

GOING PUBLIC

Why Baptism Is Required
for Church Membership



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Chapter 1

Setting the Stage

Whole chapter online at

http://www2.bhpublishinggroup.com/PDF/9781433686207_sampCh.pdf

Why would anyone write a whole book arguing that baptism is necessary for church membership? Is this even a debate worth having?

Not all debates are. Sometimes it's better just to walk away: "Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge" (Prov 14:7). Sometimes, though, the gospel itself is at stake, which calls for public dispute: "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned" (Gal 2:11).

This book is about an issue that falls somewhere between "just walk away" and "the gospel is at stake." It's not the Trinity, but it's not the color of your church's carpet. It lives somewhere in that vast, neglected real estate between "essential to salvation" and "not worth bothering about." You're reading this book, so presumably you don't think the question is a total waste of time, but it still helps to take a good look at what's at stake before we dive in. So in this chapter I'll give a few reasons this issue is worth arguing about.

That's one among a handful of stage-setting enterprises which will occupy our attention in this chapter. First, I'll clarify what this book is and isn't about. Second, as advertised, I'll give an account of why this is a debate worth having and why I'm entering it. Third, I'll lay out various positions in the debate, clarify some key terms, and describe the position I'll be taking. Fourth, I'm going to discuss two theological issues I think are crucial for getting this issue right and that haven't received the attention they deserve. Fifth, I'll comment on the shape the whole book takes in light of its effort to

Key Terms at a Glance	
Closed Membership / Open Membership	Whether baptism is or is not required for church membership
Close Communion / Open Communion	Whether baptism is or is not required for participation in the Lord's Supper
Close Communion / Closed Communion	Whether baptized members of other churches may participate in the Lord's Supper ("close"), or only the members of that local church ("closed")
Occasional or Visiting Communion	Participating in the Lord's Supper in one church when one is a member of another
The Open-Closed Position	Requiring baptism for membership but not the Lord's Supper

Jamieson is going to argue for closed membership, close communion, including occasional or visiting communion. He will not endorse the open-closed position.

Clearing Ground

For many Christians today the stance that no genuine Christian should be excluded from church membership because they were “baptized” as an infant rather than as a believer seems almost self-evidently right. To argue against it seems narrow and judgmental. But why? That’s our subject for this chapter.

In what follows I’m going to outline six reasons open membership can seem intuitively right and closed membership intuitively wrong. And I’m going to try to show why those factors shouldn’t decide the question in advance. Before we make a biblical and theological case for why baptism is required for membership, this chapter clears the ground to make sure we build on a smooth, level plane.

The six plausibility structures for open membership I'd like to shake up are: (1) today's culture of tolerance; (2) a pendulum swing on church discipline and denominational divisions; (3) evangelicals' cooperative DNA; (4) evangelical essentialism; (5) advancing secularism and the need to stick together; and (6) no one likes being the odd man out. These six plausibility structures interlock in many ways, some of which I'll tease out as we go.

Chapter 3

Where Faith Goes Public: (Most of) a Theology of Baptism

Headlines

Baptism is where faith goes public (Acts 2:38–41). It is Jesus' appointed means by which someone nails their colors to the mast as one of his followers.

In addition to serving as a public profession of repentance and faith in Christ, baptism signifies forgiveness and cleansing (Acts 2:38), union with Christ (Rom 6:1–4), new life in Christ (Col 2:11–12), the gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13), and the dawning new creation in Christ (Rom 6:5, 8–10).

All who claim to believe in Christ are obligated to be baptized (Matt 28:19).

Because baptism is where a believer's faith goes public, infant baptism simply isn't baptism, and churches should not treat it as baptism.

Chapter 4

The Initiating Oath-Sign of the New Covenant

Headlines

Baptism is a sign of the new covenant and embodies the newness of the new covenant (Isa 54:13; Jer 31:33). Baptism pictures God's promises fulfilled.

