
Baptism and Church Membership

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What a wonderful prospect awaits those who are true believers, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb! They will be in glory in the presence of the Lord for all eternity. This bliss will be shared by every Christian from every age — the Church Universal, as it is often called. It will be *'a great multitude that no one could number'* (Revelation 7:9). There will be nothing and no one to spoil our enjoyment of glory. Everyone around us will love the Lord. It is encouraging, thrilling, to contemplate such things.

However, when we turn from that scene to that which confronts us on earth, we are faced with a dramatic contrast. In this world, Christians are in a minority — a very small minority. Most are found in Bible believing churches. A few are scattered in churches that are not committed to the biblical faith. There are others, however, and a significant number in our day, who are not members of any church. Without that commitment they can drift from church to church. They can hear the best preachers in various congregations; listen to a selection of visiting speakers; or even, as many do, stay home and watch an endless parade of T.V. evangelists, or listen to sermons by the best preachers through the internet.

Such people avoid the pressure of responsibilities in a church, and they do not have to put up with the squabbles that all too often characterize the professing people of God. That may be viewed as an advantage, but there are some very real drawbacks which will blight the souls of those who follow that path. Apart from these considerations, we say without hesitation that a believer not committed to a local church is walking an unbiblical course.

While salvation is an individual matter, salvation brings the believer into a community — the church. In the book of Acts, converts were not just added to the Lord, but also to the congregation of believers (Acts 2:41,47). In the beginning there may not have been a formal membership, but there was certainly a body of believers to which people were added, and from which they could be removed (1 Corinthians 5:13). As church organization developed, we see an indication of roils or lists — of widows for example (1 Timothy 5:9), so it is a reasonable assumption that there would also be a list of church members. There are references to people being chosen or appointed by churches for specific responsibilities (e.g. Acts 6:3, 2 Corinthians 8:19). Again it would seem a reasonable assumption that there was some control over those allowed to participate in the choice or vote. There must have been some recognition of those eligible to vote.

There are other reasons why Christians should be firmly committed to a local church. One is the need to serve. Every believer is given talents — gifts they can use for the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul likens the church to a body. A body has various parts or members, each of which contributes to the efficient functioning of the body. Some parts, like an eye or a hand, are more prominent in their activities; the body is greatly handicapped without them. But every member is important, and a lack of any part will be a drawback. So in the church, we all have spiritual gifts (verse 7). Some are more prominent; for example, preachers and teachers, but all are necessary for the body to express itself properly. If a Christian who should be identified with a church fails to do that, then the church is deprived of that gift, and the believer is failing to exercise the gift that God has given to him or her.

Another reason for local church commitment is the need we have of the ministry of other believers. We need the encouragement of other Christians, and they need our encouragement. We can build each other up in the faith. There is also at times, the need for warning and rebuke. the extreme application of this is in church discipline. This is a solemn matter, but it is also a safeguard and a means of grace for the believer. We need people to warn us, to rebuke us in love; and there may be those who need us to reprove them.

Christians need each other, and that need can only be fully met through a definite commitment to a local church. God puts His people in churches, and if we isolate ourselves from those assemblies, it leaves a large area of the Christian life that cannot be biblically fulfilled.

What is involved in church commitment? How does one join a local church? There are two requirements.

1. CONVERSION

In Acts 2, Peter addressed the Jews on the day of Pentecost and preached Christ to them. Their hearts were pierced and they asked what they should do. Peter's first directive was, *'Repent!'* (verse 38). Repentance was a vital ingredient of the gospel message preached by Jesus and the apostles (Mark 1:4,15, 6:12). Repentance means simply a change of mind, but in connection with the gospel, it is a change of mind about sin. In reality it goes beyond the mind. It involves a change of feeling about sin, and also a change of behavior with regard to sin. To repent means ultimately to turn from sin. However, we cannot turn from sin in a vacuum. True repentance is impossible apart from faith. We only turn from sin as we turn to Christ. Paul preached that repentance involved *'repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ'* (Acts 20:21).

