

INDIFFERENTISM AND RIGORISM IN THE CHURCH:
WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR BAPTIZING SMALL CHILDREN

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ONE'S understanding of the church affects one's understanding of baptism. Therefore I propose to open further discussion between paedobaptists and baptists by an indirect route, through looking at the church and its membership.

In comparison with New Testament standards, our practice concerning church membership can be either too loose (indifferentist) or too restrictive (rigorist). Errors of both kinds arise from poor understanding of the roots of communal Christian life. Hence we start by examining those roots.

I. The Heart of the Church

Genuine Christian community arises from the power of God. Through the Holy Spirit we are united to Christ and participate in "every spiritual blessing" in the heavenly realms in Christ (Eph 1:3). Our union with Christ also unites us to Christian brothers and sisters, and makes us part of one family under God (1 Cor 12). Hence, at the heart of the church stands our union with Christ.¹

Jesus Christ is Lord over the church (Eph 5:24). The church is not a private club, with rules determined in whatever way the members wish, but a community ruled by Christ. Hence, membership in a visible Christian community ought to be determined not by an arbitrary set of rules and regulations, nor by the autonomous decision of Christian leaders, but by the authority of Christ. We are obliged to receive all whom Christ instructs us to receive. And conversely, we are obliged to exclude those whom Christ instructs us to exclude. We receive repentant sinners, even though they are imperfect, while we exclude upstanding, moral, self-sufficient "righteous" people who refuse to acknowledge Christ's saving work.

Because union with Christ is at the heart of our salvation, some people have inferred that the church consists only of those who are regenerate, that

¹ In my discussion I will presuppose that Reformed theology accurately represents the Bible's teaching about salvation. God promises that all those who are savingly united to Christ will persevere to the end (Matt 10:22) and be saved at the last day (John 6:39,51,54,58; Rom 8:28-29). People who disagree will still be able to follow large amounts of my argument; but they must understand that my argument uses terminology consonant with Reformed theology.

is, only those savingly united to Christ. But only God knows perfectly who these people are. "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tim 2:19)—but we do not. In fact, the visible church includes wolves and hypocrites as well as the genuine sheep (that is, those who are regenerate). 1 John 2:19 indicates that some people "went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us." These people were not regenerate: "none of them belonged to us." But they were for a time members of the visible church: "they would have remained with us." Similarly, in Acts 20:29-30 Paul warns that "savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even *from your own number* men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them."

II. *Continuation in the Church*

If in practice the church does include some unregenerate people, how does church life work? Life continues through continued union with Christ (Col 2:6). As we hear about the grace and power and beauty of Christ, faith and repentance are renewed, hearts are cleansed, spiritual blessings are received, and obedience is deepened. Thus we are to "encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Heb 3:13). This exhortation includes both formal sermons and informal occasions for fellowship.

Suppose now that, after the manner in 1 John 2:18-19, someone has slipped into the community whose heart was not, in the sight of God, genuinely renewed. Renewal might still take place as the person hears the gospel set forth. If someone backslides into sin and lack of repentance, the same gospel is the remedy for his backsliding. If we love people, we will rebuke them for sin and warn of its soul-destroying effects. We will endeavor also to point to Christ as the remedy for their sin. Through such exhortations Christ may give life to people in all conditions—the unregenerate, the regenerate but backslidden, and the regenerate who are growing. We ought always to endeavor to fit our words to the particular needs of the person (Col 4:5-6). But for practical purposes we never need to know infallibly whether people are regenerate or unregenerate.

In all such circumstances we ought to treat all church members as Christians. We give them the love and affection, and also the exhortation, encouragement, and rebuke, that we owe to other members of our spiritual family. If they sin, we exhort them as brothers (1 Tim 5:1-2). If, however, rebukes do not lead to repentance, the unrepentant person must ultimately be cast out of the Christian fellowship and treated as an outsider (Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:5). Even then, we do not know infallibly the state of such a person's heart. In theory, an excommunicated person could still be a regenerate person in serious sin, whom the Lord will yet bring to repentance through his discipline. Note, for example, 1 Tim 1:20, where Paul holds out the

possibility that Hymenaeus and Alexander might “be taught not to blaspheme.” Or the offender might be one who had never been regenerated. Once again, God does not require us to search after knowledge that we cannot have.

In this interaction, membership in the church does make a difference. We are to treat members as Christians and outsiders as non-Christians. We have different responsibilities and duties, assigned by God, depending on whether they share in our Christian community with its fellowship and worship.

