

**SHOULD THE NON-IMMERSED BECOME MEMBERS OF FELLOWSHIP  
BAPTIST CHURCHES? – Why the Dripped Should Be Dipped!**

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At the most recent National Convention of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist (FEB) Churches, the question was raised and discussed as to whether non-immersed believers should be considered for membership in FEB Churches.<sup>1</sup> Since the Convention, I have felt pressed by the Lord to study and write a paper on the subject for three reasons: 1) to articulate what I personally believe the Scriptures teach on this subject; 2) to determine what I will teach or will continue to teach and practice at Temple Baptist Church, Cambridge, the church for which I am the Lead Pastor; and 3) to contribute to the discussion on baptism and what it means. My motive in all things is to encourage unity around Christ and His Word and not to conflate the issue. Therefore, Ephesians 4:4-5 should be the marquis verse in both attitude and application, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, ONE BAPTISM” (emphasis added). In fact, those who are questioning our movement’s historical position are some of my closest friends and pastors of whom I respect the most in our Fellowship. Their much appreciated love makes me all the more vigilant to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, and my prayer is that we will all do likewise.

I consider this issue to be a “second-order doctrine” or conviction, rather than an absolute or fundamental of the faith. Albert Mohler is helpful when he writes, “Second-order doctrines would include the meaning and mode of baptism, ...but second-order

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the first time our Fellowship has wrestled with this question, but not on a national scale. Some churches have left the FEB over this issue in the past, most prominent being Creekside Church in Waterloo, Ontario.

issues resist easy settlement by those who would prefer an either/or approach. Many of the most heated disagreements among serious believers take place at the second-order level, for these issues frame our understanding of the church and its ordering by the Word of God.”<sup>2</sup> **May our discussion on this issue create only light and not heat!** Because the mode of baptism is a second-order doctrine, I can accommodate my FEB brethren having a different view than mine, and I did so when I served and was ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America, which practices both modes of baptism. Nevertheless, I am going to make as strong an appeal I can for what I believe the Scriptures teach, as I did at my Ordination Council.

**I believe the mode of baptism is worthy of our prayerful discussion because it is an issue of identity. Are we as a Fellowship going to emphasize Evangelical or Baptist to describe us?** (I take “Evangelical” to be the broader term and more accepting of different modes, while “Baptist” is the more defined term and historically committed to immersion only.) Our Baptist forefathers were so committed to this doctrine of believer’s baptism by immersion that they were persecuted and some went to jail for it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Mohler, “A Call for Theological Triage,” *Revive*, Vol. 45, Issue 2 (Fall 2014): 18. Some disagree with Mohler and argue that the mode of baptism is not a second order doctrine, but a first order one. However, the fact that the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:17 makes it clear that baptism in itself does not save a person should place it as a second-order doctrine. I am not willing to die for the mode of baptism. However, I would be willing to die to uphold the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and that salvation is by faith alone in Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> More than 40 Baptist Ministers were imprisoned from 1760-1777 in Virginia before the American Revolution. The forced dunking of pastors David Murrow and Edward Mintz in the Nansemond River for encouraging the baptism of confessing believers is an example of persecution of early Baptists. For a synopsis of the persecution of early Baptists, read J.M. Carroll’s *The Trail of Blood* (originally published in 1931) <https://archive.org/stream/TheTrailOfBlood/41344433-The-Trail-of-Blood#page/n0/mode/2up>. Accessed December 13, 2014.

This should cause us to take pause and appreciate what our forbearers undertook for us.<sup>4</sup> My hope is that we continue to identify ourselves as Baptists, even if it means redeeming the name in our culture. Being a Baptist conveys that we believe so greatly in identifying with the death, burial and resurrection of Christ that we are willing to advertise that truth by putting it in the names of our churches! Maybe the loss of the word “Baptist” in our churches’ names and on our church signs, has led newcomers to not understand this precious and long-held doctrine. I recommend we continue to use the word “Baptist” because **baptism through immersion conveys the first cost of discipleship!** Even non-Baptists and non-Christians understand baptism to mean that one is “all-in” as they use the phrase “being baptized by fire.”<sup>5</sup>

