

## *Baptism and Church Membership*

One would think that, over the last two thousand years or so, Baptist writers have expounded on this issue to the point that nothing original can possibly be said on the subject. I'm sure that is true and, as I am sure to prove with this piece of prose, there will still be nothing new written about it when I finish.

Let me begin with all the usual caveats. I have no particular quarrel with sects, denominations, or churches that have determined that baptism, however performed, is necessary for salvation. Nor do I take up the sword against those who would claim that water baptism actually regenerates the soul. Nor do I wish to battle those who sprinkle or pour, or discuss exactly what words are said at the baptism. I believe the scripture firmly teaches that they are wrong, but they have every right to believe what they believe and act and teach accordingly. If they believe that, they should proclaim it, teach it, preach it, and try to get people to believe it – and they should allow me the same courtesy. It does us no good, and in fact does mankind a disservice, to act in an uncivilized fashion when it comes to proclaiming what we believe. On the other hand, we must serve God and not men.

But today I am not writing concerning the differences of beliefs among denominations, churches, or other religious bodies. I am not writing to denounce what other denominations or churches believe. I am writing because I am a Baptist. I am a Baptist for the same reason that John was a Baptist – because I preach repentance and baptism. I do not preach it as well, do not have the same power (due to my own weaknesses), and am not worthy to bear the name, but I preach it for the same reasons. I am not a Baptist because I belong to any particular denomination, and for about a thousand years or so there was no recognized denomination of Baptists. But rest assured, Baptists existed, and Baptist churches existed. Christ promised to build his church (Matt 16:18), and anyone reading that scripture at any date since that time should be able to accept it as truth. Christ called out his apostles. He was their comforter and head. He accepted the baptism of John. He gave them the Lord's supper. He placed them in the church (I Cor. 12:27-28). The church did not have a human founder. It was founded by the Chief Shepherd Himself. He gave them power at Pentecost to carry forth the gospel. Peter, preaching the first great gospel message after such power was given, instructed those hearers who were "pricked in their heart" to "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. " (Acts 2:38) Three thousand people were "added unto them" that day, and they continued in the church (Acts 2:

41-42). It was not long before other churches were established and it was not long after, that heresy began to appear in the church.

An AP wire story appeared on June 12, 2006, run in the Daily Oklahoman and no doubt in some other papers as well, as follows:

Oklahoma Baptist Church Considers Not Requiring Baptism  
AP - 6/12/2006 7:21 AM - Updated: 6/12/2006 7:41 AM

EDMOND, Okla. (AP) A Southern Baptist megachurch mulls a decision about possibly eliminating baptism as a requirement for membership.

If Henderson Hills Baptist Church in Edmond decides to not require baptism for membership, it would cause the church to break with a long-held denominational tradition. The church of 6800 members will vote on the issue in late July.

Church pastor Dennis Newkirk says he and other members of Henderson Hills' elder council believe that the Bible does not mandate that baptism be a requirement of membership and that it has become more of an initiation rite than anything else.

But the executive director and treasurer of the state's Baptist General Convention disagrees. Anthony Jordan says that Baptists believe the New Testament teaches that every believer should follow the Lord in baptism as the identification with the visible church.

Now I am not a Southern Baptist, so I am not concerned with denominational tradition. I was once a member of a Southern Baptist church in Maryland (before Christ saved me) and was told by an official of the Southern Baptist Headquarters in Maryland that if I wanted to believe the bible was literally true, the Southern Baptist Convention was no place for me. I took him at his word and left. That was 33 years ago. After the Lord graciously saved my soul in 1976, my wife and I were baptized and joined to an independent Baptist church. I would just as soon spell the word "Baptist" with a small "b," but these fancy new word processors automatically capitalize it – no doubt an invention of the Anti-Christ.

But I am a Baptist, and it concerns me what Baptists believe, or don't believe. Ordinarily, we accept letters of recommendation from, and send letters of recommendation to, Southern Baptist churches, if we can determine that they believe in salvation by grace and baptism after salvation, and that the candidate has a testimony of these things. That may have to change.