We may also note two errors to be avoided. First, we must avoid rigorism. That is, we must avoid requiring everyone to show immediately the full maturity, purity, and consistency in righteousness that come only through Christian growth. The church on earth is a hospital for sinners, not a roll of those already perfected.

Second, we must avoid indifference toward sin. Just because people have professed faith in Christ and joined the Christian community, continued sin does not become less serious. If anything, it becomes more serious, since it is an insult to Christ the Lord of the church (Heb 10:26-31).

We ought not to say, “Well, they are regenerate, so God will take care of them no matter what. We need not exert ourselves to rebuke them.” For one thing, we do not know infallibly whether other people are regenerate. In addition, God has designed the process of encouragement and rebuke within the Christian community to be a *means* by which he enables the faithful to persevere and causes the erring to repent.

We have additional reasons to rebuke people rather than merely leaving them. Leaving a brother or sister in sin is plainly unloving. It is contrary to Christ’s command to love each other, and contrary to the explicit instructions in Matt 18:12-18 and Luke 17:3.

These two errors, indifferentism and rigorism, so opposite in appearance, are in fact two sides of the same coin. We raise the standards of admission to the church unnaturally high (the rigorist error) in order that we may thereafter be able to presume that those who are members are perfectly all right regardless of their continued behavior (the indifferentist error).

III. *Entrance into the Church through Credible Profession of Faith*

Now let us consider entrance into the church. Who is to be allowed to enter the church? We welcome those whom Christ instructs us to welcome. Fundamentally, we welcome the same kind of people who are already in the church. We welcome those who are committed to the gospel and to the process of encouragement and rebuke through which we help one another to persevere.

Hence, the proper practice is to admit adults to the church and to Christian baptism when they give a “credible profession of faith.” They “profess faith,” that is, they acknowledge that they trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for

their salvation. But the leaders or examiners of candidates need not make infallibly sure of the genuineness of this faith. Indeed, they cannot, since no one knows his own heart perfectly, let alone the hearts of others (Jer 17:9). Nor should the examiners try to detect infallible traces of the work of the Holy Spirit at the moment of regeneration. For, as John 3:8 tells us, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit is deeply mysterious, and is known by us only through its effects, not in its ultimate origins.

Moreover, adult professions of faith ought to be “credible,” believable. That is, they must not be undermined by obvious disobedience, lack of repentance, or lack of whole-hearted submission to the Lord. But of course the tests of such credibility must remain reasonable. When leaders examine new converts, they might quite quickly detect areas where people’s speech, their emotional life, and their family life need purging and spiritual growth. For a new convert, credibility does not mean perfection; it means believable willingness on the part of the convert to follow Christ along the road of progressive obedience and progressive sanctification. It is enough that converts have taken the first step, not that they have already proved themselves all at once to have reached the middle or the end of the road.

Here as elsewhere, we must avoid the twin errors of indifferentism and rigorism. First, there is indifferentism. If we do not require profession or credible evidence of repentance, we show indifference. We do not take seriously the fact that Christ rebukes sin.

Second, there is rigorism. We may try to admit only those who are regenerate. But we do not know infallibly who is regenerate. Do we then try to raise our standards to exclude as many hypocrites as possible? We may make the standards higher and higher, in order to exclude cases with the least possible doubt. But the result is that we require at the beginning maturity that Christ brings only along the way.

Rigorism simply misunderstands Christian growth and perseverance. It has a false conception of the purity of the church. It has too much confidence in the ability of leaders to discern people’s hearts, and simultaneously too little confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit within the community to bring about growth and to bring about excommunication in cases of lack of repentance.

Rigorism is bad, but it is nevertheless fairly common in evangelical churches. Many, many evangelicals may sincerely want to avoid rigorism in their hearts and in their personal attitudes. But they nevertheless *practice* rigorism at those times when they formally admit people to church membership. People who become members must agree to a large number of doctrinal standards that the church holds. These standards constitute a rigoristic barrier.

To many church leaders, it seems that there is no good alternative to rigorism. If we admit people easily, then these people through their doctrinal errors will corrupt the doctrine of the church. Hence we would show that we were indifferent to good doctrine. On the other hand, if we require

thorough doctrinal understanding before we admit people to membership, we practice rigoristic exclusiveness. We become a sect, a private club, by excluding many people whom Christ himself freely receives as brothers and sisters in the faith (Rom 8:29; Heb 2:12).

