

BAPTISM

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I. WHAT IS BAPTISM?

A. The meaning of the word in the New Testament

To “baptize”, from the Greek word, *baptidzo*, literally means “to dip or immerse”. In non-Christian literature it also means “to plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm”. [G-EL, A&G, 1952] The term is used in the New Testament to describe both the actual practice of putting an individual under water as well as to describe figuratively what occurs when one comes to Christ in faith.

B. The practice of baptism in the New Testament

The ancient roots of the practice may be recognized in the Judaistic Temple ceremony: washing in the *miqveh* carried implications for both initiation and ceremonial cleansing by water (Heb. *kabas* and *rachats*, “wash”).

Baptism as a ritual or ceremonial purification rite may be found in both ancient and contemporary religions. In the general history of thought, “*baptism is a lustration or washing of a person or a thing in water for some symbolic reason.*” (Hendricks, SWJTh)

Following is an overview of the primary New Testament texts related to the act of baptism.

1. The baptism of John

Matthew 3:1-12 (see also Mark 1:3-8; Luke 3:2-17; cf. Jn.1:24-28; 3:22-23)

People coming to John were baptized upon their confession of their sins. John referred to this as a baptism of repentance.

John 3:22-4:2; Acts 1:22; 10:37; 13:24; 18:25; 19:1-7

John’s baptism is the direct predecessor of Christian baptism, a step away from Judaism and a step toward the Christian practice. This is a fitting role for John, the last to stand in the tradition of the old prophetic line, a fact that Jesus understood (Mal. 4:5-6; Mt. 11:1-15; Mk).

This event confirmed John’s prophetic ministry and his role as the forerunner of the Messiah. His commendation of Jesus is important: it underscores the fact that John’s ministry (and therefore his baptism) point directly to the ministry of the Messiah (and by implication to baptism given in the name of the Messiah.)

As a precursor to Christian baptism, the baptism of John is not full Christian baptism (Acts 19...).

2. The baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:13-17 (see also Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21, 22; John 1:29-34)

Jesus was baptized by John “*to fulfill all righteousness.*”

Mt. 20:22-23; Mk. 10:38-39; Lk. 12:50

The phrase is cryptic and not clearly defined.

The word for “righteousness” connotes the character of God—His judgments, truthfulness or holiness—and points to what is “right” or “just” in accordance to God’s purposes. Thus, “righteousness” is whatever has been appointed by God to be acknowledged and obeyed by man (see Matt. 5:6, 20). In His response to John, Jesus was indicating that this was just what God wanted Him to do.

We note that Jesus did not need a ritual cleansing or a baptism of repentance.

Thus, we conclude that Jesus’ baptism was

(1) The inaugural act of His public ministry. God clearly declared His pleasure with Jesus who openly demonstrated commitment to the mission before Him (Matt. 3:16-17). This trinitarian picture of God’s speaking to the world of His Son, as the Spirit descended, set the stage for all that was to come.

(2) Identification with sinners whom He came to save. He stepped into the world and into the water with those people who had responded to John’s call to repentance. The crowds at the river are representative of all those whom Christ calls to faith and for whose redemption He gave Himself.

(3) A metaphorical picture of suffering that was to come. By His submission to this symbolic portrayal of cleansing and repentance, Jesus foreshadowed His death, burial, and resurrection (Heb. 4:15; 7:26; I Pet. 2:21-22; I Jn. 3:5; see Isa. 53; Lk. 19:10).

3. The instruction of Jesus regarding baptism

Matthew 28:19-20

Jesus instructed His followers to baptize those who would become His disciples. Thus, baptism is inherent in Christian obedience and discipleship.

Three verbs appear in this text: “make disciples, keep on baptizing, and keep on teaching”. The first verb is the key to the text, the operative baseline instruction. The second and third are follow-up actions. There is no time stamp on any of these imperatives; i.e., making disciples is an on-going process—becoming a disciple is a life-long journey. Baptism, following becoming a disciple, may take place at any point in the disciple-making process. Teaching also continues all along the way. Each of these activities takes place under the authority and faithful presence of Christ.

John 4:1-2 (compare 3:22)

This is the only mention of baptizing being carried out by Jesus and His closest followers. Apparently Jesus did not baptize but His disciples did. I Corinthians 1 contains a hint that who baptized believers had already become a point of contention and pride.

4. The practice of the early Church

In the Book of Acts Christian baptism appears in several forms.

Acts 2:1-8

The Pentecost experience is a true baptism in and by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:37-41

The first converts in Jerusalem were baptized immediately.

Some scholars say this is the closest the New Testament comes to teaching that baptism is related to becoming a member of the church; i.e., the 3,000 were baptized and “added to the church that day.” Reference.....

Acts 8:13, 26-40

At his conversion, the eunuch was baptized by Philip.

Philip also baptized Simon Magus.

Acts 10:24, 44-48

Cornelius and some of his relatives and close friends (v24) heard the Gospel message.

The Holy Spirit was poured out on them. Peter then ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Acts 16:16-34

The jailer and his family were baptized after their decision to believe in Christ.

Apparently the entire household had become believers prior to their baptism (v34).

Acts 19:1-5

About twelve men, followers of John the Baptizer, came to understand that Jesus—not John—was the Messiah and were baptized in His name.

I Corinthians 1:13, 14-17

Baptism was commonly practiced in the early church but it was not to be a point of contention, pride, or privilege.

Paul did not denigrate baptism (1:17). Rather he sought to overcome schisms on the part of those who had been baptized by various ministers at Corinth. A significant point to made here: baptism should promote unity of the church in a common faith in Jesus Christ. It should not be a source of division.

