

# **Baptism and Immersion**

An examination of the evidence

By Jon Parks

## **Introduction**

Around 2,000 years ago, we read the story of Jesus doing something he did so well – he took the common and made it special. He came down from the hills of Galilee to the Jordan River, where his cousin John was calling the multitudes to repentance. And there, in the river, Jesus was baptized. It was a normal event – baptism or ritual washing had been a way of life for the Jewish people for hundreds of years. It was an ordinary event for that time and place – the way Luke describes, it Jesus might have been standing in line with all the others.

John recognized that, of all people, Jesus did not need to be baptized. But with the enigmatic phrase, “it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness,” Jesus was baptized anyway. A dove flew down from heaven. A mighty voice was heard. And a practice as old as Christianity itself was begun, a practice every disciple of Jesus has been urged to follow.

For the last 350 years or more, Baptists have affirmed the belief that baptism by immersion is the only proper method of baptism. That means that we stand on a long tradition of Baptist heritage when we require members of other denominations to be baptized by immersion – even if they have already been baptized.

But what grounds do we stand on, other than tradition? What is the theology behind our decision to immerse? What is our reasoning behind keeping this requirement, and is that reasoning itself biblical? And finally, what do we gain or lose by keeping this requirement?

This essay was written to examine the evidence on two separate questions. First, why do we Baptists choose to baptize by immersion only, and can we stand on that principle? Second, why do we as Baptists choose to “exclude” those from membership who have been baptized by methods other than immersion, and can we stand on that principle?

This essay was also written with the hopes that it will be accessible to anyone. It was written with methods of research and writing learned in seminary and graduate school, simply because that is the way I have learned to do the task. But I have made an effort in every way to write this essay not as a scholar or as a pastoral authority – I don’t consider myself to be either one. Rather, I write as a fellow pilgrim along the journey, one member of the church body among many who are seeking to find the answers to these questions – one member who has been given the gifts and skills to look into these matters more deeply.

With that in mind, I have tried to use as few theological terms as possible, and to define the ones that I thought were necessary to use. I have also placed a summary at the end of each section, with bullet points to briefly state the points or evidence made before.

I recognize that the sheer size of the essay might make it inaccessible to some of you! Since the paper is so long, it might be more helpful for you to skim the summaries first and then to go back

into the section to find the evidence for what was written. In any case, I have tried to proceed as follows:

- The roots of immersion baptism in the theology of the Baptist and Protestant churches, and why the theology makes a difference.
- The scriptural evidence we find, including the uses of the word we translate as “baptize,” and alternate words that could have been used.
- The symbolism that makes baptism by immersion such a beautiful picture of what has happened to the believer.
- The history of baptism in the early church, which may give us a clue as to how the early church interpreted the instructions and stories in the New Testament regarding baptism.
- The history of baptism among the Baptists,
- A summary of the questions about requiring members to be re-baptized by immersion, including the roots of the debate (dating back more than 150 years) and its modern implications.
- Even though the Bible does not speak of church membership as we know it, there are instructions regarding how we welcome and treat our brothers and sisters in Christ. Do these apply to our discussion regarding membership?

With our journey mapped out before us, let us prayerfully set off in search of the evidence we can find. May God bless us and give us help on our journey!

Jon Parks  
October 2006

## **PART I**

### **On the Question of Immersion**

#### **Protestant Theology and Baptist Theology**

Baptists, as Protestants, have long held to a non-sacramental theology of the ordinances. Protestants are the churches who separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the 1500’s under the leadership of men like Martin Luther and John Calvin. Sacramental theology, still held by most of the various Catholic, Orthodox and other liturgical churches (and still loosely held by some Protestants like Lutherans), is the theology that some special grace is actually given to God’s people in the acts of baptism and communion. To them, there is actual grace in the water of baptism (thus “holy water”) that gives a blessing to the one baptized. To them, the bread and wine – in some mysterious way – actually *become* the body and blood of Christ, and some special grace is given to believers who partake. In short, sacramental theology says that those who are baptized or take communion in these special ways get some blessing that others don’t who do not participate.

In these traditions, membership is “closed.” You are not allowed to take communion unless you have been baptized, and you must be baptized in their particular way and by their particular priest. Only then are you allowed to partake of the grace that is available through the act of these ordinances. To sacramental Christians, baptism is an important part – to some, even a necessary part – of God’s work in salvation.

As Baptists, one of the theological foundations we stand on is that Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are non-sacramental – that is, there is nothing magical or special that happens in the baptismal

water or in the taking of the bread and cup. Rather, we hold that these things are symbols of what has already taken place. Baptism is not required for salvation (though there are still a few Protestants who hold to this idea), and you receive no more blessing when you take communion than the person next to you who does not.

What baptism and communion do, however, is express in a very visible way what has already happened to you. A good example of this in modern life is a graduation ceremony. If you work for four years to get your college degree, then get sick on the day of graduation, you don't have to do all the work again. No magical event happens on that stage when you are handed your diploma – that's just a symbol of all the work that has gone before. In the same way, you are not saved by baptism, but baptism is a visible expression of what has taken place in your spirit. You are not saved by taking communion, but it is a visible expression of the community you are a part of, and a memorial you make to the crucified and resurrected Lord.

However, this being said, there *is* something very spiritual about the acts of baptism and communion, and something spiritual can take place as you participate in these events. For example, prayer is not a required act of our faith, but is understood as a means of connection with God. Those who sincerely and actively participate in prayer may, because of their actions, be drawn closer to God. In the moment of communion, we are drawn closer to God and to our fellow Christians by the simple act of a meal together – a blessing those who do not participate (or those who participate carelessly) do not receive. In baptism, something spiritual does happen – through the beautiful symbolism, the feel of the water, the gathering of friends and family, the affirmation of the church, we are given a powerful reminder of what God has done in our lives. For those who were baptized as infants, or who were baptized as children so young that they cannot remember, this powerful moment is often lost.

Because we hold that baptism, while a meaningful event, is only symbolic and not sacramental in nature, Baptists have long practiced two particulars of baptism.

1) First is believer's baptism. As a result of sacramental theology, the practice came about of baptism for those who were not necessarily believers. So they would not miss out on the special baptismal grace, babies were (and still are) baptized soon after they are born; parents would not want to take the risk that something might happen to these children before they receive the grace of baptism. In some instances, baptism was (and again, still is) performed on the dead (see 1 Corinthians 15:29) or those who are not conscious (someone in a coma, or in a vegetative state) – again, so that these will not miss out on the special grace of God.

Baptists derive their name from the early “Anabaptists” of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. Among other stands, these Christians took the position that baptism was a practice *only* for adult believers who knowingly professed faith in Jesus Christ – which is true of all the accounts of baptism we find in the New Testament. They were given the name “Anabaptist” because they believed strongly that adult baptism based on profession of faith, not infant baptism, was the true meaning of baptism. Infant baptism was a practice so common among Christians of that age that the Anabaptist belief was ridiculed, even persecuted in some places. So strong was their belief in believer's baptism that the Anabaptists, who had almost all been baptized as infants, were all baptized again as adult believers – hence their name of “ana-Baptists,” which essentially means “baptized again.”