The biblical answer is to distinguish the qualifications of church leaders, the elders, from the qualifications of nonleaders. Elders ought to be not only sound in doctrine (Tit 1:9), but exemplary in their personal lives and family management (1 Tim 3:1-7). Obviously, not every Christian is qualified to be an elder. (There would be no reason for the instructions in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 if it were assumed that everyone who is a member of the church is equally qualified to rule and to make the crucial spiritual decisions in the life of the church!)

The Bible's teaching implies that some modern churches must change their practice of leadership and governance. Churches that have no elders must appoint elders with biblical qualifications. Churches that in practice have the whole congregation vote to decide *all* issues must somehow make sure that elders have an important role. The exact formal arrangements for the role of elders might perhaps vary. But in terms of spiritual realities, we must respect the greater maturity, wisdom, and doctrinal solidity that God has given to some of the older Christians. Otherwise, the weakest and most immature members of the church become a weighty influence against sound doctrine. We become indifferentist by placing control of the church in the hands of the immature. Or else we become rigorist by refusing to admit the immature into the full spiritual privileges of church membership.

Making such changes is not merely a trivial issue. It is the only sound way to avoid the twin dangers of indifferentism and rigorism. That is, it is the only sound way consistently to express Christ's love in the body. Such changes may be painful; they may offend Americans' naive views that everyone is equally qualified for everything. But Jesus did not promise that following him would always be easy or painless.

IV. *Evaluating Professions of Faith*

Now let us consider in greater detail how we are to evaluate professions of faith. What is credible depends on the person and the circumstances. Suppose that a college professor and a mentally retarded adult come before church leaders to be examined. The mentally retarded adult may give only a very simple statement of faith, "Jesus died to take away my badness. Now he is alive. He loves me. He promises to take me to heaven." The college professor, on the other hand, may be more elaborate. In fact, if he were unable to elaborate, we might start asking questions. "Don't you want to learn more about Christ and his greatness? If Christ is Lord, don't you see that your intellectual life must be conformed to what he wants?"

Similarly, an expression of faith from a 19-year-old boy, a 12-year-old, and a 6-year-old must each be treated in its own way. Concerning each of

these, we know that much growth must follow the initial expression of faith. Membership in the Christian community and participation in its family life contributes to this growth. If the growth did not take place, or if there were a rebellion against Christ at a later stage, it would call in question the genuineness of the earlier commitment. But the same is true of normal adults.

In fact, each crisis in life presents us with opportunities to renew and deepen our faith. In any crisis or new challenge, we should try to discover anew the riches and mercy of Christ as they apply to our situation. The 6-year-old girl later reaches puberty. As a teenager she goes away to college. She gets her first full-time job after graduation. She gets married. She has her first child. Someone in the family gets seriously sick or dies. Finally, she confronts old age and the prospect of her own imminent death. In each new circumstance Christ confronts her with the challenge to realize afresh his power, his forgiveness, and his comfort. Moreover, the church, the Christian community, ought to stand along side and be a channel for helping us confront these challenges and respond to them with deeper faith and obedience.

We welcome people while they are still on the way. We do not wait until they have faced all the crises and then say, "Now we are sure that your faith is genuine." Naturally, in the Bible and in the church's teaching we repeatedly hold up examples of mature faith, faith at its deepest and most fervent. We want these examples as models and goals. But we understand instinctively that such maturity comes only gradually, through growth (cf. Phil 3:10-15). It is not to be required instantaneously of a newly converted adult, nor is it to be required of a young person, either a teenager or a child.

Something about the nature of genuine faith also becomes evident through these reflections. Genuine faith, saving faith, includes in its mature and adult form vigorous intellectual apprehension. As adults, we believe many facts and many truths about God and about his promises to us in the Bible. But faith is genuine long before intellectual apprehension reaches its completion. Faith in Christ is trust in a person, not merely assent to a system of doctrine. Trust in a person normally includes some knowledge about the person—propositions. But the ability verbally to articulate such knowledge varies with age and verbal skill. College professors express their faith more articulately than the mentally retarded adult or the 5-year-old child. Christ saves us; our verbal or intellectual abilities as such do not.