I would also like to point out that this circumstance is not necessarily new. Baptists in North Carolina have been “discussing” this situation for some time now. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, pastor John Piper of the Bethlehem Baptist Church, on January 8, 2002, presented a proposal to his church along the same lines. Paragraph ten of that proposal reads as follows:

*10. Therefore, where the belief in the Biblical validity of infant baptism does not involve baptismal regeneration or the guarantee of saving grace, this belief is not viewed by the elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church as a weighty or central enough departure from Biblical teaching to exclude a person from membership, if he meets all other relevant qualifications and is persuaded from Bible study and a clear conscience that his baptism is valid. In such a case we would not require baptism by immersion as a believer for membership but would teach and pray toward a change of mind that would lead such members eventually to such a baptism.*

Please note that this church claims to be Baptist, but voices the sentiment that “***we would not require baptism by immersion as a believer for membership.***” That is a departure from what Baptists have held dear for two thousand years, no matter what effects you believe were conveyed by infant baptism. It is also a departure from the scriptural order for a child of God, which is conversion and then baptism. There was no separate category for “church membership,” because it was the church that did the baptizing, and those baptized became “members of the body.”

Perhaps a couple of quotes from notable Baptists from the past would assist us in defining the historical Baptist (and we believe, Bible) position. We do not claim infallibility for these individuals, but they are two of the best-known Baptist preachers to have ever stepped behind a pulpit. The Declaration of Faith and Practice of the Church of Christ (a Baptist church) in Carter Lane, Southwark, pastored by the learned Dr. John Gill, stated, as article 11:

*XI. We believe, That Baptism (Matthew 28:19, 20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26) and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of Christ, to be continued until his second coming; and that the former is absolutely requisite to the latter; that is to say, that those (Acts 2:41 and 9:18, 26) only are to be admitted into the communion of the church, and to participate of all ordinances in it, (Mark 16:16; Acts 8:12, 36, 37 and 16:31-34 and 8:8) who upon profession of their faith, have been baptized, (Matthew 3:6, 16; John 3:23; Acts 8:38, 39; Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12) by immersion, in the name of the Father, (Matthew 28:19) and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*

That would seem to leave little doubt as to how Dr. Gill and his church felt about baptism and church membership.

Writing in the July 1867 edition of the *Sword and Trowel*, Charles Spurgeon writes:

*To attempt to convert men to our views is our duty, but to draft them without conversion into our body is no gain in any sense, either to truth or good fellowship. A certain company of would-be extra super-fine liberals, made up of Independents and Baptists, good enough men in their way, but thoroughly wrongheaded on this and some other points, are resolved to amalgamate the two bodies, and their first action, inoffensive and insignificant in itself, we judge, from what we know of them, to be merely the beginning of the end, a stepping-stone to something more, getting in the thin end of the wedge—in plain Saxon, a little dodge. They would form churches and found a denomination in which Christ's ordinance of baptism would be left optional; some of them would even have a font and a baptistry in each place of worship, which to our mind, is to form churches on the principle of despising the command of Christ, and counting it to be an utterly insignificant matter what the ordinance may be, and whether it be obeyed or not. "Whichever you please, dear friends; pay your money and take your choice. Sprinkle the infant or immerse the believer, our church does not care a farthing which;" this is the witness of the model Union Churches, and would be the witness of a United Baptised and Unbaptised Congregationalism. We quite understand the testimony of our friends who hold infant baptism, as they also understand ours; but to form a denomination which regards all baptisms with equal indifference, seems to us to be **a scheme traitorous to Christ and his Word.***

*When ministers get a footing in Baptist churches, and first disown strict discipline as to baptism, and then inoculate their people with hostility to their denomination, and coquette with Paedobaptist bodies, they present to our churches a reason for inquiry into the advisability of the very first step in the descent; and they also raise the question as to the honesty of those who gain an inch with the covert view of getting an ell, when they know very well that no inch would be given if their ultimate design were known.*