More specifically, baptism is the initiating oath-sign of the new covenant. It is an enacted vow whereby a person formally submits to the Triune Lord of the new covenant and pledges to fulfill the requirements of the new covenant (Matt 28:19; 1 Pet 3:21).

The new covenant creates a visible people, and one becomes a visible member of that people through baptism. One may not be counted among the people of the new covenant until one has undergone its initiating oath-sign.

Chapter 5

The Passport of the Kingdom

Headlines

The keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:18–19; 18:18) function as a church-constituting charter which grants the local church the authority to publicly affirm those who credibly profess faith in Christ.

The church's initial and initiating exercise of the keys of the kingdom is baptism (Matt 28:19). In baptism the individual speaks to God and the church, and the church speaks for God to the individual.

Baptism, therefore, is both the passport of the kingdom and a kingdom citizen's swearing-in ceremony. It both identifies someone as a member of Christ's kingdom and inaugurates him into the public office of kingdom citizenship, that is, church membership.

Normally, then, baptism confers church membership. In ecclesial terms, baptism is an effective sign: it creates the reality to which it points. To baptize someone *is* to add him to the church (Acts 2:41). Baptism binds one to many.

Chapter 6

One Bread, One Body: The Lord's Supper and the Local Church

Headlines

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is intrinsically related to the church. This is seen in that it is a transformation of the Passover (Luke 22:7–20); it is a communal participation in the benefits of Jesus' death (1 Cor 10:16; 11:17ff.); it is the renewing oath-sign of the new covenant (Luke 22:20); and it is celebrated by the church, as a church, and it entails responsibility for the church (1 Cor 11:17ff.).

In the Lord's Supper we repeatedly ratify the new covenant, renewing our trust in Christ and commitment to his people. The Lord's Supper is therefore an effective sign of the local church's existence as a church. It binds many into one.

Therefore, you must be baptized in order to participate in the Lord's Supper. You must perform the initiating oath-sign of the covenant before you can participate in the renewing oath-sign of the covenant.

The Lord's Supper should only be celebrated by local churches as churches. It normally entails membership in a local church. And a gathering which regularly celebrates the Lord's Supper is a church. Why? Because the Lord's Supper, like baptism, is an effective sign of church membership.

Chapter 7

Badges of Belonging: Church Membership and Its Effective Signs

Headlines

A church is born when gospel people form a gospel polity, and the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are the effective signs of that polity.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper give the church visible, institutional form and order. They knit many into one.

"Church membership" names the relation which the ordinances create. The ordinances mold the church into a shape called "membership."

Therefore, we can't remove baptism from membership because without baptism, membership doesn't exist. That would be like speaking of a marriage with no vows. Marriage is a covenant relation constituted by vows; membership is a covenant relation constituted by the oath-signs of the ordinances.

When a church extends membership to someone who hasn't been baptized, they misunderstand what church membership is and grant the label to something which lacks the reality.

Jesus has appointed baptism to be a person's initial entry into the church. Baptism is the front door of the church; there's no other way in.

Chapter 8

Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership: A Summary

Headlines

Because baptism is how a church publicly identifies someone as a Christian, it's also a necessary criterion by which a church recognizes who is a Christian.

Baptism is like the team jersey of Christianity: it identifies Christians so the church can recognize them.

It's not enough for someone to claim to be a Christian, or for everyone in the church to think someone is a Christian; Jesus has bound the church's judgment to baptism. Jesus gave us baptism, in part, so we can tell one another apart from the world.

Church membership is a statement by the church, not by an individual Christian.

Because membership is a prerogative of the church, and the church speaks for Jesus, the church may extend membership only to those whom Jesus has authorized to be members. And baptism is among the criteria Jesus has given the church for recognizing and affirming Christians.

Chapter 9

Answering Objections

Headlines

Baptism draws the line between the church and the world. We are not at liberty to draw it elsewhere.

