

21.6 REPORT DEPUTIES DOCTRINAL MATTERS : ADDITION TO THE FORM FOR BAPTISM (Artt 95, 202)

- A. Dr N Vorster delivers the Report.
- B. **Decision:** The Report is referred to Commission Doctrinal Matters 2.
- C. Rev L du P van der Vyver reports on behalf of Commission Doctrinal Matters 2.

D. REPORT

1. Mandate (Acta 2006:539).

“Decision

1. The Proposal is executed by giving the Deputies for Doctrinal Affairs the mandate to investigate the proposed addition and to advise the next Synod on the matter.
2. Directive to the to be named Deputies:
 - a. Should it appear from the study that the addition to the existing Form for Baptism is possible, the to be named Deputies can continue with the formulation of a concept Form for Baptism and table it as part of its study results at the next National Synod.
 - b. Such a concept Form for Baptism should fall within the framework of Scripture, Confession and Church Order.
 - c. To guide Church Councils with regard to what the congregation’s responsibility “to help educate” in the suggested addition to the Form for Baptism would mean, in practice, in the light of the increased covenantal involvement of the congregation.

Decision: Noted.

2. Interpretation of the mandate

- 2.1 The essence of the mandate concerns investigating the suggested addition to the Form for Baptism and advising the following Synod on this matter. The question is therefore whether such an addition is theologically justifiable, necessary and practically executable.
- 2.2 If such an addition is necessary, the Deputies should continue with the formulation of a concept Form for Baptism that includes the added formulation, and this should be presented to the following National Synod along with the study results.
- 2.3 The concept Form for Baptism should fall within the framework of Scripture, Confession and Church Order.
- 2.4 The Deputies understand the concept “increased covenantal involvement” as meaning that the congregation should not only be passive onlookers at the Baptism. The congregation, as part of the covenant people of God, has a responsibility with regard to the education of the children. The suggestion is that the Form for Baptism should aim to involve the congregation to a greater extent by directing their attention to their responsibility towards baptized children.
- 2.5 If the addition is suggested Church Councils should receive guidance from the Deputies regarding the practical implications of this addition to the Form for Baptism.
- 2.6 The designated working procedure seems to be the following:
 - 2.6.1 To do a theological investigation with regard to 1) the implications of the covenant people's mutual bond of faith with each other for the Baptism, and 2) the character and expediency of oath-taking.
 - 2.6.2 To consider the necessity of making such an addition.
 - 2.6.3 To consider the practical implementability of such an addition.
 - 2.6.4 If it is suggested that such an addition is theologically justifiable, and is ecclesiastically necessary and practically implementable, Church Councils should receive guidance regarding the practical implications of the addition for their congregations.

Decision: Points 2.1 to 2.6.4 noted.

3. Theological evaluation

3.1 *The communal character of the covenant*

Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant that God has with man. The covenant has a strong communal character. This becomes clear from God's covenant with Abraham where God's promises also pertain to the descendants of Abraham: "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendents after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of the descendents after you" (Gen 17:7).

The Abrahamic covenant forms the centre and foundation of the Sinaitic covenant (Van Genderen and Velema, 1992:506). The descendants of Abraham with whom God had a covenant is called God's people (see Jer 11:4, Ezek 11:20). They owe their origin to the election of God, and therefore they are in the first place a community of faith, and not a cultural entity in a national political sense. This becomes clear in that Israel is not called *gôj jhwh*, but *Cam jhwh* (Helberg, 1990:16, Heyns, 1978:218). In the New Testament Christ calls the church into being in order for them to be the new covenant people (Matt 16). The New Testamental church is governed by God himself just like the Old Testamental covenant people. Christ is the Head of the church (Eph 4:15), He equips believers by giving the church offices (Eph 4:11), He gives the church gifts through the Spirit (1 Cor 12:1-5), discipline is exercised in his name (1 Cor 5:4), the church receives the signs of the covenant and is singled out as God's people for service to God (see Luke 1:17, Acts 15:17, Matt 28:19, 2 Cor 6:16).