2) The other way Baptist theology has worked its way out in practice is the exclusive use of immersion baptism – that is, the practice of baptism by putting all or part of a person completely under water.

The two most common alternatives are affusion (also called “effusion” or “infusion”), the pouring of water over the head, or aspersio, the sprinkling or placing of a moistened finger or other object on the forehead. There is still symbolism in these methods, but not symbolism as rich and meaningful as that of immersing. If baptism is a symbolic action, however, and not a sacramental act, then the symbolism of the event should be as rich as possible in the context it is being performed. Thus, Baptists and others have opted to use only the method of immersion unless it is impossible to do so.

To summarize our theology:

- As Baptists, we hold to the traditional view of baptism and communion as symbolic actions in which meaning can be found, rather than sacramental acts in which God automatically gives grace. If we receive a blessing in these actions, it is because of our relationship with God, and not simply because of the acts themselves.
- Because we believe these acts are symbolic, we insist that baptism is performed for believers only, not on infants or on those incapable of making a decision of faith.
- Because we believe baptism is symbolic, we also choose to baptize by the most symbolic method – that of immersion.

## Scriptural Evidence

The Greek word for baptism is *baptizo* (pronounced “bahp-teed-zo”), and has a wide range of meaning and usage in the New Testament. We must note at the outset that our usage and understanding of *baptizo*, a rare word in Greek sources other than the Bible, have been somewhat swayed by the ways Christians have used it for nearly two millennia now.

*Baptizo* is defined in various ways by many Greek dictionaries. There is no denying that *baptizo* sometimes means “to immerse.” But there are other places in which it may mean something different. Some dictionaries say the word can mean “to wash,” or “to cleanse with water.” In almost all cases other than the ones specifically connected with (or referring to) Christian baptism, the word refers to ritual washing.

The word *baptizo* can refer to the Jewish practice of keeping things ceremonially clean for religious purposes, including a ritual washing of the hands before eating, a fact which is mentioned in Mark 7. Part of Jewish religious custom included taking a ritual bath – from acts as simple as washing certain parts of the body, to acts as complex as ritually removing the clothes and being completely immersed, to later put on new clothes. Archaeological digs have uncovered places where these ritual baths were performed regularly – often at the entrances to synagogues, the temple, or other significant religious places.

A person or object that had undergone this kind of ritual cleansing was said to be “clean,” while someone or something that was not cleansed would be called “unclean.” Often – but not always – these cleansings meant putting the body or part of the body completely in water. Other methods of cleansing things are also prescribed in the Old Testament, including sprinkling a person or object with blood, oil or water, and also pouring oil or water over something.

This is illustrated by an interesting Old Testament story. When the Syrian general Naaman comes to the prophet Elisha seeking healing from a skin disorder, he is told to wash himself in the

Jordan River seven times. The Greek translation of the Old Testament says that Naaman went and “baptized himself in the river seven times,” using the Greek *baptizo*. Most English translations say “he dipped himself seven times.” In this instance, the ritual bath took on a greater significance – Naaman was healed.

Today, Jewish religious practice still includes the ritual washing, now called a *Mikvah*. As prescribed in the Old Testament, ritual baths are still required for women who have experienced childbirth or menstruation, a bride before her wedding, a priest before a divine service, men on the eve of Yom Kippur (the Jewish festival of atonement), new converts to Judaism, preparation of a dead person for burial, or for new kitchen utensils that will be used to prepare foods according to Jewish custom (kosher). Most modern Jewish *Mikvot* greatly resemble Christian baptisteries, and complete or partial immersion is used.

Other Greek words are also used for this kind of washing. The verb *nipito* – usually defined and translated as “to wash,” is the word used in the account of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet in John 13. In Mark 7:3-4, *nipito* seems to be used interchangeably with *baptizo*. In this passage, the Pharisees object to the fact that the disciples eat with “unclean” hands. To explain that the hand washing was for religious reasons and not hygienic, Mark adds an explanation for his readers:

*For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash [nipito] their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash [baptizo]. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing [baptizo] of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.<sup>1</sup>*

Mark seems to use the words interchangeably. Even more strangely, he speaks of the fact that the Pharisees “baptize” their cups, pots, copper vessels and dining couches. While some versions here have “tables” or “beds” instead of “dining couches,” it is hard to believe that the Pharisees would regularly immerse their beds or couches as a religious practice. It is more likely, according to most scholars, that there was a process of ritually washing these items with water that did not involve immersion.

Of course, the word *baptizo* is also used specifically for the act of baptism, as performed by John the Baptist (Matthew 3, Mark 1, Luke 3). Some scholars assume that John began performing baptism in reference to the ritual baths already required by Jewish custom – in effect, saying that as a person repented of their sins they were washed “clean.”

Immersion seems the most likely practice by which Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. This idea comes from the text itself, which says that the Spirit descended in the form of a dove “when Jesus came up out of the water” (Matthew 3:16). This could just as easily speak of the time he stepped up out of the river, as some have pointed out. But earlier in the gospel accounts we read that John baptized in the places he did because there was plenty of water there.<sup>2</sup> While we cannot say so conclusively, the evidence from the Scriptures seems to indicate that Jesus was probably immersed.

Jesus himself oversaw the baptism of those who followed him (John 3:22), and John is careful to clarify that the disciples, not Jesus himself, baptized them. Jesus also commanded that his followers be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), a charge that has been

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark 7:3-4, with the Greek words transliterated.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:23.

repeated in nearly every Christian baptism. From the facts that he oversaw baptisms himself, and that he commanded his disciples to do so, we can conclude that Jesus thought baptism was a very important part of the life of a disciple.

We find in the New Testament many instances that believers were baptized in response to their faith. It is important to note two things, however: 1) we cannot always tell exactly how or where these followers were baptized, only that they were, and 2) baptism was used for adult believers only, and never for young children or as an act that would give special blessing to someone.

Acts 3 reports that Peter and the other apostles added 3,000 members to the church on the day of Pentecost, and notes that all of these were baptized. This would be a difficult and miraculous feat for a number of reasons. First, the group of disciples was small, and it would have been nearly impossible for them to have baptized all those new believers together. Second, Jerusalem is an arid city in the middle of an arid region, and even today water is difficult to come by. Any sources of water would have been protected carefully, since it was needed for drinking. There simply could not have been enough water in Jerusalem to baptize all 3,000 believers. And if there were, the other people of Jerusalem would probably not allow all these people to contaminate their water sources.

And so our options for understanding this account could be that: 1) God miraculously provided the water and human power for all these new believers to be baptized by immersion, 2) the baptisms did not actually all occur on this day, or 3) the disciples baptized the new believers using whatever means were at their disposal – including affusion or aspersion. But we are not told.