After further, but not exhaustive prayer and study, **I am convinced that we should maintain our position that *all* members of Fellowship Baptist Churches must be saved AND baptized by immersion.** I have come to this conclusion by endeavoring

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<sup>4</sup> There is some question as to how committed early Baptists were to immersion. In 1609, English Pastor and Baptist Founder John Smyth led his congregation to reject infant baptism to practice believer’s baptism, but it was not until 1642 that the General Baptists adopted immersion as its practice. FEBPAC raises this point in their document “A Theological Issue Regarding Baptism and Church Membership – A Resource to Assist FEBPAC Discernment.” However, we need to remember that Baptists find their roots ultimately in the New Testament practice of immersion. We should be thankful to the Reformers who recovered the doctrine of grace and we are thankful for the Anabaptists who recovered believer’s baptism, but we don’t think they went far enough in their faithfulness to the Scriptures. Furthermore, we should be thankful for our Baptist founders, but just because they didn’t immerse for the first forty years of their existence does not undermine our conviction of immersion. We would say that their theological rediscovery of immersion was a process, eventually leading us back to the correct mode of baptism.

<sup>5</sup> I think it worth to note that even country singer Carrie Underwood understands the importance of immersion by taking criticism for her song “There’s Something in the Water.” <http://www.axs.com/news/carrie-underwood-stirs-up-controversy-with-atheists-on-something-in-th-22554>. (Accessed January 13, 2015.) If she is willing to stand up for her belief in immersion, why aren’t we as FEB churches?

to answer the following questions from the Scriptures: 1) what is baptism? 2) What is membership? 3) What does it mean for Jesus to call us to radical submission? 4) Should the church change its doctrine and practice to accommodate those who hold a differing view? 5) What about those who cannot be baptized due to a lack of water or are not physically able to be baptized? 6) What might the future be if members do not practice immersion? There might be other relevant questions that I am willing to consider, but these are limitations of this brief paper. Furthermore, this paper is written in a teaching document style with interrogatives, rather than in a thesis format, so that I can use it to teach our church's leadership and congregation.

## **THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM**

**1) What is baptism?** I start with this question because I believe the meaning and mode of baptism are intrinsically connected and for baptism to have its full impact. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ironically written by a Lutheran paedobaptist, states, "The basic conception both of Paul and of the New Testament generally in relation to baptism is that of the cleansing bath. (1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:26; Hebrews 10:22)... Baptism implies participation in the death and resurrection of Christ."<sup>6</sup> This is foundational because some think that in refusing the non-immersed is to uphold the form over the function.<sup>7</sup> However, you can't separate the two. Baptism is more than a ceremony, it is an action and so the form informs the function in a similar way that circumcision was a ceremony, but required only a certain part of the body to be circumcised. To circumcise other parts of the body would not be considered

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<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament – Vol. I* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 540-541.

<sup>7</sup> "A Theological Issue Regarding Baptism and Church Membership – A Resource to Assist FEBPAC Discernment." 2014

circumcision. In a similar way, I believe baptism other than immersion is not a legitimate baptism.

Why? Christian baptism simply means to “dip” or “immerse” under water in the name of the Father, Son<sup>8</sup> and Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> Greek linguists Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker further explain baptism means in Classical Greek “to plunge, sink, drench or overwhelm.”<sup>10</sup> In the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), we find the word βαπτίζω referring “dipping of the morsel in wine (Judges 2:14), of feet in the river (Joshua 3:15) and dipping of the finger in blood by the priest for sacrifices (Leviticus 4:6, 17) and of the dipping of unsanctified vessels in water to be purified (Leviticus 11:32).”<sup>11</sup> In the New Testament, the word βαπτίζω (baptizo) is used typically in the sense to “dip” or “immerse.”<sup>12</sup> Most importantly of these references listed in the footnote below, Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> My spiritual heritage emphasizes including the name of Jesus in the baptismal confession in light of the fact that all baptisms mentioned in the Book of Acts and in the Epistles emphasize being baptized into Jesus Christ. For further study on this subject, please consult my father, Dr. Philip Stairs for his Master’s thesis on “The Problem of the Formula Used with Water Baptism” (Winona Lake School Theology, 1968). I think one of my father’s strongest points in his thesis is his statement, “The question of mode affects the formula. If the correct mode is affusion or pouring, then it can be taken as symbol of the pouring of the Holy Spirit, but instead we are baptized in the name of Jesus and immersion symbolizes his death, burial and resurrection.” (Stairs, 49).

