

Conversations for Change

Article Six:

Should Baptism be a Fence to Communion?

What is the place of baptism in the New Covenant community known as the church of God? As we shape our future and our identity as a fellowship, the answer to this question is crucial. Let me begin by spelling out the traditional view of the most conservative Baptists.

Good Logic – Baptism

Any good Baptist knows the logic here:

- Baptism is the sign placed upon every member of the New Covenant community just as circumcision was the sign placed upon every member of the Old Covenant community.
- Entrance into the New Covenant community is acknowledged by the sign.
- Thus, baptism is required for entrance into the church (membership).
- Without baptism, we have no way of acknowledging you as a believer.

The logic is solid and seemingly air-tight. When you couple this logic with the clear NT teaching that the NC community is made up of believers only, then you have “believer’s baptism” as the sign upon every member of the NC community. They have even taken the logic one step further.

Good Logic – Lord’s Supper

- The Lord’s Supper is the activity of the church whereby we celebrate our participation in the death / resurrection of Christ. It is the ceremony and symbol of our unity.
- Discipline and ex-communication involve the withholding from rebellious and unrepentant sinners the very fellowship and communion symbolized in the meal.
- Therefore, the circle of communion should be commensurate to the circle of discipline.
- Only those who can be disciplined should be offered the meal. Thus the meal should be for members only.

Problems

At this point there is a little flexibility. Whether you regard the members in a formal or informal way doesn’t matter, the net result is the same. You have individuals who are regarded as “in” and those regarded as “out.”

If you follow the formal membership notion, then the Lord’s Supper is for each individual who has taken your classes, demonstrated faith and baptism and signed the particular membership covenant tailored to your congregation. Nonetheless, it is still conceivable that real believers are left attending your church as non-members. Should they be allowed to come to the Table? If you say, “Yes” then you have an inconsistency

with the way you will carry out discipline. How will you allow the individual to take the Table when you have no real authority for withholding it in church discipline?

If you follow the informal membership notion, then the Lord's Supper is for all believers. And since you believe that baptism is the sign put upon every NC member, you regard baptism as the only bar to the table. You regard the Supper as being offered to all members of the NC community who bear the sign of baptism. Nonetheless, it is still conceivable that real believers are left attending your church as "non-members." That is to say, they are true believers but not able to be recognized as such because they have yet to be baptized as believers. I am speaking of the few Presbyterian or Lutheran believers who may be attending your particular fellowship.

Good Logic – False Premise

Here is where the rub really exists. Is the premise stated above really true? Is baptism the biblical sign of acknowledging a true believer? Must I regard every man an unbeliever until the time of his baptism? Must we hand out baptism identification cards to be carried about by all those members of the NC community?

If I want to acknowledge a brother or sister in the Lord, where do I look? To their baptism alone? No. The answer is to their faith that results in a changed life (James 2:14-22). Is baptism, then, a higher command than any other command enjoined on a believer? That is, must a person obey that command before he or she can obey any of the others? Is it really first in order? Can we prohibit a true believer from obeying the commands related to participation in the Table simply because they have not yet obeyed the command for baptism? I don't think that this is the right way to think about this issue. It seems to me that baptism is no different from any other command in Scripture that is enjoined on any and every believer.¹

Proper Perspective

I believe, we would be unbalanced if we refused to allow a believer to obey one command simply because he had not yet obeyed another. We need to be careful so that in our protection of baptism, we do not minimize the Lord's Supper. There is still unity between the Baptist and the Presbyterian as far as the Gospel is concerned.

Paul indicates that there is a difference between the "gospel" and baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:17. He wrote to the divided church where some were following Apollos, others followed Cephas, some followed Paul and a few claimed to follow Christ – the smug ones! Paul demonstrates that no believer is baptized in the name of Apollos, Cephas or Paul; but all are baptized in the name of Christ. In fact, Paul is glad that he did not baptize many; he names a few exceptions. But then he lays down this statement: "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel..." He seems to indicate a distinction between baptism and the gospel. Baptism is not the gospel.

¹ Of course I am not speaking here of an individual who refuses to be baptized even though he believes that the Scriptures clearly command baptism subsequent to placing one's faith in Christ. He would be subject to church discipline just as anyone would if he violated any other command or refused to follow any other command and persisted doing so without repenting. I am speaking of an individual who has been misled and wrongly taught from Scripture regarding baptism. For such people, while they are genuine believers, they need to be taught and given light on the subject of baptism. Should we not bear patiently with them?

This seems to imply that while we seek to guard the good deposit of the gospel (2 Tim 1:14), and while we earnestly contend for the gospel (Jude 3), we do not do so with baptism. In other words, baptism is not made by Paul to be a test of fellowship or a means of separation. But when we make baptism the only visible sign upon NC community members, we are indeed making it to be a divisive element on par with the very gospel itself.

Furthermore, while the logic of the syllogism above might be valid it is not true. In the syllogism above I wrote: “Baptism is a sign placed upon every member of the NC community *just as* circumcision was the sign placed upon every member of the OC community. Baptism is not “just like” circumcision under the Old Covenant. The reality of which circumcision is a shadow or a picture is not water baptism it is the work of regeneration. Circumcision made with hands is contrasted by Paul to a circumcision not made with hands. The replacement is not water baptism but a work of the Spirit that transforms a heart.

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. (Romans 2:28-29, ESV)

Notice how Paul contrasts the uncircumcision of the flesh with the work of regeneration in Colossians 2:13:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.,

The circumcision came by a work of the Spirit whereby we were “made alive” and “forgiven.” This is the ministry we call “regeneration.” This is what Paul calls the “putting off the flesh” in Col. 2:11:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.

Circumcision of the flesh, done by a work of the hands, was indeed the sign that a person was a member of the OC community under Moses. The reality to which that physical act pointed was not to be replaced by another picture (water baptism) but to a substantive work in the heart known as regeneration. What each person under the OC needed was not water baptism but a work of God on the heart. So Moses urged the people to “circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn” (Deut. 10:16).

So when it comes to fencing the table of the Lord’s Supper, 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 indicates that the cup that we bless and the bread that we break are a “participation in the blood of Christ” and a “participation in the body of Christ.” Therefore, all those who do indeed participate in the blood and body of Christ should be allowed to partake of the cup and the bread.

Go Further

Just for fun, let’s go further. What makes baptism an ordinance? There is no passage in Scripture that places baptism as an activity reserved for the church-gathered? In fact,

quite to the contrary, there are several accounts where baptisms took place in private with no congregation present (cf. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:34f; or the household baptism of the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:25f). In this way, then, baptism is different from the Lord's Supper. Baptism is a testimony; that is true. But the testimony is not so much directed toward the congregation as much as it is directed toward God by the individual convert. Peter calls baptism an "appeal" made by a recent convert toward God that he has a clear conscience (1 Peter 3:21). That a congregation be present or not is a matter of freedom, not command.

Please, please, please, do not think that I am saying baptism is unimportant! I am not suggesting that we minimize the role of baptism for new converts. Far from it, baptism is an appeal made to God that we have a clear conscience. If there is a so-called convert who refuses to be baptized, he is demonstrating that he does not yet have a clear conscience before God. I am suggesting that we minimize the role that baptism plays for the gathered saints. I am saying that baptism should not be a requirement for fellowship, membership or participation in the Lord's Supper.

Going Too Far

Perhaps, the Baptists have gone too far. What does it mean to be a "**B**aptist" Church? It mainly means three things:

1. Hold to two ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper)
2. Require baptism for membership
3. Require baptism for the Lord's Supper

To be a truly consistent Baptist church means that baptism has to become a test of fellowship. It seems to me that Baptists have gone too far in this regard. I no longer think it is to be regarded as a test for fellowship. Baptism is not part of the gospel. Instead, baptism belongs in the category of the church's evangelism. Make disciples by means of converting them, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus said (Matthew 28:19-20).