From *Baptismal Regeneration*, a message by Charles Spurgeon preached June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1864, we find the following sentiments:

*What connection has this baptism with faith? I think it has just this, baptism is the avowal of faith; the man was Christ's soldier, but now in baptism he puts on his regimentals. The man believed in Christ, but his faith remained between God and*

*his own soul. In baptism he says to the baptizer, "I believe in Jesus Christ;" he says to the Church, "I unite with you as a believer in the common truths of Christianity;" he saith to the onlooker, "Whatever you may do, as for me, I will serve the Lord." It is the avowal of his faith.*

*Next, we think baptism is also to the believer a testimony of his faith; he does in baptism tell the world what he believes. "I am about," saith he, "to be buried in water. I believe that the Son of God was metaphorically baptized in suffering: I believe he was literally dead and buried." To rise again out of the water sets forth to all men that he believes in the resurrection of Christ. There is a showing forth in the Lord's Supper of Christ's death, and there is a showing forth in baptism of Christ's burial and resurrection. It is a type, a sign, a symbol, a mirror to the world: a looking-glass in which religion is as it were reflected. We say to the onlooker, when he asks what is the meaning of this ordinance, "We mean to set forth our faith that Christ was buried, and that he rose again from the dead, and we avow this death and resurrection to be the ground of our trust."*

*Again, baptism is also Faith's taking her proper place. It is, or should be one of her first acts of obedience. Reason looks at baptism, and says, "Perhaps there is nothing in it; it cannot do me any good." "True," says Faith, "and therefore will I observe it. If it did me some good my selfishness would make me do it, but inasmuch as to my sense there is no good in it, since I am bidden by my Lord thus to fulfil all righteousness, it is my first public declaration that a thing which looks to be unreasonable and seems to be unprofitable, being commanded by God, is law, is law to me. If my Master had told me to pick up six stones and lay them in a row I would do it, without demanding of him, 'What good will it do?' Cui bono? is no fit question for soldiers of Jesus. The very simplicity and apparent uselessness of the ordinance should make the believer say, 'Therefore I do it because it becomes the better test to me of my obedience to my Master.'" When you tell your servant to do something, and he cannot comprehend it, if he turns round and says, "Please, sir, what for?" you are quite clear that he hardly understands the relation between master and servant. So when God tells me to do a thing, if I say, "What for?" I cannot have taken the place which Faith ought to occupy, which is that of simple obedience to whatever the Lord hath said. Baptism is commanded, and Faith obeys because it is commanded, and thus takes her proper place.*

Now I hope I am not going too far out on a limb here, but my suspicions are that Dr. Gill (who could do his study in the original languages) and Mr. Spurgeon might just have as much insight into the scriptuality of baptism as the eldership of a modern-day liberal "Baptist" church.

I should like to briefly address two points that I think need to be made in this dialogue, and they are as follows:

1. That to start with the church, and then define the requirements for admission, is starting at the wrong end. As my grandfather would say, it is putting the cart before the horse. And Grampy knew that wouldn't work, because he had a cart and a horse.
2. This doesn't just concern letting unbaptized people into the church. This concerns letting people who were baptized as infants continue to believe their baptism is valid, unless and until they become convinced otherwise. But there is no reason to become convinced otherwise because there can be no further gain for them, since they have been granted membership in the church already.

To enlarge upon the first point, I believe it necessary for a moment to get "church membership requirements" out of the discussion and take a look at the Lord's desire and plan for a convert. We can see this plan in action in the very first gospel message after the church was empowered.

*Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard [this], they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men [and] brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, [even] as many as the Lord our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added [unto them] about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. Acts 2: 36 - 42*

This purpose and plan was implemented by God and had been given as a commandment to his apostles, whom he placed in the church (I Cor 12: 27 – 28).

*Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, [even] unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matt. 28: 18 – 20)*

The God-ordained process in the life of one of his children is salvation, followed by baptism, followed by teaching and service. The church is not mentioned in these verses because the Lord added those who believed to the ones who already believed, and they continued together. So the growth of the church is the natural result of the God-ordained process in the life of His children.

To start with the church, and then go to scripture to determine the qualifications for membership in such a body, is the wrong way to determine who should be considered a part of the church. The right way is to look at the salvation of a soul as the beginning of the believer's spiritual journey. The believer will then desire to please his Lord by following him in Baptism, which will place him in fellowship with the church. It is a scriptural, spiritual, obedient process. It results in a church with people who have at least made a profession of faith and are secure enough in that profession to be publicly immersed as a confession of that faith. Anything less than this process abrogates the Lord's plan for his chosen.

We do not believe that baptism of those who do not have faith will result in salvation, but unfortunately we cannot look on the heart to determine if it has been changed. Those who hold to baptismal regeneration often use Mark 16: 16 as their life verse:

*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.*

It might be well, however, to look at who is NOT saved – it is the one who does not believe. There is no category for those who have not believed, but have been baptized, and we believe that a child of God will desire to be baptized because the Lord commands it, and He commands it after belief. He will be baptized by an organization that has been given the commandment to do so, and will become a part of that body by baptism. If he is baptized only because he believes that baptism will save him, he has his faith in the wrong thing, and has begun at the wrong place. Instead of believing in the fact that Jesus Christ has “washed us from our sins in his own blood,” (Rev. 1:5) he believes that baptism will save him. That is not saving faith.

So we believe that to go to the scriptures and look for requirements for “church membership” is the equivalent of going to the scriptures to look for the requirements to be a member of the children of Israel. You can find a lot of information, but you will likely come to a wrong conclusion, because you start at the end. It's like one of those chemistry experiments you had to do in college. The

textbook indicated the desired result, but the desired result was never achieved during your actual experiment, and the majority of your lab report consisted of explaining why the proper result was not achieved. Such will be the case if churches are filled with those who do not follow the scriptural process for the birth and growth of a child of God – the desired end will not be achieved.

Now we shall move on to my second point, which was that this doesn't just concern letting unscripturally baptized people into the church. This concerns letting people who were baptized as infants continue to believe their baptism is valid.

In 313 A.D. Constantine called his council and combined the church and state. He became a "Christian," but waited until just before his death to be baptized, because the "Christians" he joined told him that baptism took away sin. Constantine rightly concluded that he wanted as much of his sin as possible taken away, so he waited until just before his death to have the ritual performed. By 416 A.D. infant baptism was the law of the Roman Empire, and there were severe penalties for not conforming to it. You may join me in seeing this as rather contradictory if you wish. You can read all this information in many church history sources other than those written by Baptists, so all of this is well confirmed.

There were, however, those who would not have their babies baptized, because they believed that the scriptures taught a proper order for the child of God – faith, baptism, and growth. So if an individual who had been baptized as a baby heard the gospel and was saved, these churches baptized the convert after belief. That aroused the fury of the Church of Rome and resulted in giving the name of "Anabaptists" to those who had the audacity to perform this service to the believer. There is a reason the "dark ages" got their name, and it is due largely to the fact that Christians were being put to death by the State Church for not conforming to its laws – and the biggest non-conformance was over the issue of baptism. It is estimated that over 40 million children of God lost their lives during the dark ages by refusing to submit to the State ordinance of baptism, and by re-baptizing those who were converted. Some of the most cruel instruments of torture ever invented were invented by a "church," and used on the Anabaptists and other groups of which they disapproved.

