

Paper #2
from Paul Dreblow
Concerning the Baptism and Membership Proposal
Paul was one of the dissenting elders.
It seemed wise to us that his views be made available.

10/28/02

Fellow pastors of His flock,

In preparation for our meeting on Monday the 28th [October, 2002] I wanted write again to address some issues that were touched upon by John Piper in his response to my original paper (attached below) and/or were raised in subsequent meetings. Personally I feel very humbled and blessed by God to be able to have devoted a more focused amount of time on an issue that has been on my “screen” on and off the past several years.

I believe that we must work hard to avoid any unnecessary wrangling about words, foolish controversies and ignorant speculation (2 Tim. 2:16, 23; Tit. 3:8) while at the same time “contending earnestly for the faith...” (Jude 4) with the goal of our (mutual) instruction being love (1 Tim. 1:5). I hope and pray that anything I have said or written has been done in that spirit and for that purpose.

Along those lines I will say that I personally have been challenged and instructed by John’s response to concerns raised particularly in the area of “essentialness” (or doctrinal priority) and the area of Biblical unity and relationship to the wider kingdom of God (the latter issue is certainly a growth area for me). He highlights the issues well and really gives me pause in deliberations. In fact, I think both of these (“essentialness” and “unity-relationship to the wider body”) are core issues that, at least in my view, have surfaced as the primary questions for our present deliberation.

To begin with it seems clear that we are in agreement that the current practice and teaching of “believers’ immersion baptism as pre-requisite to membership” is not under question but rather the idea of an exception being made to it on occasion as the need arises as has been outlined earlier. The proposal is that our teaching stays the same but our practice may on occasion deviate from current practice to make room at the membership level for some convinced Paedobaptists.

I. The Question of “essential” or “cardinal” doctrine:

On Numerous occasions the statement has been made regarding whether baptism and/or the timing and mode of baptism is important enough to exclude someone from membership in a local church (see statement #1 under “rationale” in John Piper proposal dated 8/26/02 and several times mentioned in response to my concerns above, under #2: “The essentialness of Baptism” and the same under “C” concerning major and minor doctrine, also #4 C). This also came up with our discussions with Campus Outreach. What is most troubling is that neither of us has yet to suggest why something should be considered “essential” or “major” vs. “minor.” Normally appeal is made to historical precedent or the “Fundamentals” of the faith. However there still remains a certain degree of *subjectivity* in those responses. Here is an attempt to define some **objective, biblical criteria for determining what is “major” and “minor” doctrine and practice (not given in order of priority):**

- a. Does the text itself indicate that for the author/speaker this was a priority/essential? I.e.- in 1Cor. 2:2, Paul writes, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” For Paul (specifically in this text) at least the doctrine of Christ and specifically his crucifixion (and derivative teachings) was *essential*, so much so that above everything else he imparted to the Corinthians this one aspect stood out, namely

his crucifixion.

- b. How often does a teaching occur; how many times is the word or concept/practice referred to? While this alone may not necessarily indicate a doctrine of major importance, it may at least lead us to investigate further (through application of other hermeneutical principles) as to the possibility of such.
- c. Is the teaching or practice somehow directly tied to theological concepts/realities which, if we were to take them away or otherwise distort would render our understanding of Christianity as void of the very heart and essence of the tenants that comprise biblical faith? In this list we would certainly include doctrine surrounding the Attributes/character of God, The person and work of Christ, the authority of scripture, the fall of man, the second coming etc. None of these can be taken away or distorted without causing serious damage (“erosion”) to the faith once handed down. Related or derived/corollary teachings may then be deemed “essential” or “major” due to their intimate connection to a doctrinal area previously deemed more essential.
- d. Has the church over the ages dealt with this topic-doctrine and to what degree has history proven it to be of greater or lesser import? This is not to say that a significant part of the body of Christ may not have been wrong through the ages (a glance at the history of the middle ages will verify this) on a particular doctrine but humility and wisdom dictate the need to take a look back in time and see where our forefathers stood on issues.
- e. Is the teaching/practice under review one which may not have been deemed “essential” in the past or in a different culture, but now given the time and current socio-religious environment in a particular target culture it is deemed essential or of major importance? Wayne Grudem deals with this idea as reason for including such topics as “spiritual warfare” and “male-female roles/relationships” in his list of topics in his theology book. Culture may “force” the church to elevate certain truths in order to offset the onslaught of false and worldly philosophies in a particular area.

The above list, while not exhaustive, gives us some concrete, more or less objective grids by which we can navigate the sometimes “murky” doctrinal waters we may find ourselves in. What can we say in these regards concerning the *doctrinal basis and practice of believer’s immersion baptism*?