5. Baptism as a reference to the spiritual transaction that occurs upon one’s Christian conversion

Romans 6:1-14; Galatians 3:26-28

Upon one’s faith in Christ Jesus, one is “immersed” into Christ. “Baptism” is used here to symbolize this spiritual reality. The new believer dies to self spiritually (Mt. 16:27...) and is raised up a new person (II Cor. 5:17).

I Corinthians 12:13

Believers are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ, the church.

Ephesians 4:4-6

Baptism appears here in the context of the one Spirit, Lord, and God the Father. Faith is the direct means by which one is immersed into the Trinitarian God.

Colossians 2:11-12

A believer is “*buried with Christ*” and raised up with Him through faith. The context makes it clear this is a spiritual baptism or immersion into Christ.

6. Observations on the early church practice of baptism

Jesus set the example of being baptized for the right reasons.

Baptism came to be practiced in response to Jesus’ command.

Baptism was always practiced as a “believer’s baptism”; it followed salvation.

Baptism was a powerful personal and public proclamation by the new believer of new birth in Christ. (Rom. 6:4)

Baptism identified the new believer as part of the nascent Christian movement.

No obvious connection is found between baptism and local church membership.

7. Comments on the mode of baptism

Christian tradition has witnessed a variety of modes of baptism including full immersion (forward, vertical, and backward) as well as sprinkling and pouring.

Pouring was practiced by the 16th and 17th century Anabaptists in Europe.

Though we cannot declare without question that any one particular mode was exclusively practiced in the New Testament church, we can say that immersion seems most consistent with the Greek term (*baptidzo*, “to dip, plunge, immerse”). Immersion also fits the language of the text (“*coming up out of*”; cf. Mt. 4:16; Acts 8:39) and most accurately portrays the theological motif (death, burial, and resurrection to new life).

II. A Theology of Baptism

A. The deeper meaning of the act

When Jesus said His baptism was “*for righteousness’ sake*”, He was pointing to something beyond the simple act of immersion. He was pointing to the deeper issues of personal commitment, self-denial, cross-taking, and following Him to the end of life.

As we seek to grasp the significance of baptism, we look beyond questions of mode, timing, and the legal aspects of the act to the fundamental truths which are reflected in the biblical teachings associated with baptism.

- 1. Baptism points us to the cross-resurrection event.** What gives Christian baptism its distinctive signature is its Christological content. Jesus’ own baptism underscores His divine nature and full humanity. It initiates His earthly ministry, sinless life, and willingness to endure suffering and death on our behalf. His command to make disciples and baptize them affirms the fact that their lives are to follow the trajectory of His own; i.e., into death, burial, and resurrection.

When Christians are baptized, they are voluntarily, openly declaring their readiness to follow Him who is the Christ, the resurrected Son of God. Any additional meaning or requirement that detracts from this central Christological significance risks compromising the integrity and simplicity of Christian baptism. (WH)

2. Believer's baptism possesses an ethical dimension.

“Newness of life” (Rom. 6:1-14) indicates that the believer has come to a place in his life in which he is now actively working to eliminate sin and sinful behavior. He understands that there is a new, set-apart (holy) way he ought to live in the world. Being obedient to the command to be baptized (Mt. 28:19) is a significant step toward obedience in other areas of life.

3. Believer's baptism possesses a sacrificial dimension.

The believer who trusts Christ to save him is committed to denying himself, taking up his cross, and following Jesus (Mt. 16:24-26). The Christian understands that suffering may come as a result of His faith. He may be called upon to sacrifice things that the world says are perfectly acceptable.

4. Believer's baptism possesses an evangelistic dimension.

The believer who chooses baptism understands that he has made a personal decision to submit to Christ's command and to follow the example of Christ. He also knows that he is, in this public act, declaring the good news of salvation available to others. He is declaring that the inward transformation that has begun in him is an option for others to consider.

B. Is baptism required for salvation?

1. The texts that are offered as proofs for baptism as a requirement for salvation present difficulties. Three primary texts are mentioned here.

Mk 16:16

This passage does not appear in the best early manuscripts

Acts 2:38; see also Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3

John's baptism was clearly not baptism for salvation. Distinct from the early church's baptism, his was pre-cross and resurrection.

Each of the texts above has the same structure. The structure of the Greek language indicates that forgiveness of sin is a precondition for baptism, not a consequence of baptism. Thus, baptism in each of these passages is an act that follows repentance that has already resulted in the forgiveness of sins.

I Pet. 3:18-22

A cryptic, unclear passage the meaning of which has been long disputed.

None of these texts provide an adequate base upon which to establish a major theological claim that departs from clear, accepted teachings of salvagtion by grace through faith alone.

2. A brief primer on salvation

a. Salvation is not of works:

Keeping rules (Mt. 5:20), following a particular religious tradition (Jn. 6:39-40, 44-45; Phil. 3:3-7), attending church, being against sin, and/or being a really good person (Ro. 3:9-12, 23) are not enough.

b. A genuine Christian

Has accepted the grace of God, the gift of forgiveness God gives freely to those who accept it (Eph. 2:3-9)

Is committed to the belief that the historical Jesus was the Son of God and that He was truly raised from the dead (Mt. 3:17; 17:5; Ro. 10:8-11; I Co. 15:17-20)

Is a fully committed Christ-follower (Mt. 10:38-39; 16:24-25), having chosen to die to himself and to follow Him to the end of his life (Ti. 2:11-15)

Is a new person (Ro. 6:4; II Co. 5:17) and is continually being transformed (Ro. 12:1-2; 8:29; II Co. 3:18)

3. Conclusion

Baptism of new believers is undeniably a New Testament practice. However, baptism is not seen as a means to or requirement for salvation. A symbolic act, baptism is not a burden imposed as an add-on to the salvation experience. In the New Testament, baptism followed belief/conversion in all cases.