<sup>9</sup> Being baptized by immersion in names other than the Trinity, like the Mormons practice, is not valid.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature – Second Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 131.

<sup>11</sup> Kittel, 535. It is important to distinguish that the priest in Leviticus 4 is dipping or “baptizing” his finger in the blood and then he sprinkled the blood on the altar. These are two separate acts distinguished by two different words in the cleansing process.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 3:6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 16; 21:5; 28:19; Mark 1:4, 8, 9; 10:38, 39; 11:30; 16:16; Luke 3:3, 12, 16, 21; 7:20, 29; 12:50; 20:4; John 1:25, 26, 28, 31 33; 3:22, 23, 26; 4:1, 2; 10:40; Acts 1:22; 2:38, 41; 8:12, 13, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:37, 47, 48; 11:16; 13:24; 16:15, 33; 18:8, 25; 19:3, 4; 22:16; Romans 6:3, 4; 1 Corinthians 1:13, 14, 15, 16, 17; 12:13; 15:29; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5, Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21. The two exceptions would be Acts 1:5, which refers to Spirit-baptism and in 1 Corinthians 10:2.

Himself when baptized was described as “immediately coming up out of the water” (Mark 1:10), which seems to be an allusion to full immersion, rather than just exiting the water of the Jordan River.

Non-immersionists often point to a few exceptions of βαπτίζω (and its cognates) as permission to practice a different mode. They cite the aforementioned passages in the Septuagint or the Greek versions of the Apocrypha to advocate for pouring because that was how βαπτίζω was understood by the Jews in their day. However, we must remember that the Septuagint was written two hundred years before Christ and by then baptism could have evolved to immersion. Furthermore, we don’t find our doctrinal practices in the Apocrypha. Non-immersionists should focus their study of the Septuagint and βαπτίζω on 2 Kings 5:14, where Naaman “εβαπτιατο” or “‘dipped’ seven times” in the Jordan River. If one wants to see how those in Alexandria understood βαπτίζω when translating the Old Testament, this would be the best example.

Non-immersionist’s strongest reference for βαπτίζω being evidence for sprinkling in the New Testament appears to be in Hebrews 9:13-14, “For if the blood of goats and the bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your

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(I’m grateful to Dr. Wayne Baxter who pointed these exceptions out to me.) Both refer to immersion, but not exclusively to water. 1 Corinthians 10:2 is a peculiar reference to when the Israelites miraculously crossed the Red Sea on dry land. It seems the ones “immersed” by water in that instance were the Egyptians who chased the Israelites and were drowned by the waters overwhelming them. However, the Israelites were immersed by the cloud of Moses, which in the context seems to refer to the cloud that held the manifest glory of God (Exodus 13:21-22). In this sense, the Israelites were immersed or covered as the cloud went over them from their front guard to their rear guard (Exodus 14:19).

conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” Presbyterian theologian John Murray states “Baptism symbolizes, represents and seals the application to us of the blood of Christ for the removal of the guilt of sin. The figure used in the New Testament for this application of the blood of Christ is that of sprinkling (Hebrews 9:13, 14, 22; 10:22; 12:24; 1 Peter 1:2).”<sup>13</sup> However, the sprinkling of Christ’s blood was not what saved us, otherwise His circumcision in Luke 2:21 would have made satisfactory atonement. It was His actual death, burial and resurrection that saved us. Christ’s sprinkling of His blood in Hebrews 9:10-23 is an allusion to this sacrifice, not the literal act of sprinkling His blood on an altar.

