Baptist Ordinances, the Gospel Center, and Church Planting: What Really Matters?

Mark A. Snoeberger
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

A few years ago, an interesting discussion occurred among the elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis that, for good or ill, became a matter of public record. At the center of the discussion was the matter of the necessity of believer’s baptism by immersion as requisite to membership at that church. Specifically, John Piper proposed that while believer’s baptism by immersion should continue to be the “official position” of the church that would “customarily” be practiced, at least some minimal allowance should be made for other modes and circumstances of baptism:

Since we believe that the New Testament teaches and demonstrates that the mode of baptism is only the immersion of a believer in water, we therefore regard all other practices of baptism as misguided, defective, and illegitimate. Yet, while not taking these differences lightly, we would not elevate them to the level of what is essential. Thus, we will welcome into membership candidates who, after a time of study, discussion, and prayer, prescribed by the Elders, retain a conviction that it would be a violation of their conscience to be baptized by immersion as believers.

The critical issue that drove the proposal is stated succinctly: “Our aim is not to elevate beliefs and practices that are non-essential to the level of prerequisites for church membership.”¹

This kind of proposal, while historically scandalous in Baptist circles, does not seem particularly surprising in light of today’s conservative evangelical insistence that the Gospel is the sole arbiter in determining whether to extend Christian recognition to one another in non-denominational conferences, coalitions, and elephant-rooms. Piper’s proposal even seems, at first blush, to have continuity with the historic fundamentalist practice of extending Christian recognition to anyone who will embrace a minimalist Christian creed such as that represented by the “Five Fundamentals.”²

But what this proposal fails to appreciate fully is that the question in view is not the criteria for extending mere Christian recognition to another. The question is rather the criteria for covenanting together with other believers as a local expression of God’s church, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). These questions are not the same, so due consideration should be given to the possibility that the answers to these questions might likewise differ. It is with this

¹Proposed change to the Constitutional By-Laws of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, Article 1, Church Membership; Section 2, Baptism and Church Membership, on p. 35 of “Baptism and Church Membership at Bethlehem Baptist Church: Eight Recommendations for Constitutional Revision,” prepared by John Piper with Alex Chediak and Tom Steller, with final revisions by the Council of Elders, August 9, 2005, available at http://dwynrhh6bluza.cloudfront.net/resources/documents/1647/baptism_and_membership.pdf?1303487756.

²A fact to which, incidentally, Piper appeals in the question/answer exchange referenced above.
premise that this presentation suggests that the Gospel alone is an inadequate basis of fellowship in the local church—a more full-orbed creed or confession is in order. Specifically, it suggests that a common commitment to the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper is vital to fellowship within the local assembly.

A Bit of History

It goes without saying, of course, that the fundamentalists lost the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that took place in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. The denominational structures and resources were in large part appropriated by the modernists, and the fundamentalists were obliged to withdraw and begin anew. What is often overlooked, however, is that the trans-denominational fundamentalist approach was not the only response offered to the problem of modernism. There were also ecclesiastical or confessional responses—responses that deliberately distanced themselves from fundamentalism, but which nonetheless vigorously resisted the ravages of modernism. It might be argued, in fact, that these responses proved more effective than the fundamentalist response:

- In Lutheran circles, a whole synod of the church—the Missouri synod—successfully resisted modernism and salvaged a significant block of denominational resources, but refused to align with the fundamentalists because the latter (1) emphasized conversionism too exclusively, (2) were too interdenominational, (3) were too lax about the sacraments, and (4) were overly concerned about prophecy. This group instead battled the Modernist crisis by insisting on what Carpenter describes as “creedal strictness.”

- In Baptist circles, Southern Baptist leadership successfully delayed their fundamentalist-modernist controversy by a half century. But rather than embrace the fundamentalist banner, they chose instead to focus on holistic concerns that included “such items as restricted communion, believer’s baptism, and denominational loyalty.” We might add, also, that when their crisis eventually came in the 1990s, it was not met by fundamentalist strategies, but by a principled call for strict subscription to the whole “Baptist Faith and Message.”