1. It has been stated that this is not a “major or essential doctrine” at least in reference to its timing and mode if not the entire ordinance itself when it comes to the question of exclusion or inclusion from membership. Possibly we need to clarify, “*essential as pertains to what?*” If we limit our discussion strictly to the area of salvation then I would agree that nothing other than God-given faith is *essential for salvation*. But I think this arbitrarily limits the discussion. That faith has historically had attached to it a firm belief in the deity of Christ, the authority of scripture, the trinity etc. However the question of essentialness can/should also be brought to bear upon the entirety of the Christian life *what happens after a person is born again (i.e. the process of sanctification)*. At this point we would certainly want to include the practice of believer’s immersion baptism. The great commission alone (Matt. 28:19- the command to baptize in the name of the triune, glorious God!) and the practice of the apostles and the NT church (see Acts ref. in earlier paper and passages to follow) verify that this doctrine is not a minor one.. In fact other texts make it very apparent that there is an intimate connection between believers immersion baptism and salvation.

Acts 2:38: “...repent and let each of you be **baptized** in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts: 22:16: “and now why do you delay (does this hint at the importance?) arise and be **baptized** and wash away your sins, calling on His name.

Rom. 6:3,4: “Or do you not know that all of us who have been **baptized** into Christ Jesus have been **baptized** into his death, therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death”

Gal. 3:26,27: “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were **baptized** into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (note the close association of saving faith leading to salvation which is then testified to by the act of immersion baptism)

1 Pet. 3:21: “ and corresponding to that, **baptism** now saves you- not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience- through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (difficult as this verse is to render, if the word “appeal” can refer to pledge or even prayer as some believe this could suggest that the act of baptism is the believer’s outward response of faith, settling in his conscience that Christ in fact has saved him; but the saving power of baptism is in the fact that it looks – in faith- to the supremacy of Christ’s resurrection)

While much could be said , **the above verses at least show that baptism is not just an issue of secondary importance or a minor doctrine.** Here I would have to concur with Beasley Murray (pg. 32) that “*understanding baptism as a beautiful and expressive symbol and nothing more is irreconcilable with the New Testament.*”

2. On the other hand it apparently is essential enough to exclude *some people who hold other baptism views* (such as the strict sacramental view of the Roman Catholic or others). This appears to be a double standard and could prove difficult to explain to the uninitiated.
3. Examination of key texts (as in Acts in earlier paper) will show that *no other baptismal practice was carried out in the NT church.* Furthermore we must be careful not to construct an artificial dichotomy between the practice of baptism and its timing and mode. This seems to be the crux of the issue. Are we denying the importance of the practice itself or only the particular mode/timing? It has not been clear in my mind at times what we are debating. I contend both are important. To say that the doctrinal practice may be essential but its specific timing or mode is not, in essence moves us in the direction of denying the importance of grammatical-historical exegesis. That type of conclusion tends towards a denial of author centered interpretation and adherence to absolute meaning as determined by the words used. **In this case the essential practice is defined by the timing and mode- baptism by immersion of the professing believer.**
4. John Piper suggested that my way of thinking is dangerous because I am making something “essential” that is clearly not but in fact is of “secondary” importance. But again there is no clear, compelling textual reason set forth for this judgment. I still hold (and hope!) that I am neither “raising” the issue up or lowering it down to “secondary status” I am simply trying to appeal to the word of God and say, only what the scriptures seem to be saying. There is great “weight” when it comes to the importance of baptism.
5. John also suggests (under #2C of original document) that if we make exceptions as is planned then we will in actuality “probably increase not decrease personal and congregational consciousness of the true NT teaching on Baptism. It will not reduce our vigilance but increase our understanding of what differentiates one baptism from another.” I wrestled with this and could not understand the point being made. In effect this reasoning seems to say, “lets allow some people who hold to the unbiblical thinking into membership by granting exceptions so that then people will see how correct our position is.” This appeared to me be a complex and somewhat confused way of reasoning. **If we want to increase our vigilance and congregational consciousness of the true NT teaching why not just constantly teach it and at the same time explain why other views are errant?**

II. Other pastoral issues which relate to the idea of bringing about a particular form of unity with others (such as Presbyterians) which give me pause:

1. Will making an exception bring about unity with other groups?

What will be the “net gain” of making such an allowance? I still find it hard to be persuaded that the gain of a deeper fellowship or affiliation with certain Presbyterians is enough to move us towards making exceptions to a teaching so clearly stated in scripture. The unity that we are to pursue is founded upon truth as Jesus made clear in John 17:20: “I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in me through their word.” It’s the word/teaching/message around which we must pursue unity, that message certainly centers on himself, the Word of God come in the flesh (i.e. the gospel) and would also include his command to “go and make disciples baptizing them...” As I have tried to show above this too, is an integral and “inaugural” aspect of the life of a disciple which derives clearly from his word or message. **Therefore we pursue and preserve closest unity with those who hold to this message (Jn. 17:20). With others, we do as its stated in the TBI statement of faith (paraphrased), “...keep the boundaries (the denominational or doctrinal differences) but love across them.”** We can certainly “bless and be a part of” the reformed resurgence that John speaks of without compromising on a doctrinal practice that is at the heart of what it means to follow as a disciple of Christ.