The covenant presupposes that the children of the covenant should live in communion with each other. This especially becomes clear from the different images used for the church in the Old and the New Testament. The images of the church as body, house, vine, people and herd are only a few images that express the strong mutual bond amongst believers. Believers receive the blessings of the covenant together. The Baptism is a sign and seal that the baptised person belongs to the communion of the covenant. Therefore Baptism is not only a personal matter, but a matter of the community of believers who live in a mutual bond of faith with each other (see Bijlsma, 1977:36).

The church is not just a faith community, but also a loving community. Love requires per definition that believers will pay attention to each other. This reality becomes clear from the variety of *each other* texts that can be found in the New Testament (Rom 15:7, Gal 6:2, Col 3:16, 1 Tess 5:11, 1 John 4:7, James 5:16).

Although covenant education is primarily the task of the covenant parents, and the Bible does not explicitly dedicate the task of education to the church, the implication of the mutual bond between believers is that the covenant people should also play a part in covenant education. Colossians 3:16 states that believers should teach each other. This surely includes children. Catechism is in essence a form of ministry of the Word, and God entrusts the ministry of the Word to the church (Matt 16:19, 28:16-20).

3.1.2 Conclusion

Since the covenant people live in a mutual bond with each other, the covenant community has a responsibility with regard to the education of children.

Decision: Points 3.1 to 3.1.2 noted.

3.2 *Oath-taking*

3.2.1 Definition

A distinction is usually made between promissory oath-taking and testimonial oath-taking. Promissory oath-taking is assurative in nature and it guarantees that certain ventures will be executed, while testimonial oath-taking has a juridical function, and is usually used by the state and the courts to establish the truth (see Thielemann, s.a:626, De Bruyn, 1993:79). The question is: what will the character of the suggested addition to

the Form for Baptism be? Is it an oath before God, or is it merely an undertaking amongst fellow believers? The suggestion of the Proposal, as it is formulated, implies that the congregation makes a “conscious commitment” towards the parents and the child to be baptised before the face of God. God is called as Witness that the congregation will fulfill her promise towards the mentioned parties. The suggested addition therefore comes down to an oath of promissory nature. The fact that the suggested addition to the Form for Baptism is oath-taking of a promissory nature, does not make it less serious and binding than an oath of testimonial nature.

In Matthew 5:34-37 Jesus warns against the Jewish view of certain types of oath-taking as less binding than other forms. Each oath calls on the Name of God in its essence and character regardless of what formula is used: whether you swear at the temple, or Jerusalem or heaven or earth (see De Bruyn, 1994:210). Both forms of oath-taking comes down to calling God as Witness for the truth. Before the Living and Almighty God who is the deepest Knower of our hearts, we declare that the truth is being spoken.

3.2.2 The aim of oath-taking

The oath finds its origin in the struggle against sin. If there was no sin and no lie, there would not have been a need for oath-taking. The aim of the oath is to establish truth and security in a world full of lies and fraud (see De Bruyn, 1994:209, 211). The oath says that in the midst of the uncertainty of the world, there is only one fixed point, and that is God (De Bruyn, 1994:209). Believers can therefore never have peace with oath-taking, because it testifies to the rule of the lie that has to be conquered.

3.2.3 The acceptability of oath-taking

Several examples of oath-taking can be found in the Old and New Testaments (see Gen 24:3, 22, 26:31, 31:54, 1 Sam 24:22, 23, Ezra 10:5, 2 Cor 11:31, Gal 1:20, Phil 1:8, 1 Tess 2:5, 1 Tim 5:21). However, one must guard against interpreting descriptive passages in the Bible as prescriptive passages. In the laws of the Pentateuch oath-taking is prescribed only in a few cases, namely when a person is suspected of theft or adultery (Ex 22:6, Lev 5:23, 25). In Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20 it is clearly stated that an oath may only be taken in the Name of the Lord. Many examples can be found where God lays down an oath by Himself (see Gen 22:16, Ezek 18:11). Christ himself laid down an oath in the presence of the Sanhedrin (Matt 26:63-64).