Conversion then, is repentance plus faith, and conversion is essential for a person to join a local church. If an organization does not insist on conversion as a condition of membership, it has no right to be called a church. It is little better than a club for those with some religious interest. Of course, human judgment is always fallible. There will sometimes be those who join a church without experiencing true conversion, but a reasonable effort should be made to ensure that candidates give evidence of conversion before they are accepted as members.

2. BAPTISM

The second directive Peter gave to those who asked what they must do, was, *'Be baptized'* (Acts 2:38). In the early church, baptism was closely associated with salvation. Note the following passages in Acts: 2:41, 8:12,13, 36-38, 9:18, 10:47,48, 16:14,15, 31-33, 18:8. In all these incidents, it is clear that conversion had taken place (or, in Simon's case, at least a profession of faith) before baptism. It was taken for granted that one who professed faith in Christ would be baptized following that profession. Why did baptism hold such a large place in the life and practice of the church? We will consider baptism under five headings.

i. The Importance of Baptism

The very number of references to baptism in the preaching and practice of the early church shows how important a matter it was. It was not an option. Peter gave the imperative, *'Be baptized'*. In the great commission, Jesus commanded His apostles to go, make disciples and then to baptize them (Matthew 28:19). If they were obedient to their commission, then there would be no unbaptized disciples. The fact that baptism is the will and command of Christ the Head of the church, should in itself settle the matter of its importance for believers. With the exception of a few groups like Quakers and the Salvation Army, the church has always accepted and practised baptism. There have been and still are theological differences regarding baptism, but very few will dispute the importance of the ordinance.

ii The Meaning of Baptism

Not everyone is agreed as to the meaning of baptism. The scope of this booklet does not permit a detailed examination of different views, but we should be aware that it is a controversial area. A number of major denominations (including Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans) believe in baptismal regeneration, that is, that the actual rite of baptism produces a change of heart. Other groups, such as Presbyterians, reject baptismal regeneration, but believe that baptism conveys special privileges, bringing the individual into the church and within the sphere of the covenant of grace.

We believe that as salvation is by grace alone, through faith, no ritual can of itself convey grace. Baptism is nothing more than a sign. It is an external symbol of what has taken place inwardly. Faith brings us into union with Christ, and baptism is an expression of that union. It is the grace of God that brings us from spiritual death to newness of life, and baptism is a picture of that change.

(a) Baptism is a Picture of Washing

Ananias said to Paul following his conversion:

Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name. (Acts 22:16)

One might be forgiven for thinking that this verse taught that the act of baptism removes sins. But that would contradict the clear teaching that it is only the blood of Christ that cleanses from sin (1 John 1:7). However, baptism is a picture of the washing away of sin. Water has an obvious connection with washing, and those baptized are demonstrating that they have been cleansed from their sins.

(b) Baptism is a Picture of Death, Burial and Resurrection

Paul wrote:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4)

Baptism therefore signifies death, burial and resurrection in union with Christ. The one baptized is in effect saying, 'I have died with Christ: I am dead to the old life. I have also risen with Him: I now live a new life in Christ.' The transformation did not occur at the baptism but at conversion. Baptism is the public testimony to that change.

(c) Baptism Implies Identification with the People of God

We read that those who received Peter's message of Christ were baptized and were added to them (Acts 2:41). There seems to be a link between baptism and addition to the local church. By baptism a convert not only testifies to the forgiveness of his sins and his union with Christ, he also declares that he is identifying himself with the people of God. There may be exceptions to this. The Ethiopian eunuch did not join any church when he was baptized (Acts 8:39). He was probably the beginning of the church in Ethiopia. There would have to be unusual circumstances not to expect a person being baptized to join the local church in association with which he or she was baptized.

iii. The Subjects of Baptism

It is the view of many segments of the Christian church that the infants of believers are to be baptized. The result of that view is that the vast majority of those baptized are infants. That was certainly not the case in the early church. An examination of the passages in Acts that refer to baptism (most of them were quoted earlier) will show that in virtually every case the people baptized were said to have believed, or at least they professed to believe, before being baptized. Certainly there is no mention of infants being baptized. A profession of faith in Christ is a prerequisite for baptism, so infants are excluded. Children are not excluded, but they must be old enough to understand the gospel and give some evidence of saving grace in their lives.