We read in Acts 8 that God commands the disciple Phillip to walk on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza – a southern road through the most desolate region of Palestine. Phillip comes upon an Ethiopian eunuch and explains the Gospel to this man. Acts 8:36 says they were coming along the road and saw “some water” – impossible to come by in any great quantity in that desert region. They got down from the chariot and “they went down into the water” (v. 37). Because the Greek here uses the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural, either both Philip and the eunuch went under the water together, or this is speaking as if they stepped down into a small stream or wadi. Phillip is bodily taken away from that place when “they came up out of the water,” (v. 39) – again using the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural, which implies that this took place not as the eunuch came up out of the water himself, but as they stepped together out of the water.

Again, our options are limited but clear. Either God provided a miraculous place where the eunuch could be baptized by immersion, or Phillip would have to baptize him by another means. The text gives us no clues. So we must make our own assumptions. The same can be said of the baptism of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:47-48), Lydia and her household (Acts 16:14-15), and the Philippian jailer and his household (Acts 16:33). Brief research will indicate that it would have been difficult to find the amount of water needed for these baptisms. But it could have been done – either by human means, or divine means. The fact is, however, the text simply doesn't tell us.

Some have made a great deal out of the account of Paul's baptism. According to Acts 9:18, when Paul was finally healed of his blindness, “he rose and was baptized” (also referenced in Acts 22:16). It is problematic to make a case, based on a few words, that Paul was baptized standing up. More likely, it means that he had been confined in his physical activity since his divine confrontation (maybe even had been bedridden for a time), and that once he was healed he first “rose” – that is, got out of bed, started moving about again – and then was baptized. Again, the passage gives us no clues as to the method of baptism.

Finally, *baptizo* is used symbolically, to describe an experience that may completely overwhelm or change a person (see Luke 12:50), like the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5) – an act that was usually accompanied by spiritual activities like speaking in tongues.

Some argue that *baptizo* means only immersion because of the existence of other Greek words that could have been used instead. As we have already discovered, *nipto* is sometimes used for “washing” in the way that *baptizo* is frequently used. *Ranitzo*, usually translated as “sprinkling,” is used in the New Testament primarily in Hebrews chapters 9 and 10. Here, the writer of the book is describing Christ as our high priest in terms of the Jewish customs of ritual cleansing laid out in the Old Testament, which involved the sprinkling of blood, oil or water for ritual cleansing.<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 1:2 also makes use of this verb to denote our “sprinkling in Christ’s blood,” again, a reference an the Old Testament practice of sprinkling the blood of a sacrificed animal on those who are to receive the benefits of the sacrifice.

It is interesting to note that there is not always consensus in the text for the words used for cleansing, however. In Hebrews 9:10, the writer uses the word *baptizo* for washing instead of *ranitzo*, again giving us pause to think perhaps the two are connected somehow.

Another word frequently cited that could have been used in place of *baptizo* is *ekcheo* (pronounced “ehk – kay – oh”), usually translated “to pour out.” It differs from the other words we have looked at because there is no basic idea of “washing.” The verb is used most frequently to speak of the “pouring out” or “shedding” of blood, a figurative phrase meaning “to kill.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus takes this figurative term to a new level when, in the upper room, he declares, “this cup that is poured out [*ekcheo*] for you is the new covenant in my blood.”<sup>5</sup> The verb is also used to describe how God bestows the Holy Spirit – by “pouring out” the Spirit on believers.<sup>6</sup>

To summarize the evidence from Scripture:

- The Greek word *baptizo*, from which our word “baptism” is derived, can mean “to immerse in water.” But at its most basic form, it simply speaks of washing in water, and several passages in the New Testament use *baptizo* for something other than immersion.
- Other Greek words could have been used to imply other methods – *nipto*, *ranitzo*, or *ekcheo*. But, like *baptizo*, these words are not used consistently. *Nipto* and *ranitzo* are sometimes used interchangeably with *baptizo*. *Ekcheo*, meaning “to pour out,” is used figuratively to speak of the spilling of blood or the bestowal of the Holy Spirit.
- Baptisms practiced by John the Baptist and overseen by Jesus, were likely derived from the Jewish practice – still in use today – of ritual baths for religious cleansing.
- We know that John baptized at certain places in the Jordan River because there was plenty of water available, and even though the text is not completely clear, we can deduce that Jesus – along with the many other people John baptized – was baptized by immersion.
- The only commands given about baptism in the New Testament say nothing of the method, but only to perform baptism on those who believe, and to do so “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

---

<sup>3</sup> For examples of this, see Numbers 8:6-7, and Exodus 29:21.

<sup>4</sup> For examples, see Matthew 23:35, Luke 11:50, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 22:20.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:17 and following.

- While the language surrounding baptism stories in the New Testament can be read either for or against immersion, there is no direct evidence that any of the people baptized in the New Testament were baptized by immersion, or by any other means. The writers were not concerned with giving us a textbook on baptism, but on telling the story of the Gospel and the emerging Church.

## Symbolism of Immersion

At this point, it might be instructive to look beyond the stories of baptisms and the ways the word *baptizo* is used, to look at some other scriptural evidence regarding the act of baptism itself – including the use of water, and the rich symbolism of immersion. There is no doubt that, of all the methods available to baptize a believer, immersion is the most beautiful, memorable, and symbolic. No other method so clearly portrays what happens in the life of a true believer in Christ.

The first great symbolism is that of a washing, a cleansing much like the original use of the word *baptizo*. Just as we bathe to remove dirt and germs from our bodies, so has Christ washed us clean of the dirt and germ of our own sinfulness. Jesus himself recognized the importance of this symbol in the life of the disciple when he washed their feet.<sup>7</sup>

It is also instructive to note the process by which converts were baptized in the early church. When a person converted to Christianity, they first had to go through a process of learning and observation before they were allowed to enter the church membership. They were taught the fundamentals of the faith, and were regularly tested on those facts before the church members. They were also observed for signs of a changed life consistent with Christ’s teachings.

Then, during Holy Week, a period of intense fasting and prayer was undertaken. As midnight on Holy Saturday (the day before Easter Sunday) approached, converts were led to the baptismal font, and were baptized – sometimes at midnight, other times at sunrise. In some cases, they would strip off their old clothes before entering the water, then would be given new clothes to wear once they came out of the water. Following the baptism, the converts would celebrate their first communion with the rest of the church. The symbolism was clear – just as Jesus had arisen from the dead, so were these new Christians raised to new life on Easter morning. They had “taken off” their old life, and “put on” the new life of Jesus. In Christ, we are washed of our sins, and we are clothed in pure, clean clothes of righteousness. More than that, we are now clothed with the clothes of Christ – even clothed with Christ himself.<sup>8</sup>

The second great symbol of immersion baptism is that of dying and being raised with Christ. Just as Christ was buried in the tomb<sup>9</sup> and raised after three days to a new and glorious kind of life, so has the believer “died” to his or her old way of life, and been “raised to walk in newness of life.”<sup>10</sup> When we go under the water, we symbolize our death to our old ways,<sup>11</sup> and show that we have put to death our own sinful natures. When we come up from the water, we show that not only have we put our old ways to death, we also show that we have been raised to live a new kind of life – the life of Christ himself.