2. What about disunity within the BGC?

On the other hand a compromise on our current membership practice raises an issue related to unity amongst our Baptist brethren. I think we all desire to be Bible believers first and Baptist second. While I have been blessed in various ways by my relationship with the BGC in the past, I personally have no deep seated commitment to the denomination of the BGC as an organizational entity. Yet the fact remains that we are *Bethlehem Baptist and we are part of the Baptist General Conference*. **Whether or not our affiliation would be revoked we need to at least question the integrity of belonging to such a group and claiming a certain name when we are no longer purely Baptist (ff. the prescribed NT teaching) in our membership practice.** So an exception clause which may bring unity on one hand may bring disunity on another. It will almost certainly bring disharmony among elements of the body of Christ if the issue is pursued.

3. What exactly is the nature of “membership”?

I referred to this in the previous paper. No doubt this is maybe an even larger issue than the one under consideration. There are two elements to consider:

A. It has been brought up at our meetings that maybe we need to look at the whole underlying issue of how we understand membership in relationship to the biblical text. Honestly its hard to defend anything other than “if you’re in Christ, your in the Church (universal and local)- period” from an appeal to the Word. To be saved by grace is to be adopted into His family (Eph. 1.5) “one body, and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith , one baptism...” (Eph. 4:4,5 see also 2:19-23). Having said that, lets remember that Baptism went “hand in glove” along with conversion in the preaching and practice of the early church. I think it highly likely that the apostles would have had trouble understanding the concept of “unbaptized member” of the body of Christ. Membership as we practice it is likely permissible by NT teaching and it certainly has some spiritual benefits given our current cultural mindset with its disdain for commitment and accountability. Similarly, when it comes to membership let’s remember that we ask people to sign a covenant as a pre-requisite to becoming a member. In essence these too become “membership criteria.” Certainly allowing people into membership who hold to and have participated in the biblical view of baptism is by far “more essential” than whether or not one has “regular devotions” or is “faithful in their engagements” (whatever that means?).

Maybe we really need to step back from all of this and ask, **“is membership, as we practice it Biblical?”** This is a separate discussion. But as is stated above and, as we believe, it is an acceptable practice. *If membership as we practice it means anything it at least means a willingness to follow the NT teachings and practice of believers immersion baptism. This would be a minimal standard for membership as it not only upholds the primacy given it by the Lord*

Jesus himself (Matt. 28:19) and the apostles but also lends itself towards insuring (assuming its performed on the regenerate) a regenerate membership

B. Can we really say (JP's #6 point on my #2C) "the issue is measure of agreement on a secondary doctrine that is required for membership in the local church?" As stated above I do not believe Baptism is a "secondary" doctrine. As to measure of agreement I appeal to Paul's admonition:

"Now I exhort you brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10 see also Phil. 1:27-30, Eph. 4:1-3).

Can we pursue unity amongst ourselves as shepherds of this flock by creating an exception clause to a teaching that is so foundational to discipleship?

4. If I follow most of our discussions we agree that any other practice/teaching on baptism is patently unbiblical (I think other terms have also been used like "defective" or "weak") so really, the question should be asked *why do we want to then begin to offer exceptions?* Is the perceived gain worth the risk in terms of possible confusion, doctrinal compromise, and difficult pastoral practice? Will it lead to an atmosphere of other exceptions?
5. Reference has been made to "unintentional disobedience to ceremonial requirement" needing to be put into a different category than intentional disobedience (#5 8-26-02 proposal). Yet for some, especially for those who have since been taught the truth it is no longer "un" but "in"- as in intentional disobedience. I would not want to describe baptism as a mere "ceremonial" requirement. I think you could say a wedding done in front of a group of friends in a particular way is a "ceremonial requirement,"¹ but not baptism. For *many believers baptism is at the heart of what it means to have a regenerate church membership.*
6. The dilemma of problematic pastoral precedent setting:

Mentioned in the previous paper. If we make exceptions then who decides; over what criteria? How do we follow up and teach them correctly? Do we have time and energy to do this? Are we creating de-facto a two-tiered membership? With enough Paedobaptists in membership it will become increasingly uncomfortable to address these issues with frankness and candor.

My desire has been to show baptism (incl. timing and mode) is not just an issue of secondary importance and therefore when dealing with issues related to membership and unity in the wider body it does not seem necessary or helpful to pursue baptismal exceptions.

Thank you so much brothers for giving me the opportunity to put these items out before you. I love the spirit with which we have approached this. The issue looms large; I pray God will give us the grace to shepherd with integrity of heart and skilful hands in this particular issue.

To His Glory and Supremacy!

Paul

¹ The issue of Rom.14-15 and how it might relate to this argument is dealt with in another paper. Suffice to say the issue of Baptism, a clear and essential ordinance set forth in scripture is not in the same genre as the dietary and Sabbath laws Paul is dealing with in those chapters. Neither would it be correct to say paedobaptists possess a weak conscience; in fact their conscience-conviction is quite strong, but not correct when it comes to baptism.