- In Presbyterian circles, J. Gresham Machen resisted full association with the fundamentalist movement due to concerns such as fundamentalist confusion about the church’s role in culture, emphasis on eschatology, and lack of ecclesiastical formalism. But Machen was far from cordial with the modernists! His Christianity and Liberalism, in fact, is still regarded today as the most incisive and comprehensive critique of modernism ever penned. But in that book his solution to modernism was not an appeal to minimalist lists of “fundamentals”; instead, his solution was for churches, no matter what their peculiar denomination, to unite in insisting on strict subscription to their respective


whole doctrinal standards, thus forcing the liberals to establish their own denominations.\textsuperscript{5} Themes like Gospel and inerrancy, while of enormous import, can never be isolated from the systems of theology that support them, and attempts to protect these doctrines apart from a holistic theological context would ultimately end in their loss.\textsuperscript{6} And included in holistic response, Machen insisted, is strict commitment to the details surrounding the ordinances of the church. He wrote,

Luther was wrong about the Supper, but not nearly so wrong as he would have been if, being wrong, he had said to his opponents: ‘Brethren, this matter is a trifle; and it makes really very little difference what a man thinks about the table of the Lord.’ Such indifferentism would have been far more deadly than all the divisions between the branches of the Church.\textsuperscript{7}

It might well be summarized that while the fundamentalists were fixated on preserving the gospel by hedging it about with fundamentals, the three representative responses above insisted on preserving the church, with all its existing doctrinal standards, as the principle means of saving the Gospel. And, interestingly, all three responses indicated that the protection of baptism and the Lord’s Supper was critical to this end.

**Baptism, the Church, and the Gospel**

Viewed as an isolated ordinance, particulars concerning the doctrine of Christian baptism seem trivial. Does it really matter whether we hold to credobaptism or Paedobaptism? Is it really important that one be immersed rather than sprinkled? After all, such details are not essential to the Gospel, and in the historical church countless thousands of believers have erred on these issues, without the slightest effect on their eternal destiny. And yet, were we to consult Machen, he would say that errors on baptism are significantly compounded when we say, “Brethren, this matter is a trifle; and it makes really very little difference what a man thinks about [baptism].” This is because baptism is never an isolated doctrine, but one piece of a theological system that depends on other pieces and upon which, in turn, other pieces of the system depend.

**The Meaning of Baptism**

Since the rise of interdenominational fundamentalism/evangelicalism, the significance of baptism has eroded. Today, when the question of the importance of believer’s baptism is raised, an answer is often offered that is disconnected from the church: baptism is important because it is the “believer’s first step of obedience.” While this statement is true, of course, it is not the historical Baptist answer to this question; nor, in fact, has it been the answer of any of the major Christian denominations. Instead, the primary importance of baptism has almost universally been seen in church history in its role as the entry rite into the church. By it the person being baptized is proclaiming allegiance to the Christ with whom he has become united, and pledging himself to


\textsuperscript{6}For a work that builds substantively on Machen’s thesis, see Cornelius Van Til’s book The Case for Calvinism (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963). In it Van Til sharply criticizes E. J. Carnell’s defense of inerrancy as an isolated custodian of Christian orthodoxy in the latter’s The Case for Orthodoxy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959). Van Til’s concern not that Carnell’s commitment to inerrancy was misplaced, but that the rationalist underpinnings of Carnell’s theological system were ultimately destructive of the very inerrancy he was purporting to defend.

\textsuperscript{7}Christianity and Liberalism, p. 50.
the life of obedience that this union requires (Rom 6:4–5; Col 2:12–13; Gal 3:27; 1 Pet 3:21). But he is also announcing his union with the assembled body of Christ (Acts 2:41; 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; cf. Col 2:11–12). The act of baptism is an external sign by which the church confirms who is on the inside and who is on the outside. By means of baptism the church guards both its own identity and the fidelity of the Gospel.

Primarily, this means that the subjects of baptism must be tightly policed for the sake both of the Gospel and of the church. The Baptist church practices believer’s baptism because it alone matches its view of the nature of the church: it is a community of regenerate persons (so Matt 28:19; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12; 10:47–48; 16:14–15, 33–34; 18:8; and by necessary consequence Rom 6:4–5; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12–13). While NT baptism is parallel to OT circumcision in that both are entry rites, they are different in that they are entry rites into disparate communities: membership in the Jewish community was a physical birthright, but membership in the NT church is a spiritual birthright (Col 2:11–13). This factor is vital to the whole Baptist system, especially since Baptists view the church collectively or congregationally as the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). To be lax about believer’s baptism is to erode the pillar and ground of the faith. Erode this and you give up the faith.