From this one can deduct that oath-taking in a promissory and juridical sense are justified (see HC 37).

3.2.4 The demand of necessity

It seems from Scripture that oath-taking may only take place in extreme cases when necessity demands it. The oath of Jephthah (Judges 11) is an example of reckless oath-taking. In Ecclesiastes 5 there is a similar warning against hasty oath-taking. The person who makes the oath must make sure that he can fulfill his promise (Ecclesiastes 5:3). In Matthew 5:34-37 Christ seems to give the command that oath-taking may not take place at all. However, one must keep in mind that he uses *masjaal* here to reveal the sinful oath-taking of the Pharisees. He does not condemn all oath-taking, but indicates that an oath may not be taken in the same way as the Pharisees do it. This becomes evident in that he lays down an oath before the Sanhedrin (Matt 26:64). Yet it remains clear that he feels that believers should stay away from oath-taking as far as possible. This view is repeated in James 5:12. HC 37 states that oath-taking may take place under the following circumstances: when the authorities ask it, when necessity demands that the truth be ascertained, and when the honour of God and the well-being of fellow man is served.

3.2.5 Conclusion

- 3.2.5.1 Oath-taking derives its necessity in the fight against sin and the struggle against falsehood. Therefore it becomes especially relevant in juridical matters. Christians

should as far as possible not lay down oaths to each other, because the truth should stand firm in the mouth of a believer. The words of Christ in Matthew 5:37 is especially relevant for the mutual relationship between believers: Let your “yes” simply be “yes” and your “no”, “no”.

- 3.2.5.2 Oath-taking should meet the requirements of necessity. The Proposal names several reasons under 1(a-d) of why the suggested addition is necessary, namely: that it would lead to a more conscious commitment on the side of the congregation, that it can lead to the strengthening of the faith of the parents, that it can lead to an awareness that the congregation should be more involved with the child and that it can help counter the spirit of individualism. However, it remains a question whether these reasons really meet the requirements of necessity. The motivation for oath-taking should not be to create a law that would force the congregation to greater obedience. It is also not good to use oath-taking as a form of inspiration for church members. The question is: Is ministry and religious instruction, instead of oath-taking, not a better way to remind the congregation of their task towards children of the covenant?

Decision: Points 3.2.1 to 3.2.5.2 noted.

3.3 *Recommendations*

- 3.3.1 The Deputies recommends that the proposal to make an addition to the Form for Baptism of Infants should not be accepted by the Synod, since the suggested addition do not meet the requirements of necessity for oath-taking.
- 3.3.2 In the light of the above-mentioned recommendation the directive to guide Church Councils with regard to informing the congregations on what “help educate” would mean in practice is not relevant. The Synod are further reminded that the Deputies Youth Matters published, on instruction of the 1982 Potchefstroom Synod, nine elaborate studies in which Church Councils were guided regarding youth care.

Decision: Approved.

- 3.2.1 In the Formulary for Baptism the following paragraph has to be added before the first prayer:

“And you, beloved congregation, receive this child/these children as part of the covenant people of God and the body of Christ. Love this child/these children, pray for him/her/them, and be an example of a life in Christ.”

3.1 **Motivation**

Both the initial Point of Description of the Regional Synod North-West and the Deputy Report indicates persuasively that the baptized child is part of the covenant community of believers, and that the congregation as covenant community also has a responsibility towards the baptized children. Although the designated manner to indicate this responsibility is not to demand a promise from the congregation (see 3.3.1), the above-mentioned call in the Formulary for Baptism is a sensible way to make the congregation aware of this responsibility.

This important matter is adequately addressed in this manner. In other Formularies, such as the Formulary for the Confirmation of Elders and Deacons, the congregation is also called upon to meet their responsibility.

Decision: Approved with the addition of BC, art 34 as part of the motivation, and the request that churches in ecumenical unity is notified of this addition – amendments are already made – Deputies Acta. The translations should be language edited, especially in the light of the long sentences that are difficult to understand.