It is easy for us to become confused about such matters. It is easy to put improper emphasis on intellectual and verbal apprehension of the truth. When we look at children, we naturally hope that their intellectual apprehension of God's truth will grow, and that their faith will come to maturity. We encourage such growth. Our hopes and our encouragement are quite proper. But if we equate intellectual maturity with the essence of faith, we change salvation from a free gift into the property of those with proper intellectual credentials. And then we contradict the gospel, which tells of

God's mercy to the undeserving, mercy that utterly ignores all supposed human credentials and vaunted abilities (Rom 9:11-12; Tit 3:5-7).

In sum, we must adjust our expectations concerning credible profession when we are dealing with people with less intellectual ability, whether they are children or the mentally retarded. To make such adjustments is simply an implication of Christian love. In love we learn to meet other people on their level and in their capacities; we do not insist that they be like us in every way.

V. Young Children

Let us then consider the situation with young children. We need to listen accurately to young children. Listen to the young children within your church, the children who are being raised in solid Christian homes. Talk with the 5-year-olds. Talk with the 3-year-olds. Talk with the 2-year-olds. Ask them about what Jesus has done for them. Ask whether they love Jesus. Ask whether Jesus loves them. I think that you will hear a lot of credible professions of faith. To be sure, you may have to make some adjustments in interpreting their statements. Many children in evangelical circles have been taught primarily to use the language of "loving Jesus" rather than "trusting Jesus for salvation." But they do think that Jesus is trustworthy, and their love therefore includes an element of trust. "Salvation" may be a difficult word for them, but they know that Jesus can deal with their badness. They cannot articulate the full theology of substitutionary atonement, but they have a basic confidence that Jesus can do whatever it takes to meet their sins. Of course, you will sometimes hear statements that are confused or doubtful, or signs that children do not know what to say. You can in love do a little teaching. Help the children to grow so that their profession is stronger and more credible.

Many of us have not really awakened to what is going on under our noses. Many of these children are Christians. Many of us don't believe so, because we demand adult or quasi-adult maturity first. But, as the above reflections have shown, such a demand is not right.

We might react by reminding ourselves that the faith of children is naive and shallow and may easily be shaken or destroyed by the crises that they will meet as they grow older. *But the same is true of adults who are new to the faith.* On the deepest level, the same is true of us all. We are children in comparison with what we could be. And we would fall away if the Lord did not sustain us. Again, we might object by saying that we may not receive children until we are sure that they will not in fact fall away. We will receive them as Christians only when their faith has been tested and matured. But, as we have seen above, such a procedure is not appropriate even for adults. The problems of backsliding and apostasy are fundamentally the same for adults and for children. The practical realities of backsliding and apostasy do not destroy our obligations to treat adult converts as Christians. We treat

them as Christians *unless and until* they prove themselves otherwise by apostasy. And we encourage, exhort, and strengthen them in every way in order to endeavor to guard them against apostasy (Heb 10:24-25). Likewise with children.

VI. Faith and Individualism

Some people might say that they hesitate with children not because children lack maturity but because they lack full individuality or autonomy in faith. In many ways, children tend to say what their parents want them to say. They believe what their parents tell them. Any profession of faith that a child makes is not totally independent. Children do not act wholly on their own. Hence, their faith seems suspect. How much is just a reflection of their parents? Can we know for sure?

In reply to this type of reasoning, we must consider several interlocking issues. First, just what does it mean to have independent, individual, or autonomous faith? If we push this criterion to an extreme, we would wait until children are old enough to be self-conscious, totally independent individuals. But when and where does such independence exist? Even adults are part of larger social groups that influence them more than we might like to admit. Married adults are not "independent individuals." In practice, many Americans might be satisfied to point to teenagers, because in American society the teenage peer group pulls teenagers strongly away from their parents. It helps make them "independent." But, ironically, they are often enslaved to peer group opinion. One must ask whether such independence is altogether a good thing!

In fact, the Bible criticizes this idea of independence quite strongly. Exod 20:12 commands us to honor our father and mother. God repeats the commandment in the New Testament (Eph 6:1-3; Col 3:20; Matt 15:4). Proverbs instructs us to respect the instruction of father, mother, and people who are older and wiser (see, e.g., Prov 1:8; 4:1-6; 4:13; 13:1; 13:20; 15:5; 15:7; 16:31). The incarnate Son testified that his own life totally repudiated "independence": "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing *by himself*; he can do *only* what he sees his Father doing, . . ." (John 5:19). "*By myself* I can do nothing; I judge *only* as I hear . . ." (John 15:30). Followers of Christ must likewise radically repudiate independence in their relation to Christ: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:24). "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Having submitted to Christ, we also submit to those through whom Christ exercises care over us: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority" (Heb 13:17). Children, in submitting to their parents, submit to God the heavenly Father as well.