The “mode” of baptism, too, says something vital about the rite. Firstly, its says something about the church’s fidelity to the authority of Scripture, which uses an explicit word (βαπτίζω) that can communicate nothing other than immersion, and offers painstaking detail about the practice that leaves no doubt at all about the mode (Mark 1:5, 10; John 3:23; Acts 8:36–39). But secondly, it says something about the purpose of the rite itself: baptism does not consist in the efficacious dispensation of special grace/blessing (a concern that paedobaptism, try as it might, cannot fully avoid, either in mode or in common practice); instead, it symbolizes the believer’s radical union with Christ—sharing in his death to the tyranny of the Law and rising to partake in the divine nature of regeneration. That’s what immersion graphically communicates. Anything less is not baptism.

Finally the place of baptism says something about the rite. If baptism is all that God intends it to be, it cannot be regarded as a private, ad hoc ritual. It must be practiced under the

---


That enormous debate swirls over whether these biblical references to baptism involve Spirit baptism or water baptism is acknowledged. This determination is not, in my estimation, necessary to this presentation. Since water baptism is illustrative of all that occurs in Spirit baptism, strict segregation of the two concepts is neither possible nor advisable.

9For further treatment of the importance of believer’s baptism see chaps. 4–5 of Hammett’s *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*.

10While there are some passages of Scripture that suggest baptism in some sense “washes” (1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5) or even “saves” (e.g., 1 Pet 3:21), the analogy of Scripture explicitly disallows the sacramentarian, *ex ope operato* understanding of baptism. Peter notes that what saves is decidedly not the washing off of moral filth in the rite itself, but the cathartic participation in Christ’s resurrection that issues forth in regenerative resolve (see esp. Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003], pp. 179–98). See also 1 Corinthians 10:2 for a Pauline suggestion that external rites have no intrinsic efficacy.
aegis of those who are specifically appointed by God to successfully adjudicate the validity of conversion, as this is a critical and primary means by which the church serves as the pillar and ground of the truth. Further, since baptism functions as an entry rite into the community, it follows that it must be exercised in a local expression of that community in order for it to fulfill this function.

*Baptism and the Church*

What, then, does this mean in a day when the mode and subjects of baptism are being dismissed as non-essential in ecclesiastical doctrinal standards? What does it mean, specifically, in a “postdenominational era, when denominational distinctives are regarded as unfortunate, irrelevant, and hardly worth fussing over”? What does it mean when we are called upon, in the planting and renewing of churches, to write/rewrite the doctrinal standards for these churches?

- First, it means that we have to recognize that the standards of Christian fellowship are not coextensive with standards of local church membership. Local church membership, via baptism, at the very minimum demands visible obedience to all the clear commands of Scripture—because that’s what the church is there to enforce.

- Second, it means we must be committed to patient explanation of these intricacies to new and otherwise uninformed believers. Specifically, we need to inform believers that baptism is a great deal more than a perfunctory “thumbs up” to the Christian Gospel—it is an entry rite of commitment to the local body of Christ, an act of utmost sobriety.

- Third, it means that we need to become keenly attuned to the interconnectedness of our systems of theology as complex and holistic preservers of both church and Gospel. Specifically, we need to be students of the historical milieus in which those systems of theology were forged, lest we lose sight of the significance of their parts.

**The Lord’s Table, the Church, and the Gospel**

Like the ordinance of baptism, details concerning the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper cannot be elevated to the place of Christian essentials. Countless numbers of believers have been wrong about these details without the slightest effect on their eternal destiny. Questions about whether the primary value of the rite is symbolic, mystical, or real (or some combination thereof)

---

11How thoroughly a church presses this adjudicating responsibility is a matter that each church must determine prayerfully. Some argue that baptism may be delayed for a considerable period in order to adequately observe the fruits of conversion (see, e.g., Mark Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright [Nashville: B&H, 2006], 344–50). Others, however (and esp. those committed to the primacy of the first-step-of-obedience rubric in baptism), argue that the biblical pattern of immediate baptism is normative for the church (so Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1972], p. 195).

12Mark Dever suggests, rightly I think, that the examination of a candidate for baptism should include not only an ascertainment of the candidate’s conversion, but also his willingness to accede to the standards of doctrine and practice demanded by the church and to commit to the duties of membership (“Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” p. 334).

do not ultimately determine one’s Christian status.\textsuperscript{14} Further, the decision whether to practice open or closed communion will not dictate whether the doors of heaven will be open or closed. As a result, the evangelical trend toward transdenominational unity has inexorably led, over the last century, to a majority position of indifference on this matter—participation at the Table should be coextensive with participation in Christ. After all, it is the Lord’s Table, not the table for the Lord’s-people-who-are-like-us.