---

<sup>7</sup> John 13:10. For more allusions to washing, see 1 Corinthians 6:11, Hebrews 10:22, Revelation 7:14.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 13:14, Galatians 3:27, Ephesians 4:24, Colossians 3:9-10.

<sup>9</sup> Which may have been either below or above ground.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:11-13.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:13, Colossians 3:5.

Water itself is rich in symbolism, which reaches back into the depths of the Old Testament – a point of which many of the New Testament writers are keenly aware.<sup>12</sup> Like the great Flood,<sup>13</sup> God has destroyed what is evil and washed it clean. Like Noah, we have been delivered “through” the water for a clean start on the other side. Water also plays a significant role in the salvation of the Israelite people from bondage in Egypt – a story that is intricately woven into the pattern of the New Testament. As a baby, Moses was saved “by” water,<sup>14</sup> as were the Israelites when they crossed the Red Sea in the Exodus from Egypt.<sup>15</sup> The Israelites came “through” the waters of the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land at last.<sup>16 17</sup>

While other methods of baptism call these stories and symbols to mind, none so clearly illustrates what has happened in the life of the believer as the act of immersion – in which a believer is taken under the water – their sins washed clean, their old selves purged, their enemies left behind – and raised out of the water – raised to new life, to hope and a new promise.

To summarize the symbolism of immersion:

- No other method of baptism is so rich in symbolism as immersion.
- Among other beautiful symbols, immersion very visibly shows how a believer has been washed clean of his or her sins, and shows how we have died to our old ways and been resurrected with Christ to new life.
- The symbolism of water is deeply rooted in the Scriptures – and especially in the Old Testament stories of how God has saved his people.

### **History: Baptism in the Early Church**

As we mentioned previously, the New Testament writers did not write a manual that was intended to be useful for every area of life. There is no “baptism chapter” in the Bible that describes exactly how we are to do baptism. The Gospel writers were writing stories, not a textbook. Even Paul, a very careful and detailed writer, gave no specific instructions on how to baptize a new believer. Precisely because the scriptural evidence is so hard to come by, baptism has historically been performed in a number of ways. We have already discussed the methods of affusion (pouring) and aspersion (sprinkling or moistening). Some even practice “triple immersion,” that is, going under three times, each for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But even though the biblical record is not clear, we might gain insight into our question by looking at the ways the early church practiced baptism. Biblical scholars use this method regularly to look into issues that are not mentioned directly in the Bible. Those early followers often passed on traditions and teachings by word of mouth, and were very careful to study what scriptures they had to make sure their practice and doctrine was correct. How did these, the earliest believers who may have actually seen and heard Jesus or one of his Apostles, practice baptism?

---

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, 1 Peter 3:20-22.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 6:9 - 9:17.

<sup>14</sup> Exodus. 2:1-10.

<sup>15</sup> Exodus chapter 14.

<sup>16</sup> Joshua chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted, however, that while these symbols are significant, in *each instance* the person or people themselves did not get wet!

One of the earliest Christian writings we have after the books of the New Testament is the *Didache* – literally, “the teaching.” It was a book compiled by early church leaders of the standard practices and teachings of the church at that time. In an age when communication between Christians in different cities was difficult by today’s standards, the *Didache* functioned as a valuable guidebook for church leaders. In this book, we find the following instruction:

*“Baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (running) water. But if thou hast not living water, then baptize in other water; and if thou art not able in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, then pour water upon the head thrice in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

This seems consistent with paintings found from this era, which portray converts baptized standing up, and water being poured or sprinkled on their heads. Vast amounts of fresh running water are hard to come by in Palestine, even today, and centuries of Christian persecution made it impractical (if not dangerous) to be baptized in a public fountain or river. While some chose to take the risk of persecution and allow themselves to be baptized in a public place where they would be openly seen as a Christian, others chose to observe the rite in private places – in homes or in catacombs – places where large amounts of running (or even standing) water could usually not be found.

It also seems clear that the early church did not always follow this preference, even when water might have been plentiful. An early Christian baptistery recently found in Nazareth, while deep enough, is too narrow for a person to be completely immersed – implying that, as some early Christian paintings portray, the practice quickly evolved of pouring water over the head while the convert stood in the water.

So it is clear that the church of the first three centuries practiced immersion among the other methods available. Today, practice in the Catholic Church is also varied. Babies are baptized, then later confirmed before they receive first communion. In the Orthodox tradition, converts are both anointed with oil and baptized in water three times, once each in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

To summarize the evidence from the early church:

- It is clear that the early church leaders preferred baptism by immersion, probably because of its symbolic nature. But it is also clear that they understood that this could not always be done. So they gave instructions for baptism to be performed in other ways.
- It is also clear that early Christians preferred that new believers be baptized in *running* water, that is, a stream, river or lake – again, symbolically declaring that we are baptized in “fresh and living” water.

## **History: Baptism for Baptists**

Immersion baptism has deep roots not only in Baptist history but in the history of Protestants as well. Martin Luther and John Calvin, two great figures of the Protestant Reformation, differed in their views on the mode of baptism. Calvin preferred sprinkling and the baptism of infants, most likely because of his affinity to the idea that Jesus, as portrayed in the book of Hebrews and other places in the New Testament, is our High Priest and continues in the same office that the Jewish High Priest (who cleansed by sprinkling people and things) once served. Martin Luther, however, argued from the Scriptures that baptism meant “to immerse,” and endorsed only this kind of baptism.

We have already referred to the earliest Baptists, called Anabaptists because they refused to baptize infants. A common misconception is held that immersion baptism is the longest-standing Baptist tradition, but this is simply not so. These early Baptists were much more concerned with *who* was baptized rather than the *method* itself. This group began in the early 1600's to separate themselves from other churches on the basis of this kind of baptism – that was strictly for believers, and not for infants. These early Baptists practiced baptism by affusion – pouring water over the head.

The earliest Baptist group to insist on immersion baptism for believers was the Particular Baptists in England. In 1641, based on their readings of Colossians 2:12 and Romans 6:4, these early Baptists concluded that immersion was the most biblical method of baptism. Other methods, they contended, were “an invention of man,” and should be rejected as false.<sup>18</sup> From that point forward, they (and most Baptists following) have performed baptism only by immersion.

## Conclusion to Part I

Let us take a moment here to look at the first question – Why do Baptists choose to use immersion only? What grounds do we stand on?