Church membership is defined by the ritual privilege of participating in the Lord's Supper, and Jesus has appointed baptism as its ritual prerequisite. Paedobaptists are denied membership because they lack not the substance of a credible profession but its form.

You can't make Christians into a church without baptism and the Lord's Supper. Therefore, in order to have a church together, you need to agree not just about essential gospel doctrine but about the proper practice of the ordinances.

Chapter 10

Turning the Tables

Headlines

The open-membership position (1) builds on error; (2) requires churches to accommodate not just error but willful inconsistency; (3) privileges the individual conscience over the authority of the local church; (4) either creates unbiblical distinctions among a church's members or requires a church to pare down its convictions; (5) overreaches, that is, it tries to resolve a tension that's beyond our power to resolve; (6) arbitrarily privileges the Lord's Supper over baptism; and (7) effectively makes baptism optional.

You can't put error regarding baptism into the structure of the church. Why? Because baptism, along with the Lord's Supper, *is* what structures the church.

No church can be obligated to accommodate someone's attempt to compromise his own convictions. Nor can the church be required to endorse indifference to a divine ordinance.

If an individual's conviction trumps the church's confession, it's not the church that has authority but the individual.

The approval of paedobaptism intrinsically undermines a convictional confession of credobaptism.

If something is optional for church membership, it's optional for the Christian life. A church may verbally insist that all believers must be baptized, but if they accept unbaptized persons to membership, they permit those persons to persist in disobedience to Jesus.

Chapter 11

Practicing Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Church Membership

Section Headings:

A Transition Plan

The Lord's Supper: Fences and the Family Meal

Baptism: Into the Church, by the Church

Membership: Making it Meaningful

To Picture, Promote and Preserve the Gospel

Appendix

Explaining Why Baptism Is Required for Membership in Three Minutes

Why must someone be baptized as a believer in order to join a local church? Because church membership is a public affirmation of someone's public profession of faith in Christ, and Jesus has appointed baptism as the means by which his followers publicly profess their faith in him. A church can't affirm the profession of someone who hasn't yet made that profession.

Baptism is how you publicly identify yourself with Jesus and with his people (Acts 2:38–41). It is how you visibly signify that you are united to Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:1–4). It is how you become identified before the church and the world as one who belongs to the Triune God (Matt 28:19). It is how you publicly embrace Jesus as your Savior and submit to him as Lord (1 Pet 3:21).

Baptism is where faith goes public. It is how you nail your colors to the mast as Jesus' disciple. Therefore baptism is how a new Christian shows up on the whole church's radar as a Christian. Baptism is like a jersey that shows you're now playing for Jesus' team. Because of this purpose Jesus has assigned

to baptism, a church may publicly identify itself only with those who have publicly identified with Jesus in baptism.

Baptism is a wordless vow, a symbolic promise to follow Christ in the fellowship of his church. The Lord's Supper is another wordless vow, in which you repeatedly own Christ as your Savior and his people as your people (1 Cor 10:16–17; 11:17–34). On one level church membership is nothing other than ongoing admission to the Lord's Supper. And no one can renew his vow to Christ who has not first made that vow in the form appointed by Christ. No one can be identified with the body of Christ who has not first identified with Christ and his body. Baptism necessarily precedes the Lord's Supper like entering the front door necessarily precedes sitting down at the family meal.

But what about infant baptism? If baptism is where faith goes public, then infant baptism simply is not baptism, and those who have been “baptized” as infants need to be baptized—for the first time—as believers. It's not that the first baptism was somewhat lacking, so there needs to be a do-over. Instead, the first “baptism” wasn't baptism at all, and a believer who has not yet been baptized needs to obey Christ's first command in order to enter his church. We who are convinced of believers' baptism must love our paedobaptist brothers and sisters in Christ. In this case the best way to love them is to help them see that they have not yet obeyed Jesus' first command, and they need to.