Such an argument sounds quite compelling if one views the doctrine of the Lord’s Table in isolation from a systematic ecclesiology or in isolation from the historical-theological factors that led most of our Baptist forebears to conclude differently. Again, Machen’s advice drives us to reconsider: We Baptists may be (and, if Machen’s system be the standards, we indeed \textit{are}) “wrong about the Supper, but not nearly so wrong as [we] would be if, being wrong, \[we\] say to \[our\] opponents: ‘Brethren, this matter is a trifle; and it makes really very little difference what a man thinks about the table of the Lord.’ Such indifferentism is far more deadly than all the divisions between the branches of the Church.”

This is because, historically, Baptists have viewed the Lord’s Supper as much more than an indicator of who falls inside or outside the broad perimeter of the church universal. Instead, Baptists view the Lord’s Supper as a primary tool for successfully executing its role as pillar and ground of truth, protecting the local church from both doctrinal and moral impurity. It is only by guarding the Table that the church is ultimately able to guard the Gospel.

\textit{The Meaning of the Lord’s Table}

Like baptism, the Lord’s Table has taken on a markedly individualist meaning in the last century. Prior to partaking of the Lord’s Supper, it has become common to set aside a block of time for each participant to scrutinize his own individual, vertical relationship with God. This is surely a valuable exercise, and I don’t mean to discourage it—there is a sense in which the Lord’s Supper celebrates the believer’s continuing, individual union with Christ. It should be noted, however, that the verse to which most appeal for this practice (1 Cor 11:28) is part of a passage that has far more to say about the believer’s horizontal communion with the gathered body of Christ than it does about his vertical communion with Christ. Failure to properly “regard the body of the Lord,” Paul argues, takes as one of its primary forms the failure to extend proper regard to fellow-members in the local body of Christ (see esp. vv. 17–22; 33–34).\textsuperscript{15}

It is for this reason that Baptists may have traditionally connected the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper very tightly with church discipline and church membership. Since the elements of the Table were not to be received by Church members who are not regarding one another in a proper manner, passages like Matthew 18:15–18 loom extraordinarily large: “If your brother sins against you,” is an issue of potentially \textit{capital import} (so 1 Cor 11:30). Reconciliation simply

\textsuperscript{14}The Roman Catholic model that sees the rite as necessary to God’s communication of saving grace does say something significant about whether one is truly a Christian, but the internecine squabbles between the Calvinistic, Lutheran, and Zwinglian theories do not (at last not necessarily).

must occur before coming to the Table. The membership of a local assembly has, it seems, the corporate responsibility to adjudicate who may properly eat in order to avoid divine judgment (1 Cor 11:31–32; 5:11–12; cf. Matt 18:17–18). Baptists have historically viewed this rite with such extraordinary sobriety, in fact, that in some cases they closed the rite to anyone outside the local body (so, possibly, 1 Cor 5:11–13). More often, however, appeal to NT descriptions of Paul celebrating the Lord’s Supper in congregations where he was demonstrably not a member (e.g., Acts 20:7, 11) has led to the practice of “close” communion, in which exception to a “closed” stance is made for believers known to be members in good standing of another church of “like faith and practice.”

That restriction is made to members of churches of “like faith and practice” reflects yet another concern of the Baptists. Since a church may only extend the Lord’s Table to those rightly related to the membership of a duly constituted local church, it logically follows that guests who are members of churches that are not duly constituted as such must likewise be excluded. For instance, a member of a church that allows the unregenerate into membership or that fails to require the entry rite of believer’s baptism could not be invited to the Baptist Table: the church in question in this case is at best “a church out of order,” or more accurately a disobedient church, or even no church at all. In this case, the good standing of the guest applicant to the Table is irrelevant, because his “membership” is a participation in disobedience. To do so would be to threaten the purity of the church and jeopardize the church’s ability to successfully function as the guardian of orthodoxy.

Likewise and finally, no unbaptized believer would be invited to the “close” celebration of the Baptist Table because (1) he is living in disobedience and (2) is not a member of a duly constituted church. He is outside the church, and thus de facto is not exercising proper regard for the Lord’s assembled body. As such, he stands outside the church’s jurisdiction and sphere of discipline (again, 1 Cor 5:11–13). Furthermore, it would be illogical for a person who has not received the entry rite into union with Christ’s assembled body to then participate in the continuation rite that perpetuates that union.