Proponents of infant baptism will usually refer to the so-called ‘household baptisms’ in the New Testament writings, and insist that there must have been infants in those households. Actually the evidence is decidedly against that. Four examples of household baptisms are mentioned. The first is the case of Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48). Those baptized had received the Holy Spirit and had spoken in tongues. That hardly allows for infants. The second is Lydia's house (Acts 16:15). The members of her household are said to have been baptized, but no details are given. As Lydia was a business woman traveling round the Roman empire, it is highly unlikely that she would have had young children. There is not even any indication that she was married. To argue that there were servants with children is pure speculation. The third is the family of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33,34). There it is clearly stated that the whole family believed. The fourth case is the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16). Paul baptized his household, but it is interesting that at the end of the same Corinthian epistle, he again refers to that household as having ‘*devoted themselves to the service of the saints*’ (1 Corinthians 16:15). If we insist on including infants in the household for baptism, we must at least be consistent and have those infants serving the saints!

Another favorite incident of those advocating infant baptism is the one where Jesus received and blessed little children (Matthew 19:13-15). We are not in any way downplaying Jesus' interest in little children, but the passage says nothing whatever about baptism. Another point, rarely made, is that this does not seem to have been an everyday occurrence. If Jesus had been in the habit of receiving and blessing children, the disciples would have known that, and would not have discouraged those who brought them.

New Testament support for infant baptism is really non-existent, and in fact the weightier arguments are drawn from the Old Testament. To put it very simply, the reasoning is that as all males born to Jewish families were circumcised as a sign of inclusion among the covenant people of God, so now all children born to believing parents (or even with one believing parent) should be baptized as a sign of their inclusion among the covenant people of God. The main flaw in this argument is that people were born Jews by natural birth, whereas we become Christians only by spiritual birth. It is therefore inappropriate to baptize on the basis of natural birth, even if the parents are believers.

Another problem is that only males were circumcised, whereas now females are baptized too. There is no ground to make that change if baptism simply replaces circumcision as the covenant sign. Our paedobaptist (infant baptizing) friends are to be commended for their insistence on the continuity of the covenant of grace, but at the same time they fail to see some important distinctions between the Old Covenant and the New.

iv. The Mode of Baptism

Here again controversy abounds. Baptism is administered by three main methods: immersion, pouring and sprinkling. Our argument is that biblical baptism is by immersion only. There are several reasons for this:

(a) The Meaning of the Greek Word 'baptizo'

The word means to immerse or dip. Although a few paedobaptists contend for a wider meaning that can include sprinkling or pouring, many of them admit that the original word means, to immerse. Even early Anglican prayer books specified that infants should be immersed. John Wesley ran into opposition because of his insistence on this.

(b) The Symbolism of Baptism Requires Immersion

As we have already seen, baptism is a picture of death, burial and resurrection. No one would be satisfied to see a loved one buried with only a sprinkling of earth covering the coffin. Burial surely requires a complete covering, and in the case of baptism, that means immersion.

(c) New Testament Practice Points to Immersion

We read that John the Baptist *'was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there'* (John 3:23). Baptism by sprinkling or pouring does not require a large supply of water. This strongly suggests that John baptized by immersion. Following the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, his chariot passed a body of water. He requested that Philip baptize him. The chariot stopped and they *'went down into the water'* and then *'came up out of the water'* (Acts 8:38,39). Sprinkling or pouring would not require that. We might also add that an important official traveling with servants through the desert, would have carried a supply of water. That would have been adequate for any form of baptism other than immersion.

v. The 'Baptismal Formula'

This is one other matter that Christians have managed to fight over. Some are strong in their insistence that baptism be administered in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Others are equally adamant that it be in the name of Jesus only. In the great commission, Jesus did give the Trinitarian formula (Matthew 28:19), and that should probably be taken as the norm. However, there is also a reference to baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5), so it cannot be a matter of monumental importance: certainly not a matter for division.

To summarize then, baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This baptism is required of every Christian as a testimony to his or her faith, and the ordinance brings the person into the fellowship of the local church.

3. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Following baptism a person is received by vote of the congregation and becomes a member of that church. In some cases the vote is actually taken before baptism. What does that membership involve, apart from having one's name on a list? In a word, it means commitment. The believer, having joined the church, should be more than a statistic. He or she is a vital part of the body of Christ: a member of a believing community. There is commitment to the Lord, but also to fellow-believers in the Lord. Let me suggest several areas where that commitment should be manifested.

i. Unity

There is an essential unity among Christians. We are '*All one in Christ Jesus*' (Galatians 3:28). But Satan will work hard to disrupt that unity, so we must '*make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*' (Ephesians 4:3). Unity is important because a loving, united fellowship is a powerful witness to the gospel. Jesus said:

All people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another. (John 13:35)

ii. Attendance at Meetings

Those converted under apostolic preaching '*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*' (Acts 2:42). Those activities meant time spent together. The meetings of believers had a high priority in their lives. If we want to grow spiritually, we must avail ourselves of those means of grace — the teaching of the Word of God, fellowship, breaking of bread (the Lord's Supper) and the prayer meeting. Our weekly schedule should be arranged around the church meetings so that we can get maximum benefit from them.

iii. Readiness to Serve

Obviously a new convert will not be thrust immediately into a position of major responsibility, but every Christian, however young in the faith, should be encouraged to serve the Lord in some way. There are many practical jobs that need doing in a church, and members should show a willingness to help out where they can. Those in leadership have a responsibility to get people involved in the work of the church. We all have talents, and those talents need to be recognized and used.

iv. Financial Support

Commitment to a church means commitment to its programme, and that includes finances. A pastor needs to be paid: missionaries require support: there are a variety of overheads pertaining to the building and the activities held there. Not everyone can contribute equally. Some members are wage-earners; some are pensioners; some are housewives; some are children. The nice thing about giving is that the actual amount is not important. The widow's mite is seen by the Lord as a greater gift than the large donations of the wealthy (Mark 12:41-44). The amount that anyone gives is a matter between them and the Lord, but there are some biblical guidelines. The Jews were required to give a tithe (a tenth) of their income. No such rule is binding on New Covenant believers, but we do have the principle of regular, proportionate giving:

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper. (1 Corinthians 16:2)

One thing not specified is the actual proportion or percentage that should be given. It would seem reasonable to argue that if Jews gave a tenth under law, then surely we would not give less under grace. Many Christians feel that a tithe or ten per cent of gross income is a good starting point. Very few cannot afford to give a tenth. Most can afford to give more.

v. Holiness

Some might be surprised that we list holiness as an area where our commitment to the church is demonstrated. But holiness is what the Christian life is all about. Paul wrote: *'This the will of God, your sanctification'* (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Holiness (sanctification) has to do primarily with the Christian's relationship with the Lord, but it also affects the church. Every member is a representative of that church. His or her behaviour in the eyes of the world will either enhance or spoil the image of that church. Conduct inconsistent with the gospel will dishonour the Lord, but it will also discredit the church to which the person is attached. On the other hand, a godly believer who is known to belong to a particular church will bring credit to that church. It is another application of the truth of the unity of the body. The behaviour of one part affects the whole body (1 Corinthians 12:26).

4. THE LORD'S SUPPER

We will conclude our consideration of church membership with a look at the second of our two ordinances. Baptism, the first ordinance, is an individual ordinance that brings the believer into the church. The Lord's Supper is a church ordinance that expresses the unity of the believers as well as the foundation of their faith.

While there is no specific statement of the fact in Scripture, it has been widely accepted that the two ordinances should be observed in their order. In other words, baptism should precede the Lord's Supper. Why should anyone want to obey the Lord in one ordinance and not in the other? Among the Jews, circumcision had to precede the observance of the Passover (Exodus 12:48), and it seems to be a reasonable parallel that baptism should be a prerequisite for coming to the table of the Lord.