These laws were reinforced by all the various councils held down through the Romish church history. The council of Trent in 1547, seventh session, commenting on the Sacraments said:



(a) *"If anyone, shall say that the sacraments of the New Law were not all instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, or that there are more or fewer than seven, namely baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, orders, and matrimony, or that any one of these seven is not truly and intrinsically a sacrament - **anathema sit.**"*

(b) *"If anyone shall say that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary for salvation but are superfluous, and that without them or without the desire of them men obtain from God through faith alone the grace of justification, though all are not necessary for every individual - **anathema sit.**"*

When the reformation took place, the reformers brought infant baptism with them, and most of the main-line Protestant churches believe in some form of infant baptism, and that it has some form of saving or gracious power.

From the Catholic Encyclopedia we find this definition of baptism:

*Holy Baptism holds the first place among the sacraments because it is the door of the spiritual life; for by it we are made members of Christ and incorporated with the Church. And since through the first man death entered into all, unless we be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, we can not enter into the kingdom of Heaven, as Truth Himself has told us.*

Luther states in The Large Catechism of 1529:

*"To put it most simply, the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save. No one is baptized in order to become a prince, but as the words say, to 'be saved.' To be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil and to enter into the kingdom of Christ and live with him forever."*

Even John Wesley, who most would think would not hold to baptismal regeneration, stated in a sermon on "The New Birth," which may be easily found by searching the internet:

*A man may possibly be "born of water," and yet not be "born of the Spirit." There may sometimes be the outward sign, where there is not the inward grace. I do not now speak with regard to infants: It is certain our Church supposes that all who are baptized in their infancy are at the same time born again; and it is allowed that the whole Office for the Baptism of Infants proceeds upon this supposition. Nor is*

*it an objection of any weight against this, that we cannot comprehend how this work can be wrought in infants. For neither can we comprehend how it is wrought in a person of riper years. But whatever be the case with infants, it is sure all of riper years who are baptized are not at the same time born again.*

I don't know about you, but I read that about five times and became more theologically confused with each reading. Some things are just beyond understanding.

We could quote others, but for the sake of space we will rest with these.

I believe we have shown, then, that most churches other than Baptist believe that there is some special power in the act of baptism. There are some that do not, and for these we are grateful. But are we now, after enduring the sword for hundreds of years, to grant membership to those whose church would have exterminated us had it been successful?

According to my research the Baptists of Europe published a tract in 1120 A.D. (and some say Baptists did not exist until the 1600's ?) entitled "AntiChrist." This tract stated:

*"A third work of Antichrist consists in this, that he attributes the regeneration of the Holy Spirit unto the mere external act [of baptism], baptizing infants in that faith, teaching that thereby baptism and regeneration must be had, on which principle he confers and bestows orders, and, indeed, grounds all his Christianity, which is contrary to the word of the Holy Scriptures."*

That was the opinion of Baptists of another era – Baptists who had been through the fire for what they believed. Baptists who had given their lives for the scriptures. But now we discover that the scripture has nothing to say about this matter and that one's baptism is really of no consequence, except as how it is viewed by the individual conscience. We will invite all to be members, fill our churches with people who disavow our history and doctrine, and all live happily ever after.

If we knowingly allow people who do not believe in our baptism into our churches, we have violated what we know to be the truth of scripture.

We do not preach this just because we hold the name Baptist. We hold the name Baptist because we preach this.

We cease to become Baptist, and cease to have a right to be called a church of the Lord Jesus Christ, if we are not going to follow the clear paths of the Word of God

—

1. Belief
2. Baptism
3. added to the assembly
4. taught

As I said when I began this little treatise, we harbor no ill will toward anyone. We believe that every human being should be allowed to interpret the scriptures and apply them according to their interpretation (Well, with a few legal and moral exceptions). I personally have many friends, relatives, and acquaintances who belong to other religions and hold other beliefs, or hold no beliefs at all. That is their right, and I will uphold it. They may preach it, teach it, argue it, proclaim it, define it, and die with it. It is their right. It is their eternity. Given the chance, I will beseech them on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God. But please do not pollute my Baptist church with those who have not followed the scriptural order concerning the new birth and service to the Lord.

I'm sorry, but for me, that just doesn't make the grade.

Doc Trin