Believer's baptism is a baptism for those who have chosen to confess publicly their personal commitment to Christ; i.e., for those who are already Christians. This baptism shows outwardly what has already happened inwardly.

C. Believer's baptism and infant baptism

1. Infant baptism (Paedobaptism)

a. Origins of the practice of infant baptism

Infant baptism has been practiced in some degree since the second or third century after Christ. The historical development of this practice and how widespread or accepted it was in the church is not clear from historical records. Apparently the practice arose gradually sometime during or after the late third century. A few early church fathers are routinely cited as evidence that the practice at least existed in some places.

Justin Martyr called the waters of baptism “the place where they are regenerated” but just as clearly claimed that these candidates were already believers. Nowhere did he approve infant baptism.

Tertullian discouraged infant baptism because he believed that mortal sins committed after baptism could not be forgiven (better to be baptized at the point of death.)

Cyprian became an advocate for infant baptism (ca. 250 AD). He believed that infants needed baptism to cleanse them from original sin. But he also indicated that infants should be baptized mainly “in cases of necessity” (that is, carried out only when an infant was expected to die soon.) His view apparently did not achieve universal acceptance and made slow progress.

Augustine (354-430 AD) argued that infant baptism frees one from the bond of original sin.

The practice gained traction in the Middle Ages (depending on one’s definition of The Middle Ages, this time period is roughly 500 – 1500 AD) when the church was faced with a combination of the doctrine of original sin (largely an Augustinian contribution), a high infant mortality rate, and hard questions from parents who feared for the mortal soul of their children.

The official Catholic Church position was codified in the Justinian code (6th century) that forbade the rebaptizing of people who had been baptized in infancy. Believer’s baptism after that became increasingly rare for fear of reprisal. The Thomistic view that baptism is an event through which God dispenses grace became absolute at the Council of Trent (1545-63). (Nettles, Historical Comm., 1989)

b. What the monument records show

There is no known portrayal of infant baptism in the monument record (the catacombs and other extant inscriptions). Though a few mentions of infant baptism may be found in the stone records, there is no reason to assume these occurred within the first two or three centuries or that they did not. We have no reliable means of determining the date of these inscriptions.

Three cases of infant baptism are mentioned in what may be the late 4th century, all apparently as death approached.

No really clear confirmation of infant baptism occurs until after 400 AD. Even then, there is no evidence that the practice of infant baptism was widespread but only when infants were near death. These infants were likely not baptized because of the faith of their parents. Rather, the parents sought the sacrament when they thought the baby was going to die, believing it was necessary for salvation. (Chase, Christian Review, 1863, pp. 550-560)

c. Consideration of biblical texts given to support infant baptism

Ps. 8:2

Ps. 139

These are wonderful texts. They point to the presence and power of God in the world. They underscore the intentional activity of God in human existence and in the universe.

Mt. 19:14; Lk. 18:15-17

These well-known and well-loved passages clearly affirm that Jesus indeed loved children. He invited them all to come. He still does. No one doubts or debates this fact.

For some traditions, Jesus' blessing of the children is construed as an argument that the children of believing parents are included in the covenant relationship He has established with the parents and thus should be baptized.

Acts 10:24, 44-48; 16:16-34

Some traditions contend that because entire households were baptized that we must assume that babies were included.

Other biblical arguments for paedobaptism

Some Christian traditions have gone to great lengths to draw from the juxtaposing of old covenantal texts with selected New Testament passages a justification for baptizing infants (e.g., Noah and I Pet. 3:20-21; Abraham and Col. 2:11-12; Moses and I Cor. 10:1-2).

2. Observations on the biblical texts used to affirm infant baptism

The praise and worship Psalms:

They are wonderful texts but are not in any way associated with the baptism of anyone, infants or others.

The invitation of Jesus to the children to come to Him:

A simple reading of the texts reveals that they are neither proofs for the practice of infant baptism nor evidence that infants are involuntarily brought into the kingdom based on the choice of their parents.

The baptism of households in Acts:

There is no logical or textual basis for simply assuming that because households were baptized infants were necessarily included. The entire reach of these texts is critical to understanding what was going on; e.g., note Acts 16:34: "*those who believed were baptized.*"

Simply and honestly put, the Bible gives no express instruction to baptize infants.

We are careful not to speak where we know not. Indeed, we do not know just what efficacy baptism does have in one's spiritual journey apart from the personal choices involved.

Clear biblical support, however, is required to uphold the contention that baptism is required for the salvation of an infant or is a requirement in the salvific journey of the infant. When no such support is to be found, the argument cannot be sustained (biblically or logically) that baptism of an infant is required to ensure that the child is spiritually “covered” until such time as he or she makes an adult decision to follow Christ.

There is no biblical basis to believe that infant baptism makes an infant a member of the church or that sin is forgiven, that the Holy Spirit comes into an infant upon baptism, or that the infant is resurrected into newness of life upon his baptism. The context of Rom. 6:3-14ff clearly shows it is written to believers who following their baptism must choose how they will live.

3. The difference between infant baptism and believer’s baptism.

a. Infant baptism

Some believe that baptism of infants is in some way essential to their salvation. This belief is accompanied by the conviction that it should be administered to infants as a “first step” in their spiritual journey.

For most traditions which practice it, infant baptism is considered a sufficient fulfillment of biblical teachings concerning baptism. The act generally carries sacramental importance: it is deemed necessary to protect the child until further spiritual growth takes place. It may also be intended to be a covenant between the parents and God on behalf of the child. The parents promise to rear their child in the faith until the child is old enough to make his own personal confession of Christ.

