that one may break the covenant with God it is necessary to promise in the beginning an all-out intent to keep the covenant with Almighty God.

If the church believed in the doctrine of eternal security - once saved, always saved - there would be no need for making a covenant (a public promise) because one would never be considered unfaithful, even if his behavior and lifestyle would turn out to be sinful.

Thus, because one may (as the church believes) be prone to falling from grace, the making of a vow to God in the form of a covenant becomes very, very important! Probably, as much as anything, the establishment of a covenant with God indicates the believer's recognition of the great responsibility he is assuming in walking with a holy and eternal God.

Samuel Froehlich wrote in Baptismal Truth (p. 137): "This is the new covenant that God gives a new law in our hearts and minds, and makes such people out of us as walk in His ways and keep His commandments and do according to them. To the new covenant belongs a new life founded on the forgiveness of the old sins".

Further, (p. 139): "The new covenant is mutual (as was the old) and not one-sided. As God gives and fulfills the promise, so the regenerated person takes over his responsibilities and must fulfill them".

In his Meditations on Hebrews (p. 290) Froehlich states, "Whoever does not, with his whole heart, wish to become a subject of Christ does not belong to the congregation and to the new covenant".

(p.291) "The new covenant consists herein that God puts His laws into our mind and writes them in our hearts, so that we live accordingly, and that our heart becomes the living law of God, and our mind a mirror of His holiness".

(p. 254) "Jesus is become the surety of a new covenant, which, however, is mutually made between God and man so that God on His part makes all promises in Christ 'yea and amen'".

(p. 230) "No one will be saved unconditionally, but only under two conditions, that man accept the offered grace and then rightly use and preserve it unto the end".

THE COVENANT AS A HISTORICAL CEREMONY

Even though the Bible serves as an ultimate guide in enlightening our understanding of the new covenant, and of the making of a covenant with God, nonetheless it is both interesting
and profitable to review historical interpretation and application of the act of making a covenant with God prior to being baptized.

In The Theology of Anabaptism, the author writes, "A covenant is a pledge which in Anabaptist thinking works in three directions: (a) a covenant between God and man, (b) between man and God, and (c) also, one between man and man, thus establishing the church".\(^1\)

Interestingly, in 1529 two men presented to the city council in Strasbourg a confession which spoke of baptism as an act in which Anabaptists "made a covenant with God in our hearts to serve him henceforth in holiness all our days by His power".\(^2\)

Pilgrim Marpeck, an Anabaptist leader of the sixteenth century, said the new covenant belongs "only to the one who covenants himself to God and promises himself to Him in the power of the Holy Spirit in faith".\(^3\)

Marpeck further stated, "And this is the covenant in baptism, that we through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, put off and flee the filth of the world and bind ourselves with Christ unto a new life, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too, as newborn from the dead, may enter into a new way of life".\(^4\)

**SUMMARY**

The making of a covenant is an official acknowledgement of God's promises to man and man's intent to accept and be obedient to God's promises and commandments. The covenant with God is conditional on man's obedience until life's end. The solemn rite of baptism and the making of a covenant is a striking gesture in which both the converted and unconverted witnesses are obviously impressed.

Regarding the matter of covenants, there is a great similarity between the partakers of the old covenant and those of the new. Children of both covenants were commanded of God to be a holy, sanctified, and separated people. God severed His "treasure" from the heathen and the world.

The following Old Testament Scriptures support the separation God wanted for those of the old covenant: [Leviticus 20:7-8, 20:22-24, 20:26](#).

Likewise, the children of the new covenant are exhorted to be separated from the world as well: [II Cor. 6:14-18; I Tim. 6:11; Ephesians 5:11](#). There are many other Scriptures that point to separation too.

Making a covenant with God while standing in those baptismal waters is both an awesome and impressive ceremony which serves as an inspiration to the church, and leaves a lasting imprint and obligation on the heart and mind of the one who has entered into such a holy commitment to the Lord.
Surely the Lord God must smile with satisfaction as He witnesses each soul who makes a sincere and lasting pledge of unswerving fidelity to Him, in sincere faith.

FOOTNOTES

3. Ibid, page 118.