

## ***The Baptist Faith and Message:*** **VII. Baptism and the Lord's Supper**

**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 Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.**

This chapter addresses the two ordinances of the church. As we know from practical experience, ordinances are local laws. The *BF&M* states that there are two such laws ordained by Christ and they are intended to be observed in Christian churches until He returns. Some churches include other practices, such as foot washing, among the ordinances, but the vast majority of the church only considers baptism and the Lord's Supper as ordinances. Some denominations refer to these as sacraments. However, Baptists have avoided calling these observances "sacraments" because the term is associated with spiritual merit (i.e., power to remit sin.) Baptists essentially stand alone in our view of these observances. To Baptists, the only sacrament is Christ.

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Baptists are best known for baptism by immersion. Unfortunately, in the mind of many, the emphasis is on the mode of baptism rather than on the primary and essential qualification for baptism: belief. Only persons who understand the gospel and profess faith in Christ can be baptized in the true sense. Although we refer to the sprinkling of infants as "baptism," Christian baptism is only the immersion of a believer. Thus, when a Baptist refers to "infant baptism" or "baptism by sprinkling," it is a conversational accommodation. I cannot emphasize enough that practices other than immersion of a professed believer are NOT Christian baptism. It is just as true that immersion of an unbeliever in a baptismal ceremony is NOT Christian baptism. Because the Roman Catholic Church and most evangelical churches practice infant baptism, the majority of Christendom is not baptized. In the NT, there are no recorded baptisms that prove infants were baptized. Those who baptize infants (paedobaptists) appeal to NT "household" baptisms to justify their practice. They say that there must have been infants and young children in the household. However, careful examination of those texts reveals that the whole house believed. The practice of infant baptism or baptizing persons as a means of uniting them with the church is grounded in the old covenant practice of circumcision, which was the prescribed means of uniting with the Hebrew nation. It has been propagated over the centuries by tradition.

NT usage of the common Greek word "baptizo" means to immerse, dip or plunge. It is from this usage and the context of its use in NT baptisms that Baptists conclude that the proper mode of baptism is by immersion. Once again, the practice of sprinkling or

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pouring used by paedobaptists is taken from old covenant practices. For example, Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of sacrificed animals as a symbol of their making a covenant of obedience with God. (Q: How can an infant personally participate in a covenant of obedience?) Paedobaptists have argued that immersion was not the required mode based on practical circumstances. They claim that there was not adequate deep water. They have also claimed that it was not possible to immerse, in one day, the 3000 souls that were added to the church in Acts 2. Baptists have over and over debunked these contentions. Furthermore, since Christian baptism is intended to convey burial, sprinkling fails to fulfill that image. When we bury people, we do not sprinkle them with earth; we place them deep in the ground and cover them with earth. This also demonstrates that sprinkling was never the intended mode and, therefore, should not be used. Another rationale for sprinkling has been that it is more practical for the aged and infirmed. However, a person on death's door can be immersed if appropriate measures are taken. If it is deemed not possible to immerse a believer, it is better not to baptize them than to give them a false baptism and, again, propagate the idea that sprinkling is somehow baptism. ALL use of sprinkling should cease. Because baptism is not salvific, not baptizing a new convert due to extreme infirmity or impending death does not hinder their entrance into the Kingdom. The thief on the cross had no Christian Baptism, yet he entered into Paradise with Jesus that very day.

Baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is also a feature of the proper mode. Baptizing in other names, even in the name of an apostle, was prohibited according to Paul. This also distinguishes Christian baptism from the baptism performed by John the Baptist, who baptized "for the remission of sins," not in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist performed only one Christian baptism, the baptism of Jesus. In that case, there was no need for John to speak the formula, "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" because all three Persons were present at the baptism. Some consider John's baptism to be Christian baptism because John baptized Jesus and there is no evidence that the apostles were baptized other than by John. Thankfully, Acts 19 appears to answer the question by giving an account of Paul baptizing men who, by their own admission, had previously received John's baptism. Thus, there must be a distinction between John's baptism and Christian baptism. So, the correct baptismal formula is a believer, immersed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and in that order, with belief happening first.

**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.**

Baptists view baptism as symbolic, not sacramental. Roman Catholics and some other denominations (e.g., Church of Christ, who baptize in the name of Jesus) believe that baptism causes regeneration by the infusion of grace into the person during baptism. Denominations that believe in this concept, called baptismal regeneration, also believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. Baptists, on the other hand, DO NOT believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. Just as Abraham's faith was accounted for righteousness prior to his circumcision, so is a Christian's faith accounted to them for righteousness prior to their baptism. We are saved by faith, an inward change, demonstrated by an outward sign, obedience to Christ. The true sign of the new covenant

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is not baptism, but a changed heart, which the Apostle Paul calls circumcision of the heart or the circumcision made without hands.

Some of our paedobaptist brothers say that salvation is by faith alone and, as we Baptists would, deny that baptism causes regeneration. Yet, as an example, the confession of faith of the Presbyterian Churches of America (PCA) states:

- 1. Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world.*

It is not my intent to speak ill of any denomination. However, when inconsistencies exist on such an important doctrine as baptism, we should expose those inconsistencies. Our Presbyterian brothers and sisters confess that baptism accomplishes the following for infants: it admits them into the visible church, it seals them in the covenant of grace, it engrafts them into Christ, it regenerates their hearts, and it remits their sins. Given that each one of these is a necessary characteristic of a saved person, why not simply say that baptism confers salvation on the children of believers? As discussed in the prior chapter on the church, their misunderstanding of the relationship of the old covenant to the new covenant forces them into such theological gymnastics in order to include children of believers in the church.

**Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.**

Faith in Christ, as an internal and personal matter, admits all believers to “membership” in the body of Christ (i.e., the church universal or invisible church.) At the point of faith in Christ, a believer receives the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and is, by that initial indwelling, Spiritually baptized into Christ. These are invisible, but very real happenings that lead to outward, visible actions of obedience to Christ.

By the example of the first NT churches, we see that new converts received water baptism prior to uniting with the visible church. For this reason, Baptists have viewed the obedience to Christ's command to be baptized as a believer's outward sign of commitment to Christ and necessary for admission into a visible body of Christ (i.e., a local congregation or church). Furthermore, because the observance of the Lord's Supper is a congregational observance, not private or individual, Baptists have logically and correctly concluded that to partake in the Lord's Supper one should first be baptized. Because the *BF&M* has defined baptism as immersion of a believer using the Trinitarian formula, it is implicit that baptism by immersion is understood to be the prerequisite. Therefore, the position put forth by the *BF&M* is that a person must be a believer baptized by immersion to participate in the Lord's Supper. However, many SBC churches hold a broader view and admit unbaptized persons from other denominations to their table. For example, some SBC churches allow any believer to partake with them. Some

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admit those who have been baptized by any mode. Some non-Baptist churches admit and even encourage unbelievers to partake, a practice called open communion.

Several hundred years ago, the Baptist, John Bunyan, of Pilgrim's Progress fame, wrote a treatise entitled: *Differences in Water Baptism, No Bar to Communion*. In it, he argued that water baptism is not the "initiating rite," and denies the existence of church membership, other than that of uniting with the body of Christ. Some very popular modern Baptists have raised up Bunyan's standard in attempt to justify admitting committed paedobaptists to their table and to their membership. Such admission will serve to validate infant baptism and sprinkling. It will engender confusion and, ultimately, produce division. Baptist churches, holding fully to new covenant principle and practices, must not compromise on Baptist principles because only we have remained faithful to the design of the church given to us in the NT.

On the other end of the spectrum, a few SB churches only admit their members to the table. This "close communion" (aka closed communion) was fairly common in 1800s in the early SB churches. The admonition in I Corinthians 11 not to profane the Lord's Table led to close communion. In order to assure that the table was not "profaned," it was considered safer to commune only with people of known character who had been admitted to membership and were under the oversight and discipline of the church. Apparently, they missed verse 28, "but, let a man examine himself." Church leaders should properly explain who can be admitted to the table, explain those things which can profane the table, and leave the rest to the work of the Holy Spirit. Leaders should not deny the people the Table simply on suspicion of sin or discord in the body, lest they fall into "lording over the people." The Lord's Table is a feast for the errant soul who comes in repentance. "He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone."

Baptists are often cast as the bad guys when we do not want to admit believers from other denominations to the Lord's Table. However, the shoe is actually on the other foot. The introduction of infant baptism by the early church fathers and the failure of the "reformers" to finish their work by returning to new covenant principles and practices (e.g. believers baptism by immersion among others) has produced the communal rift. Infant baptism has filled Christendom with unbelievers who are deceived into believing that their baptism has saved them. Centuries of adding people to "the church" at infancy has created a largely unregenerate church that acts that way. And, to be fair, the formula-method evangelism practiced by Baptists during the last century has not helped the church either. One of the Baptist distinctives is doing what we can to assure that we have a regenerate church membership, which is accomplished mainly by admitting to membership, only baptized believers.

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Baptists understand the Lord's Supper to be a symbol that, as the Savior said, is to be observed until He returns (i.e., until the end of time). The partakers are intended to be members of the church. How one interprets "members of the church" significantly affects who can participate in the Lord's Supper in a Baptist church. In modern Baptist life,

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membership in a church implies a membership role. Certainly, those on the membership role of a local body can partake and should if they desire, after self-examination. But, how do we handle visitors? I believe that anyone who has been baptized in the Baptist way is a member of the visible church and should be admitted to the Lord's Table. However, because paedobaptists are unbaptized, I would not admit them to the table in a Baptist church. At first blush, this seems rude to treat godly Christians in such a manner. But, the fact is that when Baptists commune with non-Baptists, everyone is injured in that the non-Baptists are affirmed in their error on baptism and the Baptists infer that infant Baptism is an acceptable baptism. More importantly, God is dishonored by our admitting unbaptized persons to His table. Prior to observing the Lord's Supper, an elder of the church should explain from the Scriptures who can participate in Baptist communion. In earlier times, this was referred to as "fencing the Table."

The *BF&M* 1925 states that the elements are bread and wine. In the *BF&M* 1963 and our present version, fruit of the vine is used, rather than wine. Baptists have debated whether a fermented grape juice (i.e., wine) or fresh grape juice is the prescribed element. Some say it was wine diluted with water. Those who argue for wine point to the drunkenness of some who had come to participate in the Lord's Supper. However, the text indicates that those people arrived in that condition. Also, the word translated "drunk" can just as easily be translated satiated (i.e., stuffed). Another argument, that the temperance movement and prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s is the reason that we use grape juice, is probably not accurate. The issue had been in debate long before the 1900s. Personally, I believe that unfermented grape juice is better supported by the Scriptures.

In circumstances in which the specified elements are not available, can we use something else like a Snickers® candy bar and Coca Cola® or cardboard and water? Like baptism, I would refrain from observing the Lord's Supper in such circumstances. When it comes to the ordinances of Christ, it is better not to perform them than to perform them wrongly. Some will say that as long as you have fulfilled "the spirit" of the ordinance, the rest should not matter. However, these ordinances are to be observed publically. For that reason, it is important that the elements specified in Scripture be used.