In all cases, infant baptism is by definition an act carried out by the Church and parents on behalf of the infant. The infant has no choice in the matter and bears no responsibility.

b. Believer’s baptism

Believer’s baptism assumes both conscious choice and personal responsibility. It is administered to one who is old enough to accept forgiveness of sin for himself, to express faith consciously, and to demonstrate some understanding of the meaning of baptism before he is baptized. This practice is consistent with the practice of the New Testament church, as has been shown above.

c. Summary: the differences are unmistakable

Infant baptism is done to you. It affirms the faith of your parents and assumes a work of God on your behalf that precedes your own response of faith.

Believer’s baptism is something you choose to do, a personal testimony of faith that symbolizes outwardly what has already happened inwardly.

In every instance in the New Testament baptism follows the conscious choice of an individual to become a disciple. Infants simply are not in a position to make such a decision. Any such decision must be made on their behalf by someone else.

4. The ancient debate lives on!

A column in the local newspaper on this topic, submitted in February, 2015 (the content of the column was very similar to the comments in 3. above) elicited vigorous responses. Three of the more interesting responses follow:

"I saw your article in the Monitor on Friday in which you claimed, "Infant baptism has its roots in the Middle Ages..."

To be frank, this is completely inaccurate. Such a statement tells me that you are not very familiar with church history.

Irenaeus (130-200) is a disciple of the Apostle John and he testifies to the common practice of infant baptism when he writes about the baptism of Jesus saying, "For He came to save all through means of Himself—all, I say, who through Him are born again to God—infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men" (Against Heresies: Book II). Note that the ancient church both practiced infant baptism and taught baptismal regeneration. This was the standard practice and teaching throughout the early church. It was not until the 16th century, that "rebaptism" and "symbolic" baptism was brought into the Western church through various individuals in the Anabaptist movement who claimed to have had visions from Jesus who taught them not to baptize infants.

Tertullian (160-220) testifies to the common practice of infant baptism, but desires that it be postponed until later on in life. He is the only voice of in the ancient church that taught against the practice of infant baptism. His new practice for postponing baptism was based upon his new teaching that after one is baptized, there is no forgiveness of sin for those who commit a mortal sin. This new idea created a movement to postpone baptism until the "death bed." He writes saying, "And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children" (On Baptism).

Origen (185-254) testifies to the common practice of infant baptism in his commentary on Romans (See chapter 5:9). He writes, "For this also it was that the church had from the Apostles a tradition to give baptism even to infants. For they to whom the divine mysteries were committed knew that there is in all persons a natural pollution of sin which must be done away by water and the Spirit." Again, in his homily on Luke 14 he states, "Infants are to be baptized for the remission of sins."

Cyprian (215 – 258) testifies to the common practice of infant baptism and even disagrees with his teacher Tertullian. Cyprian reports on the recommendation of the Council of Carthage, of which he chaired, saying, "But in respect of the case of the infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, we all thought very differently in our council" (Epistle LVIII). In other words, the council felt that one should not wait until the eighth

day to baptize an infant. The sooner, the better.

You also made the claim that "The Bible gives no express instruction to baptize infants."

Well... ..the Bible gives no express instruction to baptize 2 year olds, 5 year olds, 12 year olds, 18 year olds, etc... The Bible does not forbid infants from being baptized.

The Bible also gives no express instruction to administer the Lord's Supper to women. Do you administer communion to women? Unlike circumcision which excluded women, there are no exclusions for baptism.

I would love to talk with you more about the Biblical practice of infant baptism and the Biblical doctrine of baptismal regeneration."

Rev. Brian L. Kachelmeier
Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church
Los Alamos, NM
Personal email, Feb. 8, 2015

"I'm sure the Los Alamos Monitor does not wish to begin or encourage theological debates, so I will avoid any such rebuttal to Pastor McCullough's column regarding baptism, 'Explaining differences in types of baptism'.

However, it might be wise for the Los Alamos Monitor to do some fact checking where it can in its religious columns.

Pastor McCullough's article immediately began with a factual error. A quick internet search will indicate that infant baptism was practiced in the church and was mentioned as such by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian and Origen, all of whom died well before the year 300.

Unless Pastor McCullough has a different definition of 'Middle Ages' than most people, his first sentence is incorrect. I will leave it to the reader to speculate about the cause of such an egregious error."

Drew Kornreich
Letter to the Editor *Los Alamos Monitor*, Feb. 10, 2015

"In reference to Pastor McCullough's "Religion" column of Feb. 6, he is mistaken when he claims that infant baptism has its roots in the Middle Ages.

We see how the apostles baptized entire families and households even in the early church (Acts 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; I Cor. 1:16), which can be assumed to have included children.

Also, as early as the late second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons spoke of the baptism of infants, as did St. Hippolytus of Rome (225 AD), Origen (244 AD), St Cyprian (251 AD), St. Augustine of Hippo (400 AD) and many others.

We Roman Catholics do believe that the completion of the grace of Christian initiation does require one's own profession of faith later in life, but God's grace is a gift, and we holders of infant baptism do not withhold the sacrament of baptism from even the earliest born.

And though majority of numbers does not guarantee truth, it is worth noting nonetheless that the vast majority of Christians—Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans/Episcopalians, Lutherans, etc.—practice infant baptism."

Rev. Glenn Jones
Pastor, Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church
Letter to the Editor, *Los Alamos Monitor*, Feb. 10, 2015

These responses came within a few short days of the publication of a 300-word essay addressing the difference between infant and believer's baptism. It is interesting to note several things:

Each correspondent strenuously rebutted the single statement that the practice "has its roots in the Middle Ages". Each marshaled quotes from their common playbook, an almost identical collection of ante-Nicene fathers and Augustine. This approach hazards the risky position of establishing the practice not in Scripture or sound theological argument but in tradition.