Another passage that non-immersionists like to use in their argument against immersion is Mark 7:3-4 where the word βαπτισμους (baptismous) is used to describe “the washing of cups and of utensils and of bronze vessels.”<sup>14</sup> However, the washings of these inanimate worship utensils did not exclude full immersion. Most likely, the worship utensils were fully immersed in water, just like what occurs when manually washing dishes. I can still hear my mother’s correction as a boy when I tried to get away with only rinsing or sprinkling water on a dirty cup. The dishes needed to be fully immersed to become fully clean. According to Richard France, “the washing in this case is not merely of the hands, but apparently involves immersion of the whole person. Full immersion in a *miqwâ* as preliminary to worship is well attested both in literary sources and by the

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<sup>13</sup> John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1972), 24.

<sup>14</sup> Some early manuscripts record, “pitchers, kettles and dining couches (tables).” It would be wrong to base a doctrine such as a mode of baptism based on a suspect textual variant. Furthermore, though it is hard to imagine that the Pharisees would fully dip a table in water, they would thoroughly wash the tables by covering it with water – a variation of immersion appropriate for its context.

discovery of the *miqwā'ōt*,<sup>15</sup> at Qumran and in Jerusalem near the Temple site. Furthermore, we find a hint about the extent of water needed for these ceremonial washings by how large the jars were that are mentioned in John 2:6 – each jar was 20 to 30 gallons in capacity. Therefore, we can conclude that even the washings of the Pharisees and their worship utensils were by full immersion. **To baptize in the New Testament is to fully immerse under water.**

Evidence of this truth is found in the early Church's practice of baptism by immersion. According to George Duncan, "The (early church) fathers often refer to baptism... (and) speak of it as immersion."<sup>16</sup> Study of the Early Church Fathers evidences that immersion was the common practice.<sup>17</sup> This paper does not have time to do an in-depth study on all the statements on baptism by the Early Church Fathers, but I will quote from one of the earliest Christian teaching manuals *The Didache* regarding baptism,

With regard to baptism, here is the teaching: You are to baptize in this way. Once you have gone back over all that is in the Two Ways, you baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water. However, if you do not have access to living water, then baptize in some other water; and if you do not have any cold water, then you can use warm water. And if you cannot get access to either (running or still water), then pour water three times on the head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, before the baptism takes place, let both the person baptizing and the person who is going to be baptized fast – along with as many others as are

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<sup>15</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark – NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 282.

<sup>16</sup> George Duncan, *Baptism and the Baptists* (Richmond: The Baptist Foundation of B.C., 1992), 20.

<sup>17</sup> George Duncan quotes extensively the Early Church Fathers in *Baptism and the Baptists*. Everett Ferguson in his book *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009) is another great resource on the subject and provides primary source material.



able to do so. Indeed, you must instruct the person who is going to be baptized to fast one or two days before the baptism.<sup>18</sup>

We need to remember that *The Didache* is not Scripture, but it does give insight into the practices of the Early Church. *The Didache* emphasizes baptism by immersion, but allows for pouring in the absence of much water, especially in the desert climates. This exception to the rule proves the rule. Further insight to Early Church practices is found in the oldest denomination, the Eastern Orthodox, which have, throughout their history, consistently immersed new believers three times to acknowledge the Trinity.<sup>19</sup> Also, some authors even argue that early Christian basilicas were designed with facilities for baptism by immersion in mind.<sup>20</sup> Baptismal fountains were later additions to churches. A careful study of the New Testament and Early Church history testifies to the practice of baptism by immersion.

Now that I have described the mode baptism found in the New Testament, I need to delve into its significance. Baptism is more than just the amount of water used or the mode by which it is practiced. The decision of how to be baptized is not like the choice between taking a shower and a bath. No, baptism is a holy act and I follow the rich tradition of Regular Baptists<sup>21</sup> who hold to the fact that God does something unique and special in baptism by immersion. Regular Baptists ironically followed the paedobaptist and a non-immersionist John Calvin, who taught,

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Didache – A Window on the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 166.

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that though the Eastern Orthodox baptize by immersion only, they don't emphasize believer's baptism because they immerse infants.

<sup>20</sup> Duncan, 21.