- Our Protestant and non-sacramental theology tells us that baptism is a symbol, not a special means of grace. We are not required to be baptized in order to be saved.
- The scriptures give no direct evidence that baptism is to be performed by one method. But because of
  - previous Jewish practice of partial or total immersion,
  - the ways in which some baptisms in the New Testament are described, and
  - other New Testament passages that speak of our death and burial with Christ,
- we can deduce that at least some of the baptisms mentioned in the New Testament were probably done by immersion.
- The early church leaders taught that immersion was the most preferable way to baptize new believers, but also recognized that this was sometimes not possible.
- Finally, as Baptists, who have long held onto our assertion that we are able to choose our own doctrine based on our reading of the Scriptures, we have chosen to exclusively use the method of immersion to baptize new believers.

*Why do Baptists choose to baptize by immersion only? It is a choice, not a biblical mandate – but a choice we have made and honored as Baptists for nearly 400 years. We have examined the scriptures and found that many (if not all) of the New Testament accounts of baptism were probably performed by immersion. We have also seen that the Scriptures speak clearly of the symbolism of immersion. So when we choose immersion, we stand not only on our own reading and understanding of scripture, but also on a rich heritage of Baptist believers who have affirmed immersion as the best method.*

---

<sup>18</sup> Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History*. 2003, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, (p. 47).

## PART II On the Question of Membership

### A Re-Introduction

Having gained some insight into our use of immersion baptism, we now come to the real question at hand. As we look at revising our bylaws and constitution, we can easily and heartily affirm that we will exclusively use immersion baptism as our method. But the real controversy is not whether immersion is our means of baptizing new believers, but *whether we will require believers to be re-baptized in order to join our membership.*

We must recognize at the outset that this is an emotionally-loaded question. Some Baptists are so committed to the idea of immersion baptism that they continue to insist – as Baptists have for centuries now – that church members must be baptized by immersion, even if they had been baptized by another mode before. To those who have already undergone believer’s baptism and do not wish to devalue that baptism, this is an emotional issue as well.

But we cannot allow this part of the debate to be considered first. It is vitally important that we look at the other evidence available to us before we wade into the emotions of the issue. So let us proceed by first examining the Scriptural evidence, then the evidence of history and tradition, then finally look at the reasons this matter is such an emotional one.

### Biblical Instructions on Church Membership

There is no set biblical mandate for membership requirements in the church. No passage clearly defines who is a member and who is not. In fact, there is no biblical definition of the church itself, nor even any evidence that the early church looked at converts as “members” in the sense that we do today. We may have local Bodies of Christ, but God sees one Church, one Body – and God alone knows who is a “member” and who is not. The “Church” as we know it is made up of those who profess to follow Christ.

Jesus seems both loving and strict in regards to discipleship. He lovingly calls the least of the least to be his closest followers – fishermen, tax collectors and political freedom fighters. He spends time with the lowest of the low – prostitutes, drunkards, Samaritans and other social misfits. His approach is gentle and compassionate. He heals, he restores, he touches and forgives. All that is required to be a disciple of Jesus is to listen to his loving call – and to obey it.

This is where things become more difficult. In some places Jesus says things like, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest,” and “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>19</sup> And in others, he says things like, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, he cannot be my disciple,”<sup>20</sup> or that we should cut off our hand or put out our eye if these things should cause us to sin.<sup>21</sup> While the call to follow Jesus seems easy at first, we soon find it is the most difficult thing we will ever do – a task that requires us to give up all that we have.

---

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 14:26.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 18:7-9.

While he gives strict instructions for us to follow, Jesus places no standard prerequisites for his disciples: Each instance seems to be different. For the Rich Young Ruler, the requirement was to sell all he had and to distribute it to the poor.<sup>22</sup> For one who desired to be a disciple, but wanted to say goodbye to his family first, Jesus told him that “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”<sup>23</sup> For each person, Jesus issues the call – “Follow me.” But the requirements for each person are as many and varied as the number of followers. The requirements, however, are all *personal* and never *external*. Jesus asks that the Rich Ruler gives all he has to the poor, not because he expects all of us to do the same, but because he knew that *this follower* needed to let go of something he held onto too dearly.

Jesus moved us beyond the strict requirements of the Law. Instead of having us rely on outward and visible signs of obedience – things that can be easily faked – Jesus moved us toward personal accountability and a personal relationship with God that transcended laws and rules. Jesus argued that the first law a person should follow is the law of love – “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.” All the laws fall into place behind this one.

This love seems also to be the defining factor of the church. “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples – if you have love, one for another.”<sup>24</sup> By all accounts, Jesus intends his followers to be known not by their strict adherence to doctrine and practice, but by their love for each other. In fact, by the end of the writing of the New Testament canon, the church at Ephesus seems to have fallen into disarray because they have forgotten that love is the first rule. In Revelation 2:1-7, Christ himself delivers a message to the church, who has rooted out heresy and false doctrine at the cost of love for one another. “You have forsaken the love you had at first,” he tells them, and offers a stern rebuke.

The word “member” in the sense we use it appears nowhere in the New Testament at all. The idea of church membership is one that was placed on Christians long after Jesus and those first Apostles were gone. There are places in the New Testament where specific Christians are excluded from fellowship.<sup>25</sup> In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul warns the church to exclude and disassociate themselves from a Christian brother or sister who acts in an immoral way. There are also clear warnings about associating with those who teach false doctrines – one of the most serious problems faced in the early years of the church.

But this kind of exclusion is always for moral or doctrinal reasons – a person is acting in an immoral way, or a person is teaching something against the Gospel. These restrictions are for protection, never for punishment – the fellowship must be protected so that others are not swayed to act in this way. And in all instances, the rule is love – do not treat the person “as an enemy,”<sup>26</sup> but as a wayward brother who needs to be brought back into the fold. We are to correct and encourage,<sup>27</sup> and to strive to restore that person to community.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Luke 18:18-30.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 9:62.

<sup>24</sup> John 13:35.

<sup>25</sup> See 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 and 2 Timothy 3:14-15 for examples.

<sup>26</sup> 2 Timothy 3:15.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Timothy 4:2, James 5:19-20.

<sup>28</sup> Galatians 6:1.

In fact, the governing principle of the church, as preached by Paul and Peter and the other Apostles, is not *exclusion* but *inclusion*. In Colossians 3:11, Paul says that “Here (in the church), there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all.” In his letter, James warns that we should not divide ourselves by showing prejudice to those who are more wealthy.<sup>29</sup>

We may find a precedent for our understanding of the role of baptism in Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth. Here, Paul seems to hint that the circumstances of baptism (that is, who performed it) were a dividing point for the church in Corinth. He gives them a mild rebuke for their division:

*I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name... For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.<sup>30</sup>*

Indeed, Paul says in Ephesians 4:1-5 that there is “One Lord, one faith, and one baptism” – not implying that there is only one way to be baptized, but rather: Even though people were baptized in various ways and places, and by different people, we are all baptized into one family, one Church, of whom Christ is the head. Paul writes these words not in an effort to divide (“there’s only one way to baptize”), but rather in an effort to bring together.