No correspondent appeared to possess a biblical argument he was willing to put forth. The unsubstantial argument from silence is no argument at all.

Perhaps most interesting is that these responses are not too subtle reflections of the conflict between the Wiedertäufer (Anabaptists) of 16th century Europe and the established churches (Catholic and Reformed). In January, 1525, in Zurich, Switzerland, students of Ulrich Zwingli, the Protestant pastor of the Grossmunster, rejected infant baptism for the practice of believer's baptism on the basis of their biblical studies. These men and many who followed them endured for the next 200-plus years what came to be the greatest Christian-on-Christian persecution in history. The Catholic and Reformed churches, large and powerful institutions in Europe that continually battled each other, were willing to join efforts to destroy families and execute believers on the basis of a disagreement regarding baptism.

III. BAPTISM AS A REQUIREMENT FOR MEMBERSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

A. Biblical Basis for the Requirement

Possibly Acts 2:38ff

Possibly the fact of Paul's letters to individual churches in which baptism is mentioned (I Cor. 1:13; Rom. 6: Gal. 3; et al)

The biblical basis for baptism as a requirement for membership in a local church is thin principally because we do not find in the New Testament a clear indication that baptism was a criterion for local church membership. Indeed, we do not find in the text a clear portrayal of membership as we understand membership today.

B. Questions Regarding the Requirement

1. Will not requiring this make us no longer a Baptist church?

Not requiring believer's baptism for membership does not automatically render us "not" a Baptist church. (Yes, that is a triple negative.)

Baptism as a prerequisite for membership is a tradition practiced by many, though by no means all, Baptist churches. We do not deny historic Baptist distinctives or our heritage and identity as a Baptist church by not requiring believer's baptism by immersion for membership.

An increasingly important task before is to understand what does make a church a Baptist-kind of church. Not all Baptist churches that remain Baptist churches require immersion baptism for membership.

“We practice immersion baptism but we do not require those from other churches to be re-baptized unless they feel the need to do so. Thus we have a number of members who came from Methodist, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic churches who have not been baptized by immersion. Our reasoning is that if baptism really is symbolic then we should leave that decision to the individual conscience.”

Edd Sewell, Glade Baptist Church, Blacksburg, VA, Feb. 15, 1995

2. How might the requirement affect our understanding of the power and purpose of baptism?

Because of the importance of preserving the significance of what baptism portrays, the church should resist making it a stand-alone rule. Indeed, demanding that one be baptized according to our expectations might provoke interest and study. It might also result in rule-keeping for the sake of the rule. We do not wish in this way to dilute the beautiful and powerful portrayal of Christ's passion and resurrection.

The initiatory purpose of baptism may be obscured and weakened by an excessive emphasis on baptism as method of defining and keeping track of local members. (WH)

3. Is there a danger that requiring baptism for membership could tend toward legalism?

We refer to baptism as one of the “ordinances” we practice. The word “ordinance” is a legal term (it does not appear in the Bible.) It does of course, connote obedience to a command and thus is certainly appropriate when used in reference to Jesus' command to baptize new disciples. (See *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 1963 edition, section VII.)

However, we cannot easily escape the appearance of legalism when we attach baptism as an ordinance (obedience to a command) to the list of requirements for church membership. The absence of a sound biblical instruction to establish this practice indicates that we may have added to membership in the Body of Christ's people a requirement of our own making.

Paul's strong warning concerning the dangers of legalism (Gal. 5:1-13) are sufficient to advise us against our tendencies to add to the gracious work of God in calling out His church. We do not wish to require more of a person to join our fellowship than Christ requires for one to be in His Kingdom.

We might here ask a corollary question. Why do we not guard the Lord's Supper with the same diligence as we do membership? Is it not an ordinance that requires

us to place protections around it? Do we risk violating or denaturing the memorial observance when we allow non-members to partake?

4. How does baptism as a requirement for membership relate to the priesthood of every believer?

Three deep convictions converge on this issue: the authority of Scripture, the significance of baptism in one's spiritual journey, and the priesthood of every believer (or, to use Baptist parlance, the competency of the soul before God.)

We find here the roots of a logical inconsistency between the rule we have set up and the competency of the soul before God. Ecclesial intervention in this case—specifically, requiring baptism for membership—may well be in conflict with our belief in soul competency.

Baptism should be dealt with by each believer as led by the Holy Spirit and in light of the Scripture. Believer's baptism for new members who are already professing, practicing Christians but who come from a different tradition is a personal decision made according to conscience constrained by the teachings of Scripture and the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

“You know that I have a strong preference for baptism by immersion for every believer...However, I am impressed by your emphasis that baptism is an act of obedience to Christ, not the church, and that it relates one to Christ, not to the church.... I also like your statement that baptism should be a personal decision, something each believer voluntarily elects. Your statement that a traditional Baptist church sets higher membership standards than God sets for entry into the Kingdom sounded familiar—it is precisely the same emphasis that John Bunyan made in 1660 in his debate with William Kiffin.”

H. Leon McBeth, Distinguished Professor of Church History, SWBTS, in a personal letter, Aug. 22, 1995

5. Should the ancient and respected practice of baptism be an impediment to fellowship, service, ministry, and full participation in the Body of Christ?

Baptism should not be the source of a difficult dilemma for believers. As in so many other areas of our life and faith, we believe the individual should come to the point in his/her life where the act is most meaningful and not reduced simply to rote obedience to our rules.