The Lord’s Table and the Church

What, then, does this mean in a day when there exists a vast wave of pressure to adopt open communion as an expression of doctrinally minimal, irenic, and charitable church? Again, what does it mean when we are called upon, in the planting and renewing of churches, to assist in the writing/rewriting of doctrinal standards for these churches?

• First, it means that we have to recognize that the refusing a person entry to the Table is not always tantamount to excommunication. In many cases, it is simply a statement that a person is outside the jurisdiction of a given local church. In other cases it is a statement that a brother is living in visible disobedience to Scripture and may not, irrespective of his eternal state, be safely welcomed to the Table.

\[16\]It is notable, however, that many early Baptists policed even this narrow exception closely, often requiring letters of commendation from a guest’s own church before opening the Table to that guest (see, e.g., Mark Dever, ed., *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents* [Washington: Center for Church Reform, 2001], pp. 124, 152). This practice persisted almost universally among Baptists in America until 1890, often under threat of disfellowship (“Sounds from Baptist History,” p. 285). The broad acceptance of open communion among British Baptists came several decades earlier (so p. 290).
• Second, it means that we must be committed to patiently clarifying the intricacies of strict communion to new and otherwise uninformed believers who might otherwise see the practice as bigoted or tasteless. Specifically, we must explain that the Lord’s Table is neither (1) an ordinance of the universal church nor (2) an expression of individual religion, but rather an ordinance of the assembled and duly organized local church.

• Third, it means that we need to become keenly attuned to the interconnectedness of our systems of theology as complex and holistic preservers of both church and Gospel. Specifically, we need to be students of the historical milieus in which those systems of theology were forged, lest we lose sight of the significance of their parts.

Conclusion

The pressure on Baptists to abandon the strict practice of Baptist ordinances is no new phenomenon. Greg Wills offers anecdotal evidence that as early as 1873, J. Hyatt Smith, liberal minister of Lee Avenue Baptist Church in Brooklyn, was expressing frustration with proponents of close communion for using the practice to enforce “old beliefs that are out of date.” Instead of such strictures, the modern church needed to adopt the new rubric of “More Christ and less creed” or better, “All Christ and no creed” as the standard of ecclesiastical fellowship.\(^\text{17}\) In the end it was not a frontal attack on the Christian Gospel that crippled the Northern Baptist Convention and allowed liberalism to triumph, but rather the systematic erosion of the pillar and ground that supported the Gospel—the church as defined and tenaciously guarded by the Baptist ordinances. And fifty years later, after the Northern Baptist Convention was all but lost to liberalism, a small band of orthodox Arizona Baptists withdrew, arguing in sad retrospect that “opposing open Communion and alien immersion…was ‘the best way we can guard against the menace of liberalism.’”\(^\text{18}\)

This presentation is by no means a comparison of John Piper’s proposal with the sinister agenda of theological liberalism. The latter attacked the Baptist ordinances because they stood in the way of the triumph of modernism. This is surely not the case among Baptist evangelicals today. Instead, evangelical Baptists today are cordially and even apologetically setting aside the strict observance of the ordinances as part of a sincere and seemingly innocuous pursuit of bare-Gospel unity. This is unfortunate.

The “old” fundamentalist has, I believe, been properly chastened for his refusal to grant Christian recognition to *bona fide* Christians and to treat them instead as unbelievers. The failure to distinguish unbelievers from erring believers has, I think, been a terrible mistake. And the new acceptance of specific venues in which unity is predicated on the Gospel alone is, I think, appropriate. But making this concession does not now mean that *every* fellowship of believers can proceed on a bare-Gospel basis of cooperation. Churches, it would seem, cannot. In fact, the biblical imposition of the Christian ordinances as discussed above would seem rather forcibly to preclude such a minimalist standard of fellowship. This is because churches are charged with the singular task of guarding the whole Christian faith.


When engaging in the glorious task of planting and renewing local churches, there will always be a temptation to speed the process by relaxing standards of entry and participation in the church. In Baptist life, this often means relaxing standards for Baptism and Communion. But by relaxing such standards, this presentation has suggested that the Church is ultimately hindered in its vital task of guarding the faith. So to conclude, I urge those here who are contemplating or who are currently engaged in church planting/renewal to consider implementing and enforcing robust doctrinal standards (complete with believer’s baptism by immersion and close communion) that are properly networked so as to comprehensively protect the Christian faith. The best way to protect the Christian gospel is not by getting together for the Gospel every other year (no matter how helpful that may be), but by getting together every week for the church.