

Should Baptist Churches Adopt Open Membership?

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The Center for Theological Research
April 2010

White Paper 34
Published by the Center for Theological Research
at www.BaptistTheology.org

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Should Baptist Churches Adopt Open Membership?

Baptists have not always agreed among themselves on doctrinal or ethical issues, but they have had some common beliefs that they have defended and on which they have been united. When one of these is challenged or rejected, the Baptist community is likely to be in a crisis as to how to respond.

Currently, a movement has been launched to convince Baptist churches to adopt open membership. That means that Baptist churches should no longer insist that all persons received into membership (barring some physical disability) have been baptized upon and after profession of faith in Jesus Christ by the mode of immersion. Instead, persons who have had only infant baptism, who have had baptism by pouring or sprinkling, and possibly those who have had no baptism may be received into Baptist churches without immersion so long as they profess faith in Jesus. (This movement toward open membership is to be clearly differentiated from open communion, even though open communion has sometimes led to open membership.)

Should Baptist churches be encouraged to adopt open membership, or are there good reasons for not doing so? I would like to offer five of the latter.

First, believer's baptism by immersion is probably the all-time central Baptist distinctive. Other answers have been given to that question. Soul competency can hardly be traced behind E.Y. Mullins, a leading Southern Baptist theologian who made it the clue to Baptist identity in 1905. Congregational polity has from the beginning been shared with Congregationalists. The priesthood of all believers has also been strongly affirmed by Lutherans. Religious liberty for all was originally a Baptist distinctive, but today it has been affirmed by most other Christian denominations. The Lordship of Christ has been claimed by others, if not applied as thoroughly.

Although not a few non-Baptists today practice believer's baptism by immersion, the majority of professing Christians in the world today practice infant baptism. Early English Baptists were attacked for their baptismal beliefs and had to defend such; indeed, it was this belief that provided Baptists their name. Texts such as Romans 6:1–4 and 1 Peter 3:21 were employed in that defense. To make believer's immersion optional in Baptist churches would be to denigrate the central reason for a Baptist witness and a Baptist denomination. According to William H. Brackney, a respected present-day historian of the Baptists, "believer's baptism by immersion is essentially Baptist," and it is "the major Baptist contribution to modern Christian ecclesiology [doctrine of the church]."

It is, of course, true that John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, having recovered believer's baptism in 1609, did not practice immersion. The Particular Baptists, who believed that the death of Christ was intended for and actually brings about the remission of the sins of only those elected by God, a third of a century later adopted immersion. The General Baptists, who believed that the death of Christ is adequate for the remission

of the sins of all human beings but is effective only among those who believe, soon followed, unless, as Stephen Wright of England has recently argued, some Generals began to immerse a few months earlier. Thereafter immersion became the normative mode of baptism for all Baptists.

Second, open membership has been a very marginal deviation in Baptist history. John Bunyan is often cited, but we must remember that his church in Bedford, England, was in the beginning and still is in the 21st century a mixed Baptist-Congregationalist (infant-baptizing) church—a pattern not followed by most all later Baptists. Open membership has only become common during recent decades in England, and now a few churches in the United States have embraced it. Should others join in the adoption of open membership? Tell that to Benjamin Keach, who was jailed and put in the pillory for explaining to children the Baptist understanding of baptism, to William Kiffin, who insisted that infant baptism is not genuine baptism, to Obadiah Holmes, who was publicly whipped and jailed in Boston for his Baptist convictions, to Henry Dunster, who had to resign as the first president of Harvard College because he was a Baptist, or to Adoniram Judson, who lost his appointment as a Congregationalist missionary and in Burma wrote to affirm his Baptist convictions about baptism!

Third, adopting open membership would not be prudent for today's Baptists because the cause of believer's baptism by immersion has not been a failure. Between 1850 and 1950 half a dozen new Christian denominations in the United States adopted believer's baptism by immersion, and this trend is being replicated today in various indigenous Christian movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. We should be grateful that believer's baptism by immersion is no longer a Baptist distinctive. We should have the Spirit-led wisdom not to trivialize or abandon this foundation for Baptist life. To do so could leave Baptists with an uncertain and undefined ecclesiology, drifting on the high seas when Mormons, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and, yes, Muslims are more confident and explicit about their beliefs.

Fourth, the adoption of open membership may be based on a false ecumenism. For Southern Baptists in particular, who have been influenced in the past by Landmarkism, the problem may be acute. Landmarkers insist that only Baptist churches have the authority to administer believer's baptism by immersion, and hence Baptist churches should not recognize "alien immersions," that is, immersions of believers performed in non-Baptist churches and/or by non-Baptist ministers. The growing rejection of anti-alien immersion, especially after other denominations have adopted believer's baptism by immersion, has led some Baptists to "throw out the baby with the bath water." They are ready to jettison the earlier, historic, pre-Landmark Baptist understanding of baptism in order to be accommodating to members of other denominations.

Three things need to be said in reply. The first principle of healthy interdenominational dialogue is to represent one's own beliefs faithfully and accurately. It is not prerequisite to such dialogue to deny one's own beliefs. Second, Baptists have defended immersion from the Greek verb *baptizein*, meaning "to dip, plunge, or immerse," from examples of baptism in the New Testament (Acts 8:36, 38–39), and from Romans 6:1–4. But current advocates of open membership discredit that evidence. Third, truth and unity need to be kept in balance. Jesus both made truth claims and prayed for the unity of his followers. We should indeed seek more extensive Christian unity but not

at the price of the compromise of truth; nor should Baptists deny that infant-baptizing churches may, in some sense, be true churches. Believer's baptism by immersion is not merely a practice such as whether to use wine or grape juice in the Lord's Supper; it is a principle with deep theological connections. Does one expect Roman Catholics to renounce the primacy of Peter or Pentecostals to deny a post-conversional baptism in or with the Holy Spirit?

Fifth, believer's baptism by immersion, as well as the Lord's Supper, is closely connected with and is proclamatory of our Lord's death, burial, and resurrection. Paul understood this and made it the basis for the Christian life (Rom 6:1–14). No other mode can picture these events—death, burial, and resurrection. Moreover, for Paul these events were veritably the center of the gospel proclamation (1 Cor 15:3–8). The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are gospel ordinances. Among the advocates of open membership concern has been registered about “toddler baptisms” (under the age of eight) in Baptist churches. One should not deny the existence of problems in this regard. But concern must also be registered about the dry baptistries, the few baptisms, and the plateaued congregations that are so prevalent. The effective proclamation of the gospel needs to be accompanied by the great symbols of that gospel.

For these reasons and in the awareness of the gravity of the issue, I ask you to reject open membership and to give renewed and celebratory emphasis to believer's baptism by immersion.

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