The ideal of independent individualism is a peculiarly American and modern Western phenomenon. International students coming to the United States from Third World countries often remark about the extreme individualism of America. They notice it because it does not exist in their native

culture. Neither did it exist in the premodern cultures of the first-century or the Old Testament. People thought of themselves not as isolated individuals but as members and participants in a family, a lineage, a society, and a people.² Making a life-changing “decision” apart from relationship to social communities would have seemed weird. Membership in the Christian church meant participation in the new “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9) formed through Christ’s resurrection. According to Paul’s image in 1 Corinthians 12, we are members of one body, not lopped off, isolated eyes or hands or feet.

Thus, we must be suspicious and critical of this modern individualism. In fact, young children are doing exactly what God says they should be doing when they show respect for Christian parents by trusting them and imitating their faith. Precisely in such ways faith grows and matures. The children’s lack of “independence” at this point is positively desirable and praiseworthy.

These reflections lead us back to our earlier point about maturity. Genuine saving union with Jesus Christ does not require “independence,” emotional maturity, self-sufficiency, self-consciousness-of-my-own-individual-decision-in-distinction-from-my-parents, or any such characteristics. Some of these may come with the process of maturing. But Christ is quite capable of meeting us right where we are, and engendering love for him without our first having to meet certain “qualifications” that characterize only some subclasses of human beings.

VII. *Baptism as a Sign of Entrance into the Visible Church*

Now what about baptism? Who should be baptized? Christians differ over the theological meaning and significance of baptism. Such differences obviously make it more difficult to agree about the practical use of baptism. But I believe many will at least admit this much, that in the New Testament baptism was the primary sign of initiation for admission into the church, the visible, practicing Christian community. In the first century Christians were able to distinguish insiders from outsiders. As far as we know, there were no formal membership rolls, but there was nevertheless a clear, practical distinction between the church and world. Entrance into the church came by baptism. Occasionally people had to be put out by excommunication. In the practical life of the church, there was no such thing as an unbaptized Christian.

For example, Paul says in 1 Cor 12:13, “we were *all* baptized by one Spirit into one body.” With these words Paul assumes that all Christians he

² Some strands of Greek philosophical speculation succeeded to some degree in abstracting people from their native ties; but such speculation contrasted with the perception of common people.

is addressing have been baptized. True, Paul focuses on the internal work of the Holy Spirit, rather than the external use of water in water-baptism. But his argument would lose its force if not every member of the church had been baptized. Similarly, the arguments in Rom 6:3-4, Gal 3:27, Eph 4:5, and elsewhere lose some of their punch unless Paul can rely on the fact that all the Christians he is addressing have been baptized.

Hence, baptism in the name of Jesus functions in the New Testament to mark the beginning of the Christian life.³ Baptism was not merely for those with mature, tested faith, but for those starting the Christian walk. Therefore, in Acts adult converts were baptized when they professed faith. Later in church history, baptism was delayed until after people had gone through catechetical training. But I believe this practice represents a deviation rather than an improvement. Most catechetical training belongs after baptism. Baptism is at the beginning, because it signifies the inception of union with Christ (Rom 6:1-4). Following baptism one enters on a whole lifetime of discipleship, including catechism or doctrinal training that brings us into deeper knowledge of the gospel and the Christian faith.

Now what do we do with children born to Christian parents? The above reasoning implies that they should be baptized at least as soon as they have a credible profession of faith. And what counts as a credible profession? Such profession could be pushed back very early, to the time soon after children begin to verbalize in sentences. If we were to operate in this way, we would not be practicing "infant baptism," but small-child baptism. It would, I believe, be an improvement on typical modern baptistic practice.

Baptistic practice typically waits until children are quite a bit older. Why the delay occurs is not clear. Perhaps some baptists have simply not realized that baptism should mark the *beginning* of life in the Christian community. At times, however, there may be an underlying desire (perhaps not fully thought out) to have tested, mature, "adult" faith first. Such a desire is understandable, since mature faith ought indeed to be held out as a model and a goal. But we make a mistake if we confuse the goal with the minimum starting point. Such confusion is inconsistent with the whole nature of the Christian experience. Christian experience nearly always has small and stumbling beginnings. Moreover, delay in baptism is inconsistent with Christian love, which does not wait for mature proof before embracing brothers in love. It is inconsistent with Christ, who receives us when we come to him, not when we have proved ourselves mature.