This is not about making it easier to be a member and thus relaxing the importance of commitment and service. It demands that membership be taken more seriously and the expectations defined more clearly.

6. Does baptism as a requirement for membership guarantee a regenerate and committed church membership?

Baptism does not guarantee that a believer will be obedient to Christ in other areas of life. Being baptized does not assure that an individual will demonstrate

genuine commitment to Christ and consistently participate in the life of the church. Indeed, baptism does not even guarantee a regenerate soul. Requiring baptism for membership does not prevent individuals with devious or disingenuous motives from joining the church.

“The problem of believer’s baptism as necessary for local church membership is not nearly so bad as the problem of those who have been baptized into church membership and from whom you never hear again. Let the people serve who have not been baptized but let them know that baptism is a mark of obedience and because Jesus was baptized is certainly scriptural. It is a beautiful and humbling experience—the picture baptism presents....”

Howard Reynolds, former pastor of FBC, LA and founding pastor of WRBC in a personal note, Dec. 14, 1994.

On the other hand, not being baptized does not disqualify one from serving in God's kingdom. There are unbaptized "friends" of the church (those who were baptized as infants or baptized in another Christian fellowship that defines the nature, mode, and/or import of baptism differently from us) whose lives and service show their sincere and genuine commitment to the Lord and to the church. We do not question their commitment solely on the basis of their baptism. We may find many of them to be more committed than some of our baptized members.

These fellow Christ-followers should be welcomed into the fellowship of the congregation with all the rights and privileges of membership.

C. Why is this an issue in the contemporary local church?

The contemporary church exists in a world in which change is a constant. The passing of time, cultural trends, and generational shifts impose changes whether we welcome them or not. We will not be what we were or are for very long. It is not a matter of whether or not we change, it is a matter of when and how.

The American church is in a time of significant flux. It is encumbered with a wide range of competing claims for loyalties and resources. Denominations which held sway in the 19th and 20th centuries are floundering, seeking reasons to justify their existence. Traditions we have held dear are continually coming into question.

Cultural shifts lead to a greater mix of church traditions in a given congregation. People are inclined to seek a church in which they want to invest based not on denominational definitions but on the value of the church.

These inexorable winds of change make demands on us. We must be willing to examine practices and traditions to see if they have solid biblical footing and be ready to adjust as needed in order to speak to generations to come. At the same

time, we must be on guard, resisting the impulse to make expeditious changes that might undermine the core truths of our faith.

IV. A PRACTICAL RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION OF REQUIREMENT FOR MEMBERSHIP

A. Recognize that the issue is bigger than baptism.

It is a test to see if we can handle a tough, emotion laden issue where there is honest disagreement and demonstrate our ability to reach a resolution in a healthy, constructive, God-honoring manner and come out friends on the other side.

We can make this church the place where it is safe to express opinions and to ask questions. We can explore hard questions without threat of being attacked or dismissive treatment.

We are confident enough in each other and in our faith to take an honest look at any treasured tradition that has nurtured us and provided a predictable structure for living out faith. In the process, we can listen to each other carefully, avoiding heated rhetoric and threats of leaving if it does not go our way. We study hard, pray hard, and exercise humility and grace.

We can build credibility and legitimacy in the institution by continually being in the process of self-examination as a church, being genuinely honest with the Scripture, and being open to new things God is seeking to do with us. This process requires long-term commitment, effort, and vigilance.

B. Teach diligently all the Bible says about baptism.

Classes, sermons, printed materials, and electronic sources should all be utilized for this purpose.

Every believer should be encouraged to study the issue, pray through it, and come to his own conclusion. This approach has the potential for heightening the meaning and value of baptism for both the individual and for the congregation.

C. Affirm believer's baptism

Our belief in believer's baptism by immersion is not in question. We teach, encourage, and practice believer's baptism by immersion. We will encourage new believers to be baptized. We teach our children the importance of this New Testament practice. We encourage believers from other Christian traditions that practice baptism differently and for different reasons to study the Scripture and consider believer's baptism.

D. Trust the Body

Keep people informed and give them ample opportunity to speak freely. Promote open, honest, humble dialogue. No one person or group exercises power over the congregation—we are Baptists, after all! Trust the people to make right decisions.

Unity in the Spirit and persuasion are preferable to enforced uniformity and coercion. Keep the focus on what unites us, always pointing people to Jesus. Let's show each other and the world our goal is to be a source of blessing, a unique people bent on extending the Kingdom of the Living God, walking in wisdom.

The church doesn't need a lot of rules, but it does need some carefully thought-through, agreed-upon guidelines for doing business, making corporate decisions, and identifying members who are committed to the church and have its best interests at heart.

E. Address the questions surrounding baptism

1. What does our church do with infants and their families?

We separate “baby dedication” from the act of baptism. “Baby dedication” is a ceremony in which parents promise to bring their child up in the faith and in the church. At the same time, the congregation promises to provide support and nurturing. This act does not involve a baptism of the baby.

This act does imply that we take seriously the task of rearing children in the faith and supporting families in this process. We encourage children to wait until they are old enough to choose forgiveness of sin, to express faith in Christ publicly, and to demonstrate some understanding of the meaning of baptism before they are baptized.

2. What should I do if I accepted Christ in the past but was not baptized at that time?

This is a matter of conscience for you. You should seek guidance from the Scripture and from the Spirit for direction.

You should not put off being baptized simply because you are older or that you fear that to be baptized now might be embarrassing. The more important issues at hand include deciding how best to be obedient to Christ and determining what important step(s) in your personal spiritual pilgrimage need to be taken. Where you are and what you need to do are between you and the Lord—the Body of Christ stands by to support and encourage you in the journey.