To summarize the evidence from scripture on this matter:

- There is, once again, no set instruction given for church membership in the Bible. In fact, there seems to be less of a sense that these churches granted membership based on requirements, and more of a sense that the doors of the church were open to those who professed to follow Christ.
- Our actions toward one another are to be loving above all – this is the hallmark of the church.
- Exclusion from the community is rarely mentioned in the New Testament. When it is mentioned, it is always for moral reasons – someone is acting in a way that is clearly against the teachings of Christ – or for doctrinal reasons – someone is clearly making changes to or altering the Gospel message.
- This exclusion is for protective purposes – to protect the members of the church – not for punishment. When someone is in the position of sin or error, they are to be lovingly rebuked, corrected and encouraged, and welcomed back into the community as soon as possible.
- Inclusion, not exclusion, seems to be the guiding principle of the church.

## **Historical Debate over Admission of Members**

There is no doubt that immersion baptism has a special place in the heart of Baptists. Since those earliest Baptists decided that infant baptism was an incorrect practice, Baptists since have insisted that believer’s baptism by immersion is a prerequisite to church membership. Rightly or wrongly, they have insisted that since baptism is commanded for new disciples (based on Matthew

---

<sup>29</sup> James 2:1-9.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, ESV.

28:19-20), and that since baptism always or most often meant to immerse, then *immersion baptism must be required of all true believers*.

Besides being a long-standing Baptist tradition, the case can also be made from history. In Europe before the Reformation, and in some parts of the world even today, the carelessness with which baptism is performed makes it virtually meaningless. Parents bring young children to the church to be baptized, and never come to church afterwards. For life, this child who was baptized – who may never come to church again and may never remember his or her baptism – will be considered a “member” of that church. This is all the more reason, they say, that we should always exercise care when baptizing.

Still, others in the past and today have viewed baptism not just as a public profession of faith, but also as a statement that a person wishes to be identified with *this particular* church, and so make the case that when someone comes to the church and is re-baptized, they are doing so as a reaffirmation of their commitment to God and their new commitment to this church body.

As communities and churches have become less isolated and more global in the past two centuries, Christians have been forced to come into closer contact than had been possible (or maybe even preferable) before. Where, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, churches continued to divide themselves further and further based on their different beliefs, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and following, Christians began to realize that their differences had perhaps driven them *too far* apart. This has caused many Christian bodies to begin working together to resolve their differences in favor of the unity that Jesus prayed for. This movement, known as ecumenism, stresses that Christian denominations should focus not on our differences, but rather on all that we have in common. This movement has been slow to take hold in the United States, but has rapidly gained ground around the world.<sup>31</sup>

One of the earliest Baptist theologians and pastors to write about the issue of open membership, is the well-known writer John Bunyan (author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and other works). Bunyan (1628-1688) recognized that there were some matters worth fighting for in church doctrine, some matters that are essential to the Gospel. The mode of baptism, he believed, was NOT one of those essential issues. In a treatise on the relationship of baptism to church membership, Bunyan writes:

*“I speak not this, because I would teach men to break the least of the commandments of God; but to persuade my brethren of the baptized way, not to hold too much thereupon, not to make it an essential of the gospel of Christ, nor yet of communion of saints.”*

*“That I deny the Ordinance of Baptism, or that I have placed one piece of an argument against it... is quite without color of truth. All I say, is, The church of Christ hath not warrant to keep out of their communion the Christian that is discovered to be a visible saint by the Word, the Christian that walketh according to his light with God.”*

This matter was deadly serious to Bunyan because his church practiced closed communion – that is, only church members were allowed to take communion. This has also been a Baptist tradition – one that has been called into question in recent decades, and is rarely practiced in Baptist churches today. In the tradition of closed communion, to exclude someone from membership meant to exclude that person from communion as well.

---

<sup>31</sup> Much of the above information comes from Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson's *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice, Revised Edition*. 1991, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press.

Bunyan was widely condemned for this view by other Baptists, who said that this practice was clearly against the Bible's teaching on the matter. But despite opposition, his congregation practiced open membership, and others soon followed. To this day, the debate continues among Baptists around the world.

To summarize the debate through history:

- The argument for using immersion baptism as a requirement for membership is rooted in the idea that immersion is the only valid method – an argument that can be made (but not decisively) from the Bible.
- Many have recognized that, by requiring baptism by immersion, we protect the sacred and symbolic nature of baptism. This stands against the careless ways in which infant baptism is sometimes performed.
- Some assert that baptism is not only our public profession of faith in Christ, but the way by which a person declares his or her commitment to a particular body of believers. In this way, requiring immersion baptism is something like an initiation rite, or an affirmation that a person is identifying themselves with this church and the Baptist tradition.
- As ecumenism and cooperation between denominations has increased, so have the number of Baptists who reject the idea of closed membership. John Bunyan was an early champion of open membership.

### **The Current Debate Among Baptists**

Recently, many U.S. churches have begun to deal with this issue directly. After much study and consideration, they still come to different conclusions. A recent article in our state's own *Religious Herald* points to this fact.<sup>32</sup> And according to Baptist theology, each church has the right (and perhaps, even has the responsibility) to examine the evidence for itself and to make their own decision.

While nearly all Baptist churches choose to affirm immersion as the means they will use to baptize new believers, their stance on church membership generally falls in one of three categories: 1) Baptism by immersion is required for any who join, including re-baptizing those who have been baptized by other means; 2) Baptism by immersion is commended, and a kind of alternative membership option is open to those who do not wish to be re-baptized; or 3) Baptism by immersion is commended, but not made a requirement for joining a church.

Many churches continue to hold the policy that anyone who joins must do so by immersion baptism, and require those baptized by other means to be re-baptized by immersion prior to joining the church. Some, in fact, go so far as to claim that what is needed is not "re-baptism," because what took place before was not really baptism at all, since it was not performed in the proper manner. They resonate with the tradition of Baptist history, and hold fast to the belief that the mode of baptism really makes a difference. In general, they reaffirm what Baptist statesman and theologian Herschel Hobbs wrote: "Change the mode [of baptism] and the meaning is lost. Change the meaning and the mode loses its New Testament significance."

---

<sup>32</sup> *The Religious Herald*, Vol. 179, No. 21: July 20, 2006.