³ "... baptism is a sign of beginning the Christian life and therefore of beginning life in the true church as well" (Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 984). Note that baptism has not always marked the beginning of keeping covenant with God. Old Testament saints enjoyed a covenantal relation to God without being baptized. Christian baptism was foreshadowed in the Old Testament by circumcision and cleansing rites. But Christian baptism *as such* specifically celebrates the resurrection of Christ, and is practiced only after Pentecost.

Let me put it another way. With respect to both adults and children, the Christian church is supposed to be neither indifferentist nor rigorist. In contrast to indifferentism, the church devotes itself to continual exhortation and rebuke of both adults and children. It takes seriously the danger of backsliding and apostasy. In contrast to rigorism, the church welcomes even halting professions of faith. The church has “easy” entrance requirements (antirigorism) and a “hard,” disciplined attitude toward perseverance (anti-indifferentism).

Some baptists may nevertheless not agree. They want another solution. They do admit that young children may be believers. They are quite willing to receive them as brothers in the family of God, and to respect their role in the family of God. But they do not want to baptize them just yet.⁴ To this position the reply must be, “Why do you not baptize them?” The delay of baptism is hypocritical. You say that you see these people as fellow Christians, and that they are in the family of God. Your words say it, but your action denies it. Withholding baptism says *in action* that they are not in the family of God.

The only other option is to try to change the meaning of baptism from a sign of initiation to a badge of maturity. Then one has a two-level Christianity, consisting of baptized and unbaptized Christians. The baptized are the mature, and the unbaptized are the immature scum. This two level approach utterly misses the point of Luke 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 12 (note especially 12:13).

VIII. *Paedobaptist Practice*

I believe that paedobaptists as well as baptists must improve their practice in this area. Since paedobaptists baptize the infant children of believers, they may think that they are immune from these problems. It is true that they do not confront exactly the same problems. But they must still be concerned about what to do when young children from non-Christian families profess faith. And they must watch for indifferentism and rigorism expressing themselves in other ways.

Many paedobaptists practice indifferentism by saying to themselves that their children have been baptized and are therefore “safe.” They thereby convert baptism or church membership into careless presumption about salvation. This presumption is contrary to the warnings of Hebrews.

Others may be tempted to rigorism. They view baptized children as members of the church only “formally,” while in practice they think of them as sub-Christian until they reach teenage years and go through the rite of confirmation. In many instances paedobaptists describe confirmation as “joining the church” or “becoming a member of the church,” when in

⁴ I have even heard of situations where parents allow their children to partake of the Lord's Supper, on the basis of their faith; but the children remain unbaptized.

actual fact the people about to be presented in a confirmation ceremony have already joined the church and are already members, for they have been baptized as infants. The thinking that they are *not* yet members of the church seems to reveal a subtle form of rigorism.

Avoiding subtle forms of indifferentism and rigorism requires love, and there are no short-cuts to loving. Learning to love is a life-long process of spiritual growth (Eph 4:11-16).

IX. *Baptistic Practice*

Baptists have more difficult problems. If I am right, they must change their practice on baptism by baptizing even very young children who can give a credible profession of faith. Fortunately, some are already moving in this direction. I am informed that scattered individuals and congregations are already baptizing children as young as four years old, and more may be in the process of moving in this direction. Such movement is encouraging. I hope that many more baptists will come to understand the biblical reasons for such a move.

We might still ask why baptists have historically been reluctant to baptize younger children. Within historically baptistic circles the practice of baptizing children of preschool age has been a rare exception, at least until recently. Yet such withholding of baptism is unbiblical. Why this consistent inconsistency? Something is clearly operating here under the surface. The most plausible explanation is that many baptistic communities may be in the grip of some corporate distortion of the meaning of baptism. If so, it behooves baptists to change, not only for the sake of biblical consistency, but for the sake of altering this corporate distortion.

In actual practice, change might often come gradually. Let us picture a typical case. Change starts when the elders or leaders in a baptist church become convinced of several related truths: that baptism marks the inception of life with Christ and the joining of the church; that credible profession of faith rather than infallible evidence of regeneration is required; that credible profession must be appropriate to the age and gifts of the person; that faith consists primarily in trust in Christ rather than intellectual mastery, precise verbal articulation of the truth, or self-conscious, autonomous decision-making.

With this conviction, the elders start looking at children with new eyes. They baptize some children six, seven, and eight years old. They find a spiritually mature five-year-old boy. After they have examined him, he is baptized. It is the first time the congregation has seen someone baptized that young. Some people are astonished, but they adjust to it.

After a time, they find a spiritually mature four-year-old girl. She is baptized. Some people in the congregation raise some questions. The leaders give some explanations. The adults in the congregation start to change their attitude. They start encouraging their children to profess faith in Christ

early. More young children start being presented to the elders. The elders start feeling more comfortable with what they can expect of children. More four-year-olds get baptized.

Then come some bad repercussions. Some parents start thinking, "Why isn't my child baptized when he is already six?"!! They start competing and trying to pressure their children artificially. But the problems are discussed. People are counseled to be patient. Things settle down. In the process, a good sort of zeal arises. Parents start praying earnestly and expectantly for their children to be saved at an early age. Parents take more care to instruct their children, beginning even at a very early age. More Bible stories are read and discussed at home. Parents are given instruction and examples of how to make their teaching appropriate to the children's age. Parents learn more about helping their children overcome sin, sins of selfishness, disobedience, and ingratitude. As a result, the children start growing spiritually at earlier ages. Parents are encouraged and start praying more.

Some of the three-year-olds are doing very well spiritually. The elders start baptizing these three-year-olds. More questions come. More explanations come from the elders. The church settles into this new practice.

The elders have now adjusted to what Christian faith is like when it comes from a three-year-old. Over a period of time, they realize what Christian faith is like from a two-year-old. The two-year-olds start getting baptized.

Practicing Christian love means not only loving small children, but also loving the adults who have difficulty adjusting to changes. If one person within a particular congregation becomes convinced that young professors should be baptized, that person should not try immediately to force the practice on everyone else; we should not just bulldoze a path without taking account of the views of others. Rather, we are to exercise patience with those who disagree. Hence, an adjustment that takes time may actually be more loving and more honoring to the Lord than an adjustment that takes place suddenly, all in one big step, by an autocratic imposition from a head pastor. It is legitimate for adjustment to be gradual. But adjustment must come, in order to practice love toward the young children.

X. Benefits of Changing Practice

If baptists change their practice in this area, there may be exciting results of various kinds. I believe that this change honors God. Hence, blessings are bound to follow. The sins of indifferentism and rigorism are pushed back, and spiritual growth takes place.

The change also opens prospects for rapprochement between baptists and paedobaptists. For one thing, when baptists deal seriously with the sins of indifferentism and rigorism, it encourages paedobaptists likewise to deal with similar sins within their own hearts and their own practice. Paedobaptists eliminate indifferentism in their own ranks partly by exhorting and

training their baptized children. They try to teach them again and again to trust in Christ. They endeavor to deepen and strengthen their faith. This process in turn encourages the baptists. One main concern of baptists is that the children in paedobaptist churches may be considered "safe" in an indifferentist sense. They may not then be challenged with respect to believing in Christ. To see the paedobaptists practicing diligence in this area is surely reassuring.

Baptists and paedobaptists thus begin to draw together because both are more adequately shepherding their children. They may still dispute about whether to baptize children under two-years-old. But they may encourage one another and learn a lot from what they are doing with children who are already baptized, two-years-old and older.

I believe that God requires *both sides* to change. Both sides must grow. Both sides must help the other side grow.

But many baptists may still feel that they are doing more changing than are the paedobaptists. And in a sense they are right. Changing a traditional pattern concerning baptism requires considerable adjustment. I believe we can hope to see change in several respects.

First, we change in our view of spiritual war. A modern national army normally consists only of adults. But in the spiritual war of Eph 6:10-20, God calls all members of the body to participate. Children must learn to submit to Christ, to pray, and to fight sin from earliest childhood. In this matter we must avoid both indifferentism and rigorism. In indifferentism we may imagine that children may be safely ignored, that they do not really have to fight sin until they are older. We may neglect praying for them or expecting consistent obedience from them. Or in rigorism we may despise their contribution to war, until they can prove that they are toughened adults. But we would then be misunderstanding spiritual war, and ignoring the fact that God gives special protection to the weak (Isa 40:11).

Second, we change our view of church membership. Opening baptism to young professors reminds us vividly that we are all still in the process of growth, that we need one another, and that we must take responsibility to help others to grow. We see more clearly that the church is a body where there is room for the immature as well as the mature. We see also that the boundary between the world and the visible church matters. Church membership is not a matter of indifference, but a matter of submitting to Christ and to the ministry that Christ gives to us through other members of the body.

Admitting the immature also reminds us that the church is not a private club that can set its own standards in whatever way it chooses. Its standards are determined by Christ. The admission of immature people into our own group also reinforces our obligation to extend fellowship to other adults in other churches and other denominations. We do not wait until people agree with us in every point of doctrine before being willing to recognize them as Christians *and* admit them into common membership with us. Thus we appreciate more our solidarity with other Christian churches.

Third, we change our view of baptism itself. Before, it may be that we thought of baptism mostly as an experience for the person baptized. As we saw it, the people being baptized testify to their faith and also have their faith confirmed through reflecting on the meaning of their baptism. These elements may still be in mind when small children are baptized. But if personal experience is the only thing that matters, it would clearly be expedient to delay baptism until the baptized person was very mature spiritually. Then their own testimony would be richer, and their understanding of baptism would be richer. The experience as a whole would be richer. Hence why not delay baptism as long as possible?

The observation that baptism belongs at the beginning of the Christian life puts a stop to such reasonings. If people are baptized when they initially become Christians, they can never *fully* appreciate baptism at the time. Full appreciation comes only later. This truth becomes particularly evident with small children, because they so clearly must grow afterwards. On the other hand, when adults are baptized, we can easily fool ourselves into thinking that they are already mature spiritually, because they look mature physically.

Hence, baptism is not merely a subjective performance of the person being baptized. What is it? The church, not merely the individual, practices baptism. More pointedly, we might say that Christ baptizes us into his body, and that the church is only his instrument in accomplishing baptism. The church identifies the members of the body by the sign of baptism. The person who is baptized appreciates baptism not primarily by having a maximally rich subjective personal experience at the time of baptism, but by continually remembering that he has been baptized and is bound by divine obligations to the body of believers and to Christ himself.

When baptists begin changing their practice and their thinking in these matters, still another issue confronts them. What do you do about rebaptism? Many baptists prefer to rebaptize adults who have been baptized as infants. Many also will rebaptize under other conditions. Adults may have earlier been baptized as adults or teenagers, but are now not sure whether they were regenerate at the time of the earlier baptism. They are then rebaptized in order that baptism may chronologically *follow* the point of regeneration.

I personally have seen cases where adults are rebaptized for still another reason.⁵ In these cases there is no serious doubt that people were regenerate at the time of their earlier baptism, but they request and receive rebaptism because they have since grown in the faith and want to testify anew to their faith in Christ through a new commitment. Their commitment is also accompanied by a deeper understanding of baptism. In such cases, it seems

⁵ During the years that I was growing up my parents and I were members of several evangelical Baptist churches. I am grateful for the spiritual nourishment that they gave me, and I have a continuing love and respect for their ministry. Whatever criticisms I have are minor in comparison to what we hold together.

that they want baptism not only to follow regeneration but to follow a mature understanding of baptism. People want their baptism to be a rich subjective experience. Their original baptism was not such an experience, because at the time they lacked the spiritual maturity necessary to appreciate it richly and to experience it deeply.

Such practices may seem appealing, but they are unbiblical. In the New Testament there is no instance of doubling Christian baptism.⁶ Such doubling contradicts the nature of baptism as an intrinsically unrepeatable initiation (Rom 6:2-3; Gal 3:27; 1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:5).

Baptizing small children helps indirectly to put a stop to the unbiblical practice of rebaptism. As we have seen, the focus is no longer exclusively on the personal experience of the one being baptized. It becomes clear that rich subjective understanding of baptism is not absolutely necessary. Moreover, baptizing small children puts more focus on what the church does, rather than simply on what the child does. The church is joining new members to itself. Since joining takes place only once, rebaptism is clearly inappropriate.

In addition, it is clearer in the case of children that we cannot have infallible knowledge of another person's regeneration. Hence we are not so tempted to demand as an absolute rule that regeneration precede baptism in order for a baptism to be valid.

Baptizing small children may also operate against rebaptism more indirectly, by reducing the idea of rebaptism to absurdity. After they are baptized, small children need lots of growth along the road to maturity. After they go through each crisis in growth, they may come to feel as if they never knew Christ deeply before their crisis. Rigorists will suggest, "Maybe they were not regenerate until this latest crisis. Since we