<sup>21</sup> This term should not be confused with the group of churches called the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (G.A.R.B.C.) in the United States. G.A.R.B.C. churches tend to lean toward an Arminian view, not a Calvinist one.

Baptism is the initiatory sign by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the Church, that being in-grafted into Christ we may be accounted children of God. It is a sign and evidence of our purification. It is a kind of sealed instrument by which the Lord assures us that all our sins are so deleted, covered and effaced, that they will never come into His sight, never be mentioned, never imputed.<sup>22</sup>

Calvin was greatly affected by Romans 6:3-4 where the Apostle Paul taught that baptism “into Christ Jesus, was being baptized into His death.” Calvin said that our baptism “This “shows us our mortification in Christ and new life in him.”<sup>23</sup> Being baptized by immersion powerfully seals in the mind of the believer that their sins were crucified to the Cross and buried with Christ to be raised and walk in newness of life. As Paul David Tripp states, “In baptism ... Christ’s resurrection is our resurrection.”<sup>24</sup> This is why I follow the tradition of quoting Romans 6:3-4 when baptizing people. **I believe God powerfully uses baptism by immersion in the life of believer for sanctification.** There are few better reminders of your identity in Christ than baptism by immersion for the believer. When believers doubt their salvation, we should remind them of Christ’s grace and their baptismal confession.

Nevertheless, I realize that some in our movement might not be impressed with John Calvin’s views, and hold to the General Baptist or Arminian view of baptism as only a symbol. I encourage them to read the book *More than a Symbol* by Dr. Stan Fowler, Professor of Theology at Heritage College and Seminary. Dr. Fowler surveys Baptist history and aids our understanding of the significance of baptism. He reminds us that Baptist theologians and preachers through the centuries have wrestled with words

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<sup>22</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion – Volume II*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 513.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, 515.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy S. Lane & Paul David Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2008), 32.

like “sign,” “sacrament” and “ordinance” to describe baptism. For example, British Baptists wrote the *Second London Confession*, which reads,

Sacraments are holy Signs of the Covenant of Grace immediately instituted by Christ, to represent him and his Benefits, and to confirm our Interest in him, and solemnly to engage us to the Service of God in Christ, according to his Word... There are two Sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>25</sup>

I realize that the term “sacrament” is a term that many in our movement rightly shy away from because our Catholic friends use it to convey that one must do something (actually seven sacraments) for salvation beyond simply trusting in Christ. Baptism could be a “means of grace” in the sense of sanctification (not justification), but we need to stay far away from any notion of baptismal regeneration. Nevertheless, if we stick with baptism being an “ordinance,” one of only two commanded by Christ and practiced communally, then at the very least, it evidences the importance of baptism by immersion. **The commands of Christ are not optional! The lack of baptism will not condemn us, but the rejection of baptism will.** As Dr. Fowler states, “Just as true faith which brings justification demands on-going evidence of good works, so also true faith demands initial expression in baptism.”<sup>26</sup> If baptism by immersion is significant, both Biblically and historically, shouldn’t we then call people to be immersed? Baptism by immersion should be considered less of a stumbling block or spiritual hoop to go through, and more of a calling to declare what Christ has done in a person’s life. Being baptized is a delight and declaration of the exchanged life – our lives for Christ’s.

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<sup>25</sup> Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Fowler, 201.

## DEFINING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

**2) What is church membership?** Church membership at its most basic definition means that one is committed to a local body of believers. A person joins the church by declaring they believe what that particular local body of believers hold to, especially regarding faith in Jesus Christ. This public declaration is often done through baptism. We read about this process in Acts 2:41 (NIV), “Those who accepted his (Peter’s) message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” This verse is one of the strongest cases for church membership in the New Testament and it records belief and baptism by immersion as prerequisites to membership. I do not think we should deviate from such a formula for church membership. Baptism is a call to follow Christ and a call to the local church. As one Anabaptist writer says, “Where there is no water baptism, there is no church.”<sup>27</sup>