A recent debate (summer 2006) at Henderson Hills Baptist Church in Edmond, Oklahoma, shows just how present this topic is – even among conservative Southern Baptist Churches. When the pastor and church leadership proposed to recommend that the church stop requiring immersion baptism for membership, the stir – which started among associational and state leaders – rose to national attention. Among many other scholarly responses, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Al Mohler eloquently stated the case for closed membership:

*The consistent biblical witness to baptism as the immersion of believers leads Baptists to see no other act as true baptism, no matter how it may be conceived by other churches. Then, when baptism is understood to mark the believer's primary profession of faith in Christ and his or her incorporation of the believer into the Body of Christ, an unbaptized church member then becomes a truly foreign concept.*

*For Baptists, the experience of believer's baptism by immersion is a source of unity and a powerful affirmation of the church as a local body of regenerate believers, united in one Lord, one faith, one baptism. To compromise this principle is to lose something precious to our Baptist faith – and to the New Testament vision of the church.*<sup>33</sup>

While some, like Mohler, have held to the traditional views of baptism and membership, others seek a middle ground. These congregations, desiring to stand on the Baptist principle but still willing to be open to people who do not wish to be re-baptized, create other types of membership. Some possibilities include membership by “alternative baptism,” “associate membership” or “watchcare membership.” Those who want to join the church but not be re-baptized can join by these methods, which carry many of the rights of membership but limit participation in some (or all) leadership positions and in some (or all) voting matters.

Finally, there are those churches who have decided not to make immersion a requirement of membership. One of the most prominent cases for open membership is the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In a paper presented to the membership of his church in favor of discontinuing the practice of requiring immersion baptism, pastor John Piper has probably made the most eloquent statement for the position of open membership.

*Our conscience is troubled that, on the one hand, we cannot receive into membership some genuine Christians only because of their different views of baptism, nevertheless we rejoice that there are other churches who will receive them so that we don't have to view our rejection as excommunication. We have grown so accustomed to the diversity of denominations, that we do not pause to think of the implications of saying “no” to a genuine Christian who wants to be a member of the visible manifestation of Christ's body ... We do not often feel what John Bunyan felt on this matter, “What greater contempt can be thrown upon the saints than for their brethren to cast them off, or to debar them from church-communion?”*

*...It seems to imply that, in principle, we have made agreement on baptism higher on the scale of values than having genuine Christians be members of a church. If we say, no, we are not turning people away to no church, but to other churches, then we are, in effect, justifying our standards by the very practice (in other churches) that we disagree with. We are glad others will do what we will not do so that we can feel okay about not doing it.*

---

<sup>33</sup> Mohler, Al in *The Baptist Messenger* (Oklahoma), July 17 2006.

*We don't want to be in that situation. The local church, it seems to us, should have a front door about as wide as the door Christ has built for his own invisible church. As Paul says in Romans 15:7, "Receive one another as Christ has received you, for the glory of God."<sup>34</sup>*

Piper and the board of elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church presented this proposal to the church body in August of 2005, and the matter still has not come to resolution.

To summarize the current debate:

- Many churches are revisiting this issue once again – Baptist autonomy makes this possible and even necessary.
- Nearly all Baptist churches agree that immersion is the method we will use.
- However, in the question of the admission of members, there are three basic positions:
  - Closed membership is affirmed, and all who wish to join must have been immersed.
  - Levels of membership are created, in which those who do not wish to be re-baptized can become members in a limited sense.
  - Open membership is affirmed, and while immersion may be strongly recommended, it is not required for membership.

## **Conclusion to Part II**

Finally, a summary of the evidence about requiring immersion:

- Once again, we cannot find an authoritative passage to guide us on this matter. Scripture does not give specific instructions on membership. Rather, we must look at the overall Biblical ideas of the church, discipleship, and how we treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.
- As mentioned above, the first Baptists to baptize by immersion exclusively were the Particular Baptists in England. Eventually, this tradition evolved into a stance that excluded anyone from membership (and therefore fellowship or the Lord's Supper) anyone who had not been immersed.
- But this tradition came into question by some who thought that we should not exclude anyone from God's church.
- Today, as the world grows closer together and we examine the differences that have driven us apart as Christians, as well as the similarities that bring us together, this method of excluding members has come into increasing question – one that has not yet been satisfactorily answered.
- Churches are attempting to answer the question as best they can – either by affirming tradition, or by seeking some way that others can be included.

The end of the matter is still unclear. We, as an autonomous Baptist church, can decide whatever we want about this matter. We are not bound by any tradition or any higher government. As Baptists, we believe that we are not only able, but required to look into this issue for ourselves and make a decision on the matter. This decision must be based not only on our emotions (which tend to run high on this issue), or on tradition (which is divided), but on the evidence of Scripture, on prayer, and on the work of the Spirit in our hearts.

---

<sup>34</sup> Piper, John et al, *Baptism and Church Membership at Bethlehem Baptist Church*, (internally published document), August 2005, pp. 18-19.

## Resources

There is a wealth of resources available on the topic of baptism and on immersion. You can find some of them in the footnotes of this essay. But here are a few resources I commend to you as you study the issue on your own:

- Your own Bible. Find a good concordance, or use the one in the back of your Bible, and look up the times and places baptism is specifically mentioned in the Scriptures.
- Look up other biblical resources as well. Nave's Topical Bible and other topical reference guides help you find where baptism, though not explicitly mentioned, is spoken of in the Bible. A good Bible Dictionary may give you an overview of what the Bible says. Commentaries and past Sunday School lessons on passages about baptism often have a lot to say about the topic as well.
- Section VII of *The Baptist Faith and Message* deals specifically with Baptist interpretation of baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- Look through other books on your shelf of Christian literature, and scan the index. You might be surprised to find baptism mentioned, and specifically the process of immersion or other modes of baptism.
- Finally, I give you the resource to use most cautiously: The internet. I hesitate to mention it at all, but I know some of you have probably already gone there. There are so many sources available out there that may be of help to you. But remember two things:
  - First, CHECK SOURCES for the information you get. Is someone just making up what they're saying, or have they really done (and cited) their research? Have they really looked into the original languages, or are they just borrowing from someone else and not really grasping what they're writing?
  - Second, ask yourself, "WHO'S WRITING?" Remember that someone from a Catholic background will have a very different bias than someone with a Baptist background.
- One final encouragement: Look at ALL THE EVIDENCE before you make a decision. This is especially true if you are using the internet. Gather all your own evidence, then with prayer and with humility, make your own conclusion.

## PART III My Conclusion

### A Disclaimer

This document has been several weeks in the making. I have done a good deal of research (though I could have done more), but have based most of what is said above on the evidence of Scripture, rather than the evidence of tradition and history. It has been a difficult, but worthwhile task, and I think that it gives me the evidence I need to make my own decision.

So I urge you, the reader, to go back to what you've seen above before you read on. Look at the evidence for yourself, do your own research. Listen to how the Spirit speaks to you. You may decide not to read what follows – my own biased, personal and flawed opinion. And I would rather you came to your own conclusion before you read mine (though I imagine you may already know what it is).

### My Position

I hesitated for a long time to put in my own thoughts and feelings on the matter. After all, the reason I undertook the project in the first place was to gather evidence, not posit my own thoughts. But the more research I did, the more I understood and resonated with both sides of the issue. I agree with those who stand up for immersion baptism, and as result of this work and the process we are in, I have decided that – unless circumstances do not permit – I will not perform baptism by any other method. The practice is as dear to me as our ways of worship and communion, and I believe I will hold them more firmly as I grow in my life and ministry.