3. What should I do if I made a responsible, personal confession of faith in Christ and received a believer's baptism but the mode was not immersion?

The practices of sprinkling or ablution are seen in some Christian traditions to be consistent with biblical believer's baptism. Our own history shows that modes of baptism have varied from time to time, location to location, and church to church.

To insist that you be immersed at this point in your spiritual journey is to indeed practice “re-baptism”. We do not have good biblical ground upon which to denounce or dismiss your personal experience. We have good reason to welcome you into the fellowship based upon your personal, public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as the resurrected Son of God and your desire to be a committed follower and faithful servant in, through, and to His church.

4. What should I do if I was baptized as an infant?

This church requires members to have been baptized in the way Jesus demonstrated. We contend that believer’s baptism (a free choice) by immersion (an eloquent expression of the core doctrine of the Christian faith; i.e., the death and burial of the old self and resurrection to being a new creation in Christ) is consistent with Scripture and an important part of the spiritual journey of every believer.

The difficulty generally occurs when persons, who were baptized as infants and/or who grew up in a tradition which affirms that infant baptism is a fulfillment of biblical teaching, perceive the membership requirement as a denial of the value of their infant baptism or as a legalistic demand which adds to saving faith.

This is the point at which we have to recognize the tension between what we understand to be an important requirement for church membership; i.e., a standard that we have decided at some point in our history is necessary for all members, over against our firm position regarding priesthood of every believer and freedom of conscience, and the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding individuals in the decision making process.

Several aspects of this question should be considered as you seek guidance on the issue:

- a. The matter is one of conscience. You should choose what is right for you in light of all that the Bible teaches on the subject.
- b. The tradition from which you come or in which you grew up is not demeaned or diminished by this requirement. You should take from your heritage that which is of value to your personal Christian walk and treasure it. No one in this church will deny the value of your Christian heritage.
- c. Understand the difference between the two baptisms (infant and believer’s.) One was done to and for you. The other is one you choose for yourself in order to follow what Christ taught and in order to identify with this body of believers. Believer’s baptism is not a “re-baptism” because it is not a repeat of what was done to you as an infant.
- d. When considering baptism, reflect on the meaning of the act and the celebration and joy that accompany it. Baptism is not a perfunctory demand or oppressive, legalistic burden. To see it as such and to enter into it with a sense of reluctant duty is to make a mockery of it as well as the deep beliefs that underlie it.

F. Affirm the importance of vital church membership.

Whether or not baptism is a requirement for membership, a greater emphasis should be put on what it means to be a responsible, vital member of the local church. Church membership should include public confession of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and commitment to and engagement in the life and work of the church. We should take seriously the personal spiritual growth of every believer in the context of the Body of Christ. Baptism is an important of a believer's spiritual journey.

Following is one approach to developing strong church members:

1. UNDERSTAND WHY IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IMPORTANT

Every organization that takes itself seriously has an understanding of the importance of membership. We are no different in this regard.

We understand that members usually bring with them commitment, investment, and a deep concern for the well-being of the church. This has implications for enabling our church to cultivate a vital presence in our community and for developing the next generation of committed, involved Christians who understand the importance of the local church.

Membership is implicit in a local, autonomous body of believers. It fulfills psychological/emotional, spiritual, ethical, and practical purposes.

Psychologically, membership provides an individual with a sense of identity. Membership identifies a believer with a particular community of followers of Christ who share like beliefs and practices. Identity and community are fundamental human needs.

Emotionally, membership provides a person with a crucial sense of belonging to something of value, an entity with both local and worldwide significance with eternal implications! In a very real sense, one is a member of an earthly, temporal expression of the heavenly, eternal kingdom of God. Thus membership speaks to the fundamental search for meaning in life.

Spiritually, membership allows a believer to profess personal faith and to demonstrate the desire for spiritual growth in the context of other Christ-followers. It not only provides opportunities for Christian maturing—it strongly encourages the member to be involved in this life-long process.

Ethically, membership implies the learning of and practice of Christian character. Scriptures such as Exodus 20, Matthew 5:1-12, and Galatians 5:22-23 provide insight into the kind of character that is taught and promoted among members of the Body. Both accountability to and responsibility for others is inherent in church membership.

Practically speaking, membership gives the individual a say (a vote) in the decision making process of the church. Membership, as in any organization, implies a commitment to the healthy and effective functioning of the organization and facilitates the conducting of the business of the church in a decent and orderly manner.

2. KNOW WHAT IS REQUIRED OF A CHURCH MEMBER

The member of the White Rock Baptist Church should...

...Be committed to the stated purpose of the church:

“The White Rock Baptist Church is a community of believers bound together by faith in Jesus Christ that exists to worship God through Jesus Christ, to teach biblical truths, to nurture Christian relationships, and to reach the world with the Gospel of Christ.” (Bylaws, Art. I.1)

...Affirm the basic beliefs of our faith:

- Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God, Savior of mankind and Lord over all.
- Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.
- The Bible is inspired, authoritative and trustworthy, the objective standard for faith and ethics.
- The local church, under the Lordship of Christ, is locally owned and operated.
- Baptism by immersion is a symbolic statement of the believer’s faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.
- Every believer in Christ is free and responsible: free to follow his conscience in matters of faith and worship, and responsible for his actions, both to God and to the Body of Christ.

3. BECOME A MEMBER

The following is not necessarily easy nor is it a legalistic set of demands designed to make membership difficult. Rather, it is a means of taking membership seriously. We believe that membership indicates commitment, a response to the consumer mentality of many American Christians.