## BAPTISM AS RADICAL SUBMISSION TO CHRIST

**3) What does it mean for Jesus to call us to radical submission?** At our most recent National Convention, we passed the Fellowship Direction document. Our first value declares, “We unite together in radical submission to God’s Word resulting in Biblical proclamation and personal transformation.” I interpret this value to mean that we need to call people to the highest form of radical submission to God’s Word. **If we value radical submission, then shouldn’t we call those who come to FEB Churches who have not been immersed to be baptized?** Did not our Lord Jesus Himself demonstrate this when John the Baptist tried to refuse to baptize Him and Jesus declared that He needed to be baptized “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15)? Jesus was willing to

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<sup>27</sup> Rollin Stely Armour, *Anabaptist Baptism: A Representative Study* (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1966), 43.

fulfill all righteousness and be baptized “to accomplish redemption in obedience to the will of God.”<sup>28</sup> We should do nothing less than be willing to fully obey God.

Baptism is that first step of obedience. It is understood as radical. Even non-Baptists understand the significance of being baptized by immersion and often give their family members difficulty when they decide to be baptized by immersion. I teach that people should be baptized by immersion out of obedience to Christ, for the sake of community and for witness. As the Apostle Paul said, “To the Jews, I became a Jew” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Paul even circumcised Timothy for this very purpose of mission to the Jews (Acts 16:3). Is baptizing somebody by immersion as costly as adult circumcision? I think we fear that we might lose people by calling them to radical submission, when in reality people want to give their time to the things that matter most. This is why Jesus always called His disciples to leave everything and follow Him. I repeat: baptism by immersion conveys the first cost of discipleship.

#### **ACCOMODATION OF OTHER VIEWS**

**4) Should the church change its doctrine and practice to accommodate those who hold a differing view?** This is one of the most challenging questions because we want to exercise love to all. Influential Pastor John Piper and the Elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church in St. Paul, Minnesota publically wrestled with this question. We can learn much from Bethlehem Baptist Church’s process.<sup>29</sup> Piper wanted to make sure the door to the local church was not smaller than the door to the Kingdom of God. I believe

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<sup>28</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Commentary – Volume 8*, ed. Frank Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 108.

<sup>29</sup> Bethlehem Baptist Church has posted their process of this issue at [http://cdn.desiringgod.org/pdf/baptism\\_and\\_membership.pdf](http://cdn.desiringgod.org/pdf/baptism_and_membership.pdf). Accessed December 14, 2014.

this is the correct attitude when it comes to belief about the absolute doctrine of salvation by faith alone. However, I think we should remember that the mode of baptism is a “second-order” doctrine. “Second-order” doctrines cause groups of believers to rally around convictions. These convictions and worship preferences have caused denominations to form for the sake of unity, while still respecting the diversity of other churches’ beliefs. This upholds our Evangelical ecumenicalism, while maintaining Baptist conviction. Baptism is one of those “second-order” doctrines that define us as a Fellowship. Churches have chosen to limit their complete autonomy when joining FEB because they agree to unite around immersion (and other doctrines and values). Individuals also choose to limit their convictions to join a church.

Therefore, our practice going forward should be what we do for any area of discipleship. We patiently pray and instruct new believers or the unconvinced to study what the Bible teaches (2 Timothy 2:24-26). We don’t change our convictions to encourage growth; we call people to become convinced themselves. It has been my experience over my eighteen years of pastoral ministry that many of the non-immersed have reconsidered and joyfully been baptized by immersion after going through the exercise of studying baptism in the New Testament. They testify that there was something holy different about getting immersed. If baptism was a matter of conscience before studying the New Testament on the subject, it often becomes a matter of conviction after thorough study.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Baptism is not simply a matter of conscience because it is an explicit command of Christ (Matthew 28:19) and the Apostles (Acts 2:38). Therefore, the choice to be baptized is not the same as the choice to consume alcohol or not as mentioned in Romans 14:21. When calling people to be baptized, we are not placing a stumbling block before them, but an opportunity to obey Christ and to grow spiritually.

## PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS FOR BAPTISM

**5) But what about those who cannot be baptized due to a lack of water or are not physically able<sup>31</sup> to be baptized?** The lack of water would be rare indeed and not an issue in Canada, which has the largest supply of fresh water in the world. There would almost certainly be a lake or river nearby to be baptized in. If in winter the waterways were frozen, baptism could be delayed a few months. The point is that people work hard at finding water to drink and they should work hard at finding water to be baptized in.

Others cite that the thief on the cross was not baptized (Luke 23:39-43) and try to make a case that baptism is optional. However, I'm sure the thief on the cross would have loved to come down from his cross and be baptized declaring his faith in Christ, but he didn't have the opportunity to do so. The Early Church responded to this question of baptizing the infirmed by performing what was called "clinical baptisms." "It was more of a ceremony where the infirmed declared their faith in Christ, but weren't immersed. These non-immersed were called 'clinics,' not Christians, until they recovered and were fully immersed in baptism."<sup>32</sup> I am not proposing that we call the non-immersed "clinics," but I've attempted to show how seriously the Early Church took baptism by immersion. These rare exceptions prove the rule of being baptized by immersion.

The Early Church reminds us that we should stick to our convictions. If a person from another church proposed that we include in our Statements of Faith that speaking in tongues is the evidence of salvation or that we should no longer use instruments in

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<sup>31</sup> It is has been my experience that people delay getting baptized due to a fear of public speaking or a fear of water. In both cases, I remind them that God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit were at Jesus' baptism and God would be with them as well at their baptism. Romans 1:16 and 8:31 are excellent verses to encourage the timid.

<sup>32</sup> Duncan, 20. Duncan does not describe what the status was of those who didn't recover and were not baptized.

worship, we would not change our practices to accommodate them. Instead, we would lovingly encourage them to find a church that holds their conviction. Therefore, I don't think we should accommodate those who hold a differing view. There are many believers who do not accept immersion only. If they want to join our churches, they are required to be immersed. This change would mean we are joining them. Who should be joining whom? And what is the next group we decide to join? The reality is that **if someone really believed in baptism by immersion only, he or she would be baptized by immersion.**

Nevertheless, if the Fellowship votes to give greater autonomy to individual churches to decide what constitutes a member, I believe each FEB Church should stay within the Fellowship because one should only leave over first-order doctrinal deviancy. My hope is to encourage Temple Baptist Church, Cambridge to remain in the unity no matter the outcome of the decision. I see it as a great problem to leave and potentially risk our witness for Christ to the communities we find ourselves in, by being divisive over a second over doctrine.

## **THE FUTURE FOR BAPTISTS**

**6) What might the future be if members do not practice immersion?** This last question is one only of speculation. To join a church means that one is encouraged to serve based on their gifts. If the non-immersed join FEB Churches, could we have in the future elders and pastors who don't hold to our precious doctrine of baptism by immersion and teach the mode of baptism is not important or worse, that baptism is not important? **Will we still be Baptists?** I know we are not proposing to jettison the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper and become like our friends at the Salvation



Army. However, if baptism by immersion has been a core conviction of our FEB Churches and we are willing to let the non-immersed join us as members, what will our churches hold as convictions in the future? This is not a “slippery slope” argument based on fear, but a legitimate concern.

## **SUMMARY**

At first, I thought this issue raised at our National Convention was a distraction from being on mission with Jesus. Why is this issue now being raised? Why change now? It is unsettling. Have we discovered our practice was wrong or at least too narrow? As an adjunct professor at one of our Bible College and Seminary partners, I applaud the quest for new scholarship, but I don't see new definitions of βαπτίζω and its cognates being discovered, only reinforcing baptism by immersion. Why would our theologians and leaders point us in a new direction? I will choose to assume their positive intent to be more inclusive, though I still uphold the call to be more radical submissive to Christ.

I also questioned whether there is sufficient benefit to changing our position to compensate for what could be very divisive to our Fellowship, especially since this change would only accommodate a few. However, I realized this question of accepting the non-immersed into church membership could be used by God to further clarify what we believe and more importantly challenge us to call people to the most radical submission to God's Word – to deny ourselves and take our cross daily and follow Him through teaching and practicing baptism by immersion only. Then we can all heartily proclaim that we have, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”