However, as I studied the Scriptures, I also began to see what I already suspected: That the idea of exclusion based on a Christian's method of baptism, while not specifically spoken for or against in the Bible, is against my own understanding of the Scriptures and the Gospel of Christ, which is open to all. Indeed, I show my own prejudice in the matter by using the word "exclusion," a term that (perhaps too strongly) conjures the harshness of the idea.

I am certain that someone already convinced that this practice is right can find scriptural evidence to support their claim. They could also find evidence from history and reason and experience, and could write a paper that takes them to that conclusion. But I cannot write their paper. I can only write my own. And the evidence I have found, from both the words and the ideas of Scripture, from the history of the church, from my own logic and experience, have led me to think that this idea is foreign to the Gospel, and have placed me in favor of removing this policy from our church in favor of open membership.

Why? There are several reasons.

**1. Flexibility of Baptist Belief.** First, it is flexible as far as general church practice is concerned. It is something that we as Baptists can make *our own* stand on. I do not believe that immersion is biblically mandated, and the evidence of church history shows that Christians have long been divided on this issue. Moreover, as Baptists – who claim intellectual and spiritual autonomy, and who hold to our competency to read and interpret Scripture and to govern our Body as we see Christ leading us – I believe that by broaching this issue we have not only the right but the *requirement* to declare our position, our reason, and what it means for our church.

**2. Not a core issue of belief.** I also believe that this matter is flexible in that immersion (not baptism itself) is *not an issue that is vital to the Gospel*. Since it is nowhere addressed directly in Scripture, and only briefly in the writings of the Apostles or early church Fathers, it is obvious that this was not a core matter for them. There are many things worth fighting and taking a stand for. There are some essentials of doctrine that we must take a stand on – the Gospel, the Trinity, the meaning of salvation. Then there are other things that are important to debate, but things that should not (in my opinion) keep us from extending membership to anyone.

**3. By what means should we exclude?** For instance, we would not exclude someone from membership simply because they might believe that the Apocryphal books are useful as Scripture. To me, there are issues more vital. And baptism is simply not one of those issues. It seems strange to me that we might admit someone for membership who is obviously living an obstinate and sinful lifestyle (for example, a man who is openly cheating on his wife – keep in mind this is only an example!), but would exclude someone from membership who lives an exemplary Christian lifestyle, but was baptized by sprinkling.

**4. Alternatives are no good.** To me, other options for membership like “alternative baptism” or “watch-care membership” are complex means to skirt around the issue,<sup>35</sup> and are on even shakier ground than the original question. All members of the church should be under the “watch-care” of the other members, and in no place in the Bible is “alternative baptism” practiced (placing limitations on a member because they were baptized in a different way). Where is the passage that says we are not all equal as Christians before God?

**5. And rebaptism is worse.** Also difficult to me (though I will practice it if I am in a church that requires it) is the idea of “re-baptizing” someone who has already made their public profession in baptism. There is certainly no biblical evidence for this! Why would we add on an unbiblical type of baptism just so we could hold onto this tradition of requiring immersion? I can also feel the disappointment some may have experienced at having to negate their previous method of baptism, and am deeply against the idea that some have been re-baptized against their better judgment. To me, baptism should be a willing and joyful affirmation of our discipleship. It would be difficult for me to find joy in it if I felt I were being forced through a “hoop” to get into someone else’s church.

In fact, if this policy stands, I wonder if it might be a good idea for ALL of us to be re-baptized in order to recall that important time to our memories (how long ago it was for some of us!). If I were to baptize someone who had already been baptized, I would probably feel the urge to be re-baptized myself – because, after all, we all need to be reminded of our own baptism, and be willing to reaffirm our commitment to Christ.

**6. I am no judge.** My own experience has given me reason to dislike this policy. And here, I must declare my own human weaknesses. My personality being what it is, I realize that I am predisposed to make the decision I have made. I am intuitive by nature, so I can not only sense, but feel the pain that this issue has caused for many who desire to be a part of our church but feel excluded because they were baptized by another method. Many I have talked to feel that this policy makes light of their previous baptism. “It wasn’t good enough. It wasn’t right. You have to do it again if you want to be a part of us.” To me, our policy implies that their previous experience was faulty in some

---

<sup>35</sup> Note that I am not speaking of our practice of watch-care, which was not established as an alternative to immersion, but rather as a means to extend fellowship to some who wish to join with us only temporarily.

way. The way another believer was baptized is something that was between that believer and God in that time and place – in short, something I feel I have no right to judge.

**7. De-values baptism.** Some argue that if we allow baptism by other modes, we devalue baptism. But I would say that the opposite is true. By requiring someone who has already been baptized to be re-baptized, we find ourselves devaluing baptism in two ways. First, we are devaluing that person’s former baptism – even though we do not say it out loud, we are saying that their first baptism was incorrect in some way. But more than this, we are devaluing baptism as a whole practice – basically, taking away its significance as a spiritual event and symbol, and making it a “hoop” to jump through in order to gain admission to a particular church. Far from a joyful and willing act of obedience, it has the potential to become a Spirit-less act of finishing a checklist.

**8. Tradition is strong, but divided.** The most passionate argument we will likely hear in defense of keeping this policy is that of tradition. And as I said previously, I resonate with this tradition. But my reasoning overrides tradition in this case. How far will we follow tradition? And who will define that tradition for us? While immersion baptism is a long-standing tradition of Baptists, all the other particulars surrounding this tradition are muddy. For instance, if we are going to keep the tradition of requiring immersion baptism, should we decide, like the early Church Fathers, that we should baptize only in fresh, running water? What a level of symbolism is added when we are baptized in clean, fresh and “living” water rather than stale water in a tub behind a choir loft!

Or, if this is about Baptist tradition, will we also restrict access to the Table? For hundreds of years, most Baptists had a “closed table,” refusing to allow anyone who had not been baptized by immersion to approach the table. According to our own doctrinal standard,<sup>36</sup> baptism, (previously defined in that document as immersion only) “being a church ordinance, is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership *and to the Lord’s Supper.*” Are we going to adhere so strongly to tradition that we deny anyone from taking communion at our table?

### **In Humble Conclusion**

Therefore, I humbly submit this essay, fallible and weak though it may be, as my reason for suggesting we change this policy. I am open to correction, open to debate on any of the things I have brought up. I am also open to the fact that the church may decide to keep this policy in place, and that is fine – contrary to many people’s view of the pastoral office, I am not the “first citizen” of the church, as the President used to be considered the “First Citizen” of the United States. I am only one member of this, the Body of Christ as it has been brought together at this place and time.

No matter the outcome, I am grateful that we have walked this journey together and made a decision – not one based only on what was handed to us in a dusty document that we just pulled out of the drawer, but one based on careful consideration of God’s evidence in Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, and God’s own work in our lives here at Kenbridge Baptist Church.

---

<sup>36</sup> Section VII of *The Baptist Faith and Message*, both 1963 and 2000 versions.