This process provides the individual who desires to become part of this congregation in a formal sense an opportunity to learn more about what this church is, to decide if indeed he/she wishes to become a committed, invested member, and to establish a means by which that may take place effectively and successfully.

Our goal: That we *“speaking the truth in love...grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”* (Eph. 4:15-16)

1. Invest some time with the church and learn about it.

- Attend worship services regularly.
- Make some time to visit with a pastor or deacon.
- Get to know one or more current members who will walk alongside you to help you find your way around.
- Participate in a “Foundations” class. The purpose of this course is to provide an understanding of our church, what we believe, and how we function.
- Demonstrate an interest in the church. Explore becoming engaged with some aspect of its life and work.

2. Be prepared to publicly state one’s faith and desire to join.

- Publicly express a desire to join the church. This action would generally be done on a Sunday morning when most of the congregation is gathered.
- Be willing to profess faith in Jesus Christ before the congregation.

3. Formally become a member.

- A member is one who confesses Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord, has presented himself for membership, and has been accepted as a member at a congregational meeting.
- An individual becomes a member of this church by publicly expressing agreement with the basic biblical Christian beliefs of this church and expressing the desire to participate in the life and work of the Church. (Revised Bylaw, Art. II.1.1, 2)
- A vote at a business meeting is taken, with a current member voicing personal support for approving the membership request.

4. WHAT A NEW MEMBER DOES NEXT

Get connected.

- A new member should be connected to a LIFE group or other small group as soon as possible.

Continue in the Christian Journey

- Develop your practice of the spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, Bible study, and regular tithing;
- If you have not received believer's baptism, you should undertake a study of the biblical teaching on this topic and consider prayerfully how the Spirit is leading you.
- Find a ministry or place of service and get involved.
- Continue to learn: take advantage of the variety of courses offered that are designed to enhance Christian growth.

Addendum: On the Mode of Baptism

In the New Testament, more emphasis is given to the meaning than to the mode.

The oldest mode is like submersion. Certainly it was so in ancient Judaism. The use of complete immersion baptism in Judaism was to demonstrate complete conversion and cleansing.

Philip and the Eunuch (Acts 8): the first example of a second person in the water (after John's baptism)

End of the first century: baptism is conducted in the three names of the Trinity.

Two important documents show a shift in the post-biblical era:

3rd century: Origen argued for original sin in infants; he believed they inherited guilt and damnation. Infant baptism arose as a means to address infant guilt.

4th century: John Chrysostom taught infant innocence but argued for infant baptism.

The Latin tradition:

Tertullian: infants are born in innocence. They go forth into the world of guilt at the age of discretion or accountability. Therefore he opposed infant baptism (more sin would occur after baptism so best wait until the last minute.)

5th century: Augustine developed further the doctrine of inherited guilt worthy of damnation. He tried to soften this doctrine with the idea of limbo. The guilty infants doctrine has held on for centuries. Because of high infant mortality rates, people did not want to take a chance with their babies. Infant baptism as a means of protecting them from damnation took a deep hold.

Mass baptism: on Christmas Day, 496 AD, Clovis baptized 3,000 soldiers by sprinkling them as they waded through the river which had been blessed upstream by priests.

Immersion baptism was practiced until the 13th century. Baptisteries may be found in many 12th, 13th, and 14th century cathedrals. Aquinas argued that since intelligence is in the head, it would be just as good to pour water on the head three times as to do immersion. Pouring was used for “clinical” (bed ridden patients) even though it was seen as a secondary form.

The Reformation

Luther defended immersion. He said, “Purge something entirely, so as to cover it.” Lutherans did not follow him in this.

Calvin: children born to believers are saved according to the covenant. Infants should be baptized because they are saved already. Immersion is best but should be adapted to the climate.

Anglican:

The Church of England early retained the ancient traditions, dipping over pouring. The church did not stay with this practice.

Anabaptists: in 1525, they rejected infant baptism in favor of believer’s baptism based on their study of Scripture.

Grebel, Manz, Hubmaier, Sattler, et. al, taught baptism but practiced pouring early on.

16th century: the Westminster assembly debated sprinkling versus immersion. Immersion lost by a vote of 25-24. The Methodists and Presbyterians followed the Westminster Confession.

1600s: Baptists (called so by detractors who used this nickname in a condescending way; they were give this name because of their concern for the proper practice of baptism)

practiced immersion of believers in the name of the Holy Trinity. Their sometimes close association with Presbyterians did not change this.

1755: John Wesley preferred immersion baptism. The baptism of infants by sprinkling continued to develop in rejection of Anabaptism practice.

12/24/1787: Baptism was described as “forward” immersion. Robinson died before a division between “backward” and “forward” Baptists could arise!

19th century: The Campbellite controversy

Landmarkism (J. R. Graves) was in response to Alexander Campbell. Graves described “Baptist baptism only”. This baptism was demanded using the proper mode (immersion), with the proper subject (a new believer), and the proper administrator (one authorized by the local church, typically an ordained pastor). Any other kind of baptism is “alien immersion”.

In the 19th-20th centuries:

Preparation for baptism became important:

More attention to understanding of salvation and discipleship.

Parents of prospective candidates were spoken with as were the children.

A baby dedication was held to prepare families/parents for leading their children to salvation and subsequent baptism.

Moody: “The New Testament idea is not to dip’em and then drop’em.”

A pre-baptism Baptist catechism was widely used in the 19th century.

Confession of faith a part of the service.

Use of white robe to symbolize new life in Christ.

There is little help in the New Testament regarding the administrator.

Tertullian: any baptized believer could be an administrator.

Landmark position is too rigid: no church like the Jerusalem church exists.

Immersion is the norm but there should be flexibility in secondary matters.