i. The Importance of the Lord's Supper

As with baptism, it is the command of the Lord. *'Do this in remembrance of me'* (Luke 22:19). Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the 'Last Supper', and Paul's exposition in 1 Corinthians 11:23-32 makes it very clear that it is to be observed by the church. Being the Lord's command should remove any doubts we have about its importance. In addition, the very nature of the Lord's Supper should underline its importance. It is a setting forth of the sufferings and death of our Saviour. It pictures the basis of our salvation. It is a reminder of the cost of our redemption. We need reminding of that frequently. Another thing that shows the importance and seriousness of the Lord's Supper is the fact that abuse of the table can bring judgment on the guilty party (1 Corinthians 11:29,30).

ii. The Meaning of the Lord's Supper

Once again we enter the field of controversy. One of the battles of the Reformation was over the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass. Rome believes that in the mass, the priest has the power to transform the bread and wine into the literal body and blood of Christ, and offer them as a sacrifice for sins — a re-enactment of Christ's death on the cross. The term used to describe the change from bread and wine to flesh and blood is transubstantiation. Martin Luther and other Reformers rejected this view, although strangely, Luther's view was not much different. He denied the sacrificial nature of the Lord's Table, but he taught that although the bread and wine remained as bread and wine, the flesh and blood of Christ were also present. This view is known as consubstantiation.

Other reformers such as Calvin, denied the literal presence of Christ in the sacrament, but did believe that His spiritual presence accompanied the elements. Zwingli the Swiss reformer took the position that

the bread and wine were purely symbols of Christ's body and blood. He believed there was no special presence of the Lord any more than at other meetings. That is the position generally taken by Baptists today.

We do believe though, that the Lord's Supper is a means of grace if rightly observed. If our focus is on Christ and His atoning death, it will certainly draw us closer to Him and strengthen our faith. The Lord's Supper is a participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16), but that is never automatic.

To summarize, we believe that the Lord's Supper is an ordinance in which the church partakes of bread and wine, symbols of Christ's body and blood. This remembrance is to be observed by worthy believers until the Lord returns.

Let us touch upon a few other points briefly.

(a) The Participants

Clearly it is an ordinance for believers. Unbelievers are excluded. Also, those under church discipline would not be admitted. In the previous paragraph, we used the expression 'worthy believers'. That does not mean that any sense of unworthiness prevents us from coming to the Lord's Table. We are to examine ourselves before we participate (1 Corinthians 11:28.) Sin should be confessed, but if we had to be perfectly worthy, we could never come. We will always feel unworthy, but it is grace that permits us to come, even as it was grace that saved us originally. The Lord's Table should give us a greater appreciation of that grace.

(b) The Elements

Sadly, there is disagreement here too. Some use ordinary bread: some insist that it be unleavened. Sometimes a single cup is passed: more often individual cups are employed. In the beginning, Jesus and His disciples would have used unleavened bread and diluted wine — that was the Jewish practice for the Passover. They probably used one loaf and one cup. But when people fight over the symbols, then they lose sight of the things symbolized.

(c) The Frequency

People argue for the whole range from weekly to annual observance. There is some indication that the early church broke bread weekly (Acts 20:7), but the evidence is sparse. Jesus said '*whenever you do it*' (1 Corinthians 11:25) without specifying the frequency. We must leave it to the conscience and decision of each church. We might say that it should not be so seldom that we neglect and forget the Lord's Supper and its significance, and not so frequent that it becomes commonplace.

One final point. The main purpose of the communion is to remember the Lord's death, but there is another thing set forth—the unity of the church.

*Because there is one bread, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.
(1 Corinthians 10:17)*

Starting with a single loaf helps to illustrate this aspect better than having it cut in pieces. The bread is passed among the believers, and they partake of it. Although broken, distributed and consumed, there is a sense in which it is still one loaf, because of the unity of those eating it.

So the Lord's Supper sets forth the preciousness of the church. Its preciousness to Christ is shown by the price He was willing to pay for it—His own blood. Its preciousness to believers is shown by their desire to meet together and express their love to Christ and to each other. The church demonstrates as nothing else can, the unity of all who truly love Jesus Christ. We should treasure our relationship with the people of God. It is a privilege to be a part of Christ's church. Nothing should keep God's people from it.

*Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He whose word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for His own abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou mayest smile at all thy foes.*

*Saviour, if of Zion's city
I through grace a member am;
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in Thy name.
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

(John Newton)