

Baptism as a Prerequisite to the Lord's Supper

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Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. *Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.*

The Baptist Faith & Message [2000], emphasis mine

Most of the major branches of the Christian tradition believe in the importance of observing baptism and the Lord's Supper. Roman Catholics believe in seven sacraments, each of which serves as a means of imparting divine grace to the believer. Most Protestant traditions shorten the number to two, baptism and the Lord's Supper. While many Protestant denominations also refer to these practices as sacraments, most Baptist churches prefer to call them “ordinances,” emphasizing Christ's command that each be an ongoing practice in local churches. This also helps avoid the Catholic error of making participation in the ordinances a necessary element in one's salvation.

Baptist churches have always been known for their serious commitment to the doctrine and practices of the church. In fact, many have argued that the major difference between Baptists and the great Reformation traditions is the Baptist emphasis on a believers' church versus a “territorial” church or “tribal” church.¹ Because of this emphasis on maintaining a regenerate (born-again) church membership, Baptists normally take very seriously such issues as church polity, mission and evangelism, personal discipleship and church discipline. The doctrine of a believers' church is also the reason Baptists often emphasize the ordinances. Of the two, Baptists are undoubtedly best known for their defense of credobaptism, or the idea that only those who have been born again and can make a credible profession of faith should be baptized by total immersion in water. But as central as baptism is to the Baptist vision of Christianity, the Lord's Supper has also often played an important role in Baptist church practice.

As the two ordinances of the New Testament, it should not be surprising that baptism and the Lord's Supper are related to each other, both in meaning and in practice. In fact, you cannot separate the ordinances from each other without significantly altering their meaning. This paper will show the interrelationship between the two ordinances, both theologically and practically. First, I will offer a brief introduction to each individual ordinance. Second, I will argue that the

¹By “territorial” church, I mean those traditions that believe all the people born within a specific geographic area are members of the same church. This was common during the medieval era, and is still common in some European countries. By “tribal” church, I mean those traditions that believe that someone can be a church member by virtue of being born into a Christian family. This belief is common in many paedobaptist churches, or those churches that consider the sprinkling of infants to be a valid baptismal practice.

meaning and significance of each ordinance cannot be properly maintained unless baptism is understood as being prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper. Third, I will demonstrate the validity of this position based upon both New Testament teaching and Baptist history. Finally, I will address objections to this position on the ordinances. It is my fervent hope that this paper will help Southern Baptist pastors and other church leaders to practice the ordinances in a consistently biblical, Baptist manner.

I. Baptism in the New Testament

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament should make it clear that baptism was an important practice in the early church. In fact, the Bible seems to emphasize several aspects of the early church's baptismal theology and practice. Thomas White divides these baptismal characteristics into six categories: subject, mode, meaning, church, administrator and formula.² The proper subject of baptism is someone who has repented of his sins and exercised faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This means non-Christians and infants in Christian families are not proper baptismal candidates; the former rejects faith in Christ and the latter is still unable to make a voluntary faith decision. The proper mode of baptism is immersion, or the submerging of the believer entirely under water. In fact, the Greek word *baptizo* is literally translated "to dip" or "to immerse."³ This means that both sprinkling and pouring are inappropriate modes of baptism. Proper baptism must be performed under the auspices of a true church, and the proper administrator of baptism is a representative of a local church.⁴ This means that immersions performed in false churches are not valid, as are immersions performed unconnected to any local congregation. The proper formula for baptism is Trinitarian immersion in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, though Acts 2:38 seems to indicate that immersion in the name of Jesus is also a valid formula.

Most germane to our present discussion is the proper meaning of baptism. New Testament immersion is understood to represent several different realities about the believer and his relationship to the church. First, baptism represents the Christian's initiation into the church. Acts 2:41–47 records that those who responded to Peter's Pentecost sermon with faith in Christ were subsequently baptized. It was only after this baptism that the new converts "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42)."⁵ Second, baptism represents the believer's purification from sin. In Acts 22:16, Paul claims that following his Damascus Road conversion Ananias asked him, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." Most scholars agree that Ananias was not claiming that the act of immersion physically washes away sin, but that it *symbolizes* cleansing from sin, which actually occurs at the moment of regeneration.⁶

²Thomas White, "[What Makes Baptism Valid?](#)" (Fort Worth: Center for Theological Research, 2006). Available online at www.BaptistTheology.org.

³See Gerhard Kittel, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), s.v. *bapto, baptizo*.

⁴For a helpful discussion of the marks of a true church, see White, "[What Makes Baptism Valid?,"](#) pp. 6–8. For a fuller treatment of the subject, see John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), pp. 51–76.

⁵All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

Most significantly, baptism symbolizes the new believer's union with Christ. Specifically, we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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 6:3–4).

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, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:11–12).

Baptism represents what happens to a Christian when he believes in Christ: his sins, which Christ paid for on the cross, are forgiven, while Christ's righteousness, evidenced by his life of perfect obedience to God's law, is credited to the believer.⁷ The Christian has died to his old life of sin and been resurrected to new, eternal life in Christ. This vivid symbolizing of death and resurrection is lost when sprinkling or pouring is substituted for immersion. Only the immersing of actual believers fully captures the proper meaning of the spiritual reality of what happens to an individual when he is born again.

II. The Lord's Supper in the New Testament

Just as baptism was important to the life of the New Testament church, so also the Lord's Supper played an important role in first-century congregations. The Lord's Supper is called by many names in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, the ordinance is called "communion." In 1 Corinthians 10:21, the ordinance is referred to as the "Lord's Table." Acts 2:42 and 20:7 use the terminology of "the breaking of bread" to describe the ordinance. Though the name is not found in the New Testament, many Protestant traditions also refer to the ordinance as the "Eucharist," from the Greek word *eucharistia* (meaning "thanksgiving"), recognizing that thankfulness was emphasized in the accounts of the Last Supper found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Though the New Testament seems to indicate that communion was observed regularly, there is no specific command as to its frequency.

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is rich with symbolism. First, communion represents ongoing spiritual growth, or sanctification. This is evidenced by the fact that this ordinance is not a one-time practice (like baptism) and that the elements of unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine represent nourishment and refreshment.⁸ Second, communion represents the unity of the church. Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." Third, notice also that these verses indicate that communion, like baptism, represents our union with Christ. But whereas baptism represents our initial union with Christ at

⁶For the connection between washing and regeneration, see Acts 15:9, 1 Corinthians 6:11 and Titus 3:5.

⁷See Romans 3:21–26, 5:12–21, 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13.

⁸See Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, p. 282.

conversion, the Lord's Supper represents our ongoing identity with the Savior as his committed followers.

Fourth, the Lord's Table represents accountability within the church, both personally and corporately. 1 Corinthians 11:28 warns that personal examination should precede participating in the ordinance—the personal dimension. Paul notes in the next verse, “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself (1 Corinthians 11:29).” Many scholars believe that the term “body” is not referring to the individual but rather the entire congregation—the corporate dimension.⁹ Many also believe that the references not to eat with individuals under church discipline exhort churches not to allow a flagrant, unrepentant sinner to participate in communion.¹⁰ Fifth, communion represents the missionary spirit of the church. 1 Corinthians 11:26 says, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” The very act of communion is itself gospel proclamation. Finally, the Table looks in anticipation toward the end of the age and the coming marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6–9). This anticipation goes hand in hand with the missionary aspects of the ordinance; it is a reminder to preach the gospel to all nations, playing our part in the winning of that “great multitude” that will participate in the coming eschatological feast.

There is some debate about what is the best understanding of the ordinance. Most Baptists have historically held a “memorial view” of the Lord's Supper, recalling Jesus' command that the ordinance be observed “in remembrance of me.”¹¹ Here Baptists follow the practice of the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli and their close cousins in the Free Church tradition, the Anabaptists. The memorial view focuses on thanksgiving for the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and expectation of the marriage supper of the Lamb in the coming Kingdom of God. In contrast to the memorial view, some Baptists hold to a view of the “spiritual presence” of Christ in communion, following the Genevan reformer John Calvin. The spiritual view contends that, when the church observes communion, Christ is uniquely present in their midst through the person of the Holy Spirit. This presence is spiritual and is not to be confused with the “real presence” espoused by Roman Catholics and some Anglicans and Lutherans, who claim that Christ is actually present (albeit mysteriously and miraculously) in the bread and wine of communion. Whether one holds to a memorial or spiritual view of the Table, most Baptists agree that the Lord's Supper should be observed until the return of Christ and that the above-mentioned themes of unity, spiritual growth, accountability and proclamation should each be emphasized during participation in the ordinance.¹²

⁹See Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 563–564; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), p. 200.

¹⁰For example, see 1 Corinthians 5:11.

¹¹Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), p. 81.

¹²The “spiritual presence” understanding of the Lord's Supper is especially common among some moderate Southern Baptists and in the Reformed Baptist tradition. For a discussion of this view from a moderate perspective, see John M. Finley, “Worship Culminates in the Lord's Supper,” in *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Charles W. DeWeese (Nashville: Providence House, 1996), pp. 114–115. John Hammett notes that while the theologically Reformed *Second London Confession* seems to indicate a “spiritual presence” understanding, “this view is somewhat unusual in Baptist life.” See Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, p. 281.

III. The Case for Consistent Communion

Throughout their history, Baptists have spent a great deal of time and energy debating who can properly participate in the Lord's Supper. Most Baptists and other Free Church Christians believe that communion is for professing Christians, and hence it is inappropriate for non-Christians to partake of the elements. Where many Baptists have often been controversial is in their insistence that only those Christians who have been properly baptized can participate in the Lord's Supper. This means that Christians who have never undergone any type of baptismal ceremony, those who consider their previous sprinkling or pouring to be a valid baptism and those whose immersion was performed in a church whose understanding of the ordinance confuses or redefines the gospel (for instance churches that hold to a form of baptismal regeneration) cannot participate in the Lord's Supper. This conviction has led to no small disagreement between Baptists and other denominations. This practice of requiring immersion before communion has been variously referred to as "close," "closed," "restricted" or "strict" communion. Because all of these terms communicate the practice negatively—and Baptists certainly do not like to think of following biblical precedent as a negative act—I have opted to normally refer to this practice more positively as "consistent communion."

Before looking at the biblical and historical cases for consistent communion, it is important to stop and consider several issues. First, the argument against consistent communion is not a rejection of the practice of requiring baptism before communion *per se*. The fact is almost all Christian traditions require baptism before one can participate in the Lord's Supper. The quarrel does not concern the practice itself, but concerns the fact that Baptists do not recognize sprinkling, pouring or even some biblically-irregular immersions as valid. The difference is not in the practice of restricting communion to the baptized, but in not recognizing other modes of baptism as biblical.

Second, it is true that Baptists have never universally practiced consistent communion. There have always been some Baptists who believe that it is inappropriate and unloving to not invite all Christians to the Table, regardless of their baptism. The practice of inviting all Christians to the Lord's Supper is called open communion. I am in no way claiming that consistent communion is a universal practice; quite the opposite. What I am claiming is that consistent communion has been the majority practice in Baptist history. I am also claiming that consistent communion is the most biblical pattern and this is why the practice is in continuity with the practice of most Baptists during the last 400 years.

Third, it is true that many contemporary Baptists have moved away from consistent communion. This is true even in the Southern Baptist Convention, where consistent communion was virtually universal until recent years and continues to be explicitly advocated in the denomination's confession of faith, *The Baptist Faith and Message*. We can attribute this move toward open communion to a variety of causes. Among moderate/liberal Baptists, consistent communion is rejected out of a desire to be ecumenical. Many moderates also claim that consistent communion is associated with Landmarkism, a view of Baptist life that refuses to recognize non-baptistic churches as true churches. Many Reformed Baptists reject consistent communion out of a desire to allow other Reformed Christians (most of whom are Pedobaptists) to participate in the ordinance. Those who follow this line of argument note that the *Second London Confession* (1677, revised 1689), the most influential Reformed Baptist confession, does not advocate consistent communion. This claim will be discussed below. Conservative Southern Baptists sometimes reject consistent communion because of a desire to be welcoming to other

Christians who are visiting their church. It seems likely that many others practice open communion out of either theological ignorance or methodological laziness. Churches reject consistent communion for many reasons, but we will see below that a rejection of consistent communion is a rejection of both biblical precedent and historic Baptist practice.

The Biblical-Theological Argument

We are now ready to look at consistent communion from the standpoints of both New Testament practice and Baptist history. There are many indications that New Testament churches practiced consistent communion. One indication is New Testament baptismal practice. Significantly, there is no evidence that any form of baptism was practiced in the New Testament other than immersion. This is conceded even by many Pedobaptist scholars.¹³ If the universal practice of the New Testament was believer's baptism by immersion, then it only stands to reason that churches practiced consistent communion; there were no "baptisms" by sprinkling or pouring.

The case for consistent communion can also be made from specific texts. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20, the proper order of the ordinances is implied in Jesus' command: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" Several things should be noted about this passage. First, the command is grounded in Christ's authority. Second, believers are called to "make disciples" and then baptize them according to the Trinitarian formula. Third, it is only after this conversion and baptism that disciples are taught to "observe all Christ commanded." Surely communion is understood as one of the many things that Christ has commanded. So the order is baptism before observance; baptism precedes communion.

Acts 2:41–42 states the proper order even more clearly: "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." In these verses, individuals believe ("received his word") prior to their baptism. Only after baptism did these new believers become part of the community, participation in which included "the breaking of bread," a common New Testament designation for the Lord's Supper. Again, baptism preceded communion.

In Colossians 2:11–13, referenced above, Paul argues that baptism is symbolic of and the natural response to regeneration. Under the Old Covenant, circumcision signified public identification with God's elect people, the nation of Israel, not all of whom were regenerate. In the New Testament analogy, regeneration followed by baptism signifies public identification with God's elect people, the church, all of whom are regenerate. Just as Jewish males needed to be circumcised to be incorporated into the nation of Israel, so all people must be regenerated and baptized to be incorporated into a New Testament church. Again, Acts 2:41–42 seems to indicate that participation in the Lord's Supper is included among those aspects of the Christian life that follow after regeneration and baptism.

¹³See Lyle D. Bierma, "Infant Baptism in the Reformed Confessions," in Gregg Strawbridge, ed. *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), pp. 238–239.

Closely related to this argument is the question of whether or not the practice of open communion genuinely represents the spiritual reality of union with Christ. There is a theological connection between baptism and the Lord's Supper based upon what each ordinance is intended to represent. As noted above, both baptism and the Lord's Supper communicate the important ideas of union with Christ and participation in the church. In addition, baptism uniquely symbolizes the death and resurrection of Christ while the Lord's Supper memorializes Christ's sacrifice. While both open communion and consistent communion Baptists would agree on this theological connection, I believe a critical component is missed when a church practices open communion.

While open communion may indeed symbolize the themes of unity and (to a point) mutual accountability, in practice the concept of union with Christ is totally ignored. This is not because of who may or may not be invited to the Table, but because of how Pedobaptist Christians have understood their "baptism." Sprinkling and pouring can represent several concepts, even biblical concepts such as the washing away of sin and initiation into the church (as understood by most Pedobaptists), but these other baptismal modes miss the crucial symbolism of union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Only immersion truly communicates the believer's union with Christ in his death and resurrection. This means in Baptist churches that practice open communion, a Pedobaptist may be adequately representing his ongoing union with Christ by participating in communion, but he has never had his initial union with Christ properly represented through immersion. As a result the theological relationship between the two ordinances is at best disjointed, and at worst it is entirely overlooked. Only consistent communion churches adequately represent the believer's union with Christ in their observation of both ordinances.

The Argument from Baptist History

As previously noted, there have always been some Baptists who did not practice consistent communion. But a strong case can be made that most Baptists—and certainly most pre-20th century American Baptist churches, north and south—rejected open communion in favor of consistent communion. A strong majority commitment to consistent communion is present in almost every major Baptist confession of faith, whether English or American, Calvinist or Arminian.

The first modern Baptist confession was written by the General Baptist John Smyth in 1610. Entitled *A Short Confession*, this confession clearly advocated consistent communion:

The Holy Supper, according to the institution of Christ, is to be administered to the baptized; as the Lord Jesus hath commanded that whatsoever he hath appointed should be taught to be observed (Article 31).¹⁴

Notice that this statement apparently appeals, without reference, to the wording of the Great Commission. Smyth's one-time co-laborer Thomas Helwys authored another General Baptist confession in 1612. Entitled *Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Christian Religion*, it also taught consistent communion:

¹⁴All confessions, unless otherwise indicated, may be found in William L. Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969).

That in the outward supper which only baptized persons must partake, there is presented and figured before the eyes of the penitent and faithful, that spiritual supper, which Christ maketh of his flesh and blood...(Article 72).

The most significant early General Baptist confession was probably the *Orthodox Creed of 1678*. The confession's statement on communion was very much in continuity with earlier General Baptist statements:

The supper of the Lord Jesus, was instituted by him the same night wherein he was betrayed...and no unbaptized, unbelieving, or open profane, or wicked heretical persons, ought to be admitted to this ordinance to profane it (Article XXXIII).

The Calvinistic Particular Baptists were just as clear in their adherence to consistent communion as the Arminian General Baptists. The first widely-used Particular Baptist confession was the so-called *First London Confession*, which was published in 1644 and revised in 1646. The second edition of the confession explicitly teaches consistent communion:

That Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed only upon persons professing faith, or that are Disciples, or taught, who upon a profession of faith, ought to be baptized and after to partake of the Lord's Supper (Article XXXIX).

The Midland Confession, adopted by a Particular Baptist association in 1655, echoed the convictions of the First London Confession in the matter of consistent communion:

That persons so baptized ought, by free consent, to walk together, as God shall give opportunity in distinct churches, or assemblies of Zion, continuing in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers, as fellow-men caring for one another, according to the will of God. All these ordinances of Christ are enjoined in His Church, being to be observed till his Second Coming, which we all ought diligently to wait for (Article 15).

Many modern Reformed Baptists are quick to point out that the most influential Particular Baptist Confession, the *Second London Confession* (1677; revised 1689), did not address the question of consistent versus open communion. Some claim that this omission is tantamount to explicit advocacy of open communion. This seems highly unlikely. First, this is obviously an argument from silence. Second, there were many leading Baptists who signed both confessions, including William Kiffin, Hanserd Knollys, Henry Forty, Benjamin Coxe and his son Nehemiah.¹⁵ In fact Kiffin, who was perhaps the key leader among the Particular Baptists of his era, entered into a debate with John Bunyan over the terms of communion. Kiffin argued that the consistent Baptist position was "restricted" communion, whereas Bunyan argued for an open communion position.¹⁶ Third, historians note that most of the Baptists during the late 17th

¹⁵For a fuller treatment of the continuity between the confessions, see James Renihan, "Confessing the Faith in 1644 and 1689," available at <http://www.reformedreader.org/ctf.htm>.

century held to closed communion.¹⁷ While it is possible that the *Second London Confession's* omission represents a rejection of consistent communion, it is just as possible that the practice was accepted as the norm and taken for granted. Even if closed communion was omitted from the confession because it was being debated, there is no evidence that a majority of Particulars practiced open communion. The fact remains that one cannot make an air-tight case for open communion based on the *Second London Confession's* lack of an explicit affirmation of consistent communion.

Most mainstream American Baptist Confessions, except for those that reproduced the wording of *Second London*, take a consistent communion position. The influential *New Hampshire Confession*, written in 1833, is the confession that the *Baptist Faith & Message* is based upon. The statement on the Lord's Supper unequivocally restricts communion to immersed believers:

We believe that Christian Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer, into the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost; to show forth, in a solemn and beautiful emblem, our faith in the crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, with its effect in our death to sin and resurrection to a new life; that it is prerequisite to the privileges of a Church relation; and to the Lord's Supper, in which the members of the Church, by the sacred use of bread and wine, are to commemorate together the dying love of Christ; preceded always by solemn self-examination (Article 14).

The same could be said of the *Abstract of Principles*, written by Basil Manly, Jr. in 1858. *The Abstract* was the earliest public confession authored by a Southern Baptist. It remains the confession of faith of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. It also explicitly teaches consistent communion, echoing the wording of *New Hampshire*:

Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord Jesus, obligatory upon every believer, wherein he is immersed in water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, as a sign of his fellowship with the death and resurrection of Christ, of remission of sins, and of his giving himself up to God, to live and walk in newness of life. It is prerequisite to church fellowship, and to participation in the Lord's Supper (Article XV).

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000) also teaches consistent communion. In fact, all three editions of the *Baptist Faith and Message* clearly state that communion should be restricted to the immersed.

It should be noted that the earliest American Baptist confession, the *Philadelphia Confession* (1742), was a slight revision to the *Second London Confession*. Though the article on communion was left unchanged, this should not be interpreted as an endorsement of open communion. In fact, nearly all the churches of the Philadelphia Association practiced consistent

¹⁶See Peter Naylor, *Calvinism, Communion and the Baptists: A Study of English Calvinistic Baptists from the Late 1600s to the Early 1800s*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, UK; and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2004), 94–106. It should be noted that there is considerable scholarly debate over whether Bunyan, who also practiced open baptism, was actually a Baptist. For example, see J. D. Ban, "Was John Bunyan a Baptist? A Case Study in Historiography," *Baptist Quarterly* 30, no. 8 (October 1984): pp. 367–376.

¹⁷McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, p. 83.

communion. Whenever a query was brought before the association noting that a congregation was practicing open communion, the association admonished the church to desist and follow the apostolic pattern of baptism before communion.¹⁸ The association also determined that it was not uncharitable for a Baptist church to refuse communion to a fellow believer who had never been immersed.¹⁹

The majority of churches in southern associations also practiced consistent communion. As in the Philadelphia Association, individual southern churches would occasionally move toward an open communion position. And as with the Philadelphia Association, the southern associations would reprove churches that did so. The terms of communion were also often addressed in associational circular letters, position papers distributed to the member churches and published in the proceedings of the association's annual meeting. For example, in 1833 Jesse Mercer, a leader among early nineteenth century Georgia Baptists, authored a circular letter for the Georgia Baptist Association on the topic of the Lord's Supper. After arguing that all who are regenerated should be immersed, Mercer stated unequivocally that, "Therefore, no unbaptized person should be permitted to partake of the Lord's Supper."²⁰

The fact that a majority of Baptist churches in America practiced consistent communion should cause us to reject the oft-repeated charge that restricted communion is merely a Landmark practice. Because of the wariness many contemporary Baptists show towards the Landmark movement, this claim is often made by those wishing to discredit consistent communion. While it is true that all Landmark churches practice consistent communion, it should be obvious by now that the practice is not a Landmark innovation. The earliest Baptists, both General and Particular, practiced closed communion. Most of the churches in the Philadelphia Association rejected open communion and the *New Hampshire Confession*—hardly a Southern Landmark document—explicitly affirmed consistent communion. If anything, this is one area where Landmarkers are in continuity with what most Baptists have always practiced!

While all Landmarkers affirm consistent communion, there were some Landmarkers who practiced a version of consistent communion that restricts participation to members of the administering church. This practice is also not unique to Landmarkers; some conservative Baptist churches in Britain also practice this form of consistent communion. There are also some Baptists who are not Landmarkers who affirm this form of consistent communion.²¹ Though it is often called "closed communion," I think a better term is "local-church-only communion."²² Proponents of this position point to the emphasis the New Testament places on the mutual

¹⁸See A. D. Gillette, ed. *Minutes of the Philadelphia Association, 1707–1807* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851; reprint, Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2002), p. 200

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁰Jesse Mercer, "The Lord's Supper," in *Minutes of the Georgia Baptist Association, 1833*. The document is also available online at http://www.geocities.com/baptist_documents/merceroords.supper.html.

²¹For a defense of this position by a non-Landmark theologian, see Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, pp. 283–288.

²²Proponents of local-church-only communion claim their position is truly closed (as opposed to churches that practice "cracked" communion by allowing immersed members of other churches to participate). Because the term "closed" is used by advocates of both local-church-only communion and those who allow all baptized Christians to come to the Table, I prefer to view the former as a subcategory of the latter.

accountability incumbent in the Lord's Supper. They also point out that there are no examples of visiting Christians taking communion in different churches. Though both these observations are valid, most Baptists have been willing to allow visiting Christians to participate in the ordinance so long as they have been properly baptized in a church of like faith and order and are currently members in good standing of such a church. Local-church-only communion should be viewed as a valid, though by no means universal expression of consistent communion.

IV. Objections to Consistent Communion

Proponents of open communion raise a number of objections against the practice of consistent communion.²³ Advocates of consistent communion have always had to answer the charges of their critics, and many have done so in writing.²⁴ Because space precludes an exhaustive discussion of all the arguments open-communion Baptists have raised in the past, this section will address some of the stronger arguments they have historically put forth.²⁵

The first major objection to consistent communion is that the case cannot clearly be made from passages like Matthew 28:18–20 and Acts 2:41–42. Critics claim it is a stretch to deduce consistent communion because the issue is not directly addressed. Though the topic is not directly addressed, it is a natural assumption derived from these passages. Assuming that the “all things” of Matthew 28:19 includes everything which Jesus taught, it is only logical that his teaching regarding communion (cf. Matt. 26) is included in the “all things” to be observed. The case is even clearer in Acts 2, where the baptism of verse 41 clearly comes before the “breaking of bread” (and other churchly acts) of verse 42 and following.

A second argument against consistent communion admits that non-immersed individuals were not permitted to participate in the ordinance during New Testament times, but claims that there is a great difference between someone who is totally unbaptized and someone who disagrees with Baptists about the mode of baptism. In other words, consistent communion is nothing more than Baptists being pugnacious toward Pedobaptists. This argument falls short for two reasons. First, it assumes that an individual Pedobaptist's conviction trumps the conviction of an entire church. This is a most dangerous principle. Second, it downplays the fact that there is only one mode of baptism in the New Testament. The existence of a plurality of “baptisms” in

²³There have always been Baptists, historically of a more Reformed preference, who have defended the practice of open communion. For an introduction to three such Baptists—Bunyan, Robert Hall, Jr., and Charles Spurgeon—see Timothy George, “Controversy and Communion: The Limits of Baptist Fellowship from Bunyan to Spurgeon,” in *The Gospel in the World: International Baptist Studies*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 1, ed. D. W. Bebbington (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK and Waynesville, GA: Paternoster, 2002), pp. 38–58.

²⁴Three notable examples are Joseph Kinghorn, *Baptism a Term of Communion at the Lord's Supper*, 2d ed. (Norwich, UK: Printed by Bacon, Kinnerbrook, & Co., 1816), Andrew Fuller, “Thoughts on Open Communion, in a Letter to Rev. W. Ward, Missionary at Serampore, dated September 21, 1800,” in Joseph Belcher, ed. *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, vol. 3 (1845; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1988), pp. 503–506, and John L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), pp. 214–225.

²⁵Two notable examples of open communion arguments can be found in John Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment about Water-Baptism, No Bar to Communion; OR, To Communicate with Saints, as Saints, Proved Lawful*, in G. Offer, ed. *The Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 2 (1854; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), pp. 593–616, and Robert Hall, Jr. *On Terms of Communion; with a Particular View to the Case of the Baptists and Pedobaptists* (Leicester, UK: Thomas Combe, 1816).

our own day is no reason to abandon the New Testament pattern. To consistently obey Christ's command is not pugnacity but humility.

A third criticism of consistent communion is closely related to the above argument: the Lord's Table is about unity and to deny Pedobaptists the right to participate is to show a lack of brotherly love. First, as noted earlier in this paper, unity is only one theme present in the ordinance. The supper is as much about growth in grace, commemoration of Christ's death and resurrection, and mutual accountability as it is the unity of the body. Second, consistent communion is practiced by most Pedobaptist churches (excluding the liberal/ecumenical churches), at least as they understand the ordinances. In other words, Baptists place no more restrictions on the Table than non-Baptists; we simply disagree with Pedobaptists about what constitutes biblical baptism. Third, far from showing a lack of brotherly love, close communion advocates restrict communion to the baptized out of love for both biblical truth and the Pedobaptist who rejects that truth. It is the hope of consistent communion Baptists that the practice will be used by the Holy Spirit to convict Pedobaptist Christians that believer's baptism by immersion is the only true baptism.

A fourth criticism, again closely-related, is that the ordinance is the *Lord's Supper*, and hence it is inappropriate to exclude any of the Lord's children from the Table. This really gets at the crux of the issue. Many open communion Christians argue that the Lord's Supper is a Christian ordinance, given to the church universal. As such, it can be practiced by nearly any group of Christians who have some sense of commitment to each other. Baptists have historically contended that communion (and baptism) is a church ordinance, and as such local churches are the proper administrators of baptism. In the New Testament, it was local congregations that "broke bread" together. It was when the congregation was gathered that believers were instructed to examine themselves before partaking. There are no examples in the New Testament of the Lord's Supper occurring outside of the context of a local church gathering.²⁶ Unless it can be shown that the Lord's Supper is a Christian ordinance rather than a church ordinance, then this argument holds little merit. Again, proponents of consistent communion are not ultimately interested in excluding anyone; rather, closed communion Baptists are interested in following the New Testament pattern for the ordinance. Ecumenism, even among evangelicals, should not be achieved at the expense of New Testament practice. And as was noted earlier in this paper, the Lord's Supper is only one of several names for the ordinance.

A fifth criticism, which was quite popular in the nineteenth century, is that even advocates of consistent communion are willing to invite Pedobaptists to preach from their pulpits. To allow this practice is to contradict a church's communion practice. First, it should be noted that not all advocates of consistent communion are willing to allow "pulpit-exchange" with Pedobaptist ministers. Second, even if a church does allow for some interdenominational pulpit exchange, there is no intrinsic connection between the practice and the terms of communion. It should be noted that this argument in particular is one reason that some consistent communion Baptists restrict the ordinance to members of their local church.

A final argument against consistent communion is that it "de-churches" other Christian traditions, rendering them more or less invalid or false churches. Many consider consistent

²⁶Some may object that the Last Supper was not a gathering of a local church. I would argue that the Last Supper is not the same thing as the Lord's Supper, but rather communion is a church ordinance that is celebrated in honor of and in a manner similar to the Last Supper. The Last Supper was a one-time event during the crucifixion week; the Lord's Supper is an ongoing celebration of Christ's sacrifice and imminent return.

communion to be nothing more than a particularly nasty expression of Baptist sectarianism. First, it should be noted that most advocates of consistent communion are not interested in invalidating anyone's church. As many have argued, the debate is not necessarily about true versus false churches, but about healthy versus irregular churches.²⁷ A church can be irregular, meaning that it fails to follow New Testament practice in some specific area(s), but still be a true church where the gospel is rightly preached, the ordinances are observed in such a way that they do not subvert the gospel, believers are nurtured in their faith and the gospel is shared with those on the outside. In fact, I will candidly admit that many otherwise-healthy Baptist churches are "irregular" in that they do not consistently practice church discipline, a clear aspect of New Testament congregations.²⁸ The point is that the issue is not ultimately about church validity or invalidity, but about who is able to participate in the Lord's Supper. And according to the New Testament, the answer is baptized believers in Jesus Christ who have examined their hearts and are not currently undergoing church discipline.

V. Conclusion

This essay has argued that this understanding of the Lord's Supper, which I have called "consistent communion," is not only true to Baptist history but also the practice of churches in the New Testament. Unfortunately, it should be readily apparent to most readers that some Southern Baptist churches allow any professing Christian to participate in the Lord's Supper. Though this practice may be common in contemporary Baptist life, the majority of Baptists throughout history have argued that communion should be restricted to believers who have been biblically immersed.

It is my sincere hope that this generation of Baptists will rethink this critical issue and be willing to reclaim the biblical pattern of communion, even if that means momentarily offending (without being offensive!) those Christian brothers and sisters who may sincerely disagree with our understanding of baptism. The issue is not about pleasing Pedobaptists or our open-communion fellow Baptists. The issue is pleasing Christ by following the pattern he has given to us in the New Testament. Our Baptist forefathers were often persecuted and at times even martyred for their understanding of the ordinances. What a tragedy it will be if contemporary Baptists dishonor their memory—and the name of Christ—by compromising on a consistent view of the relationship between baptism and the Lord's Supper.

²⁷Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, pp. 51–76; White, "What Makes Baptism Valid?," pp. 6–8.

²⁸See White, "[What Makes Baptism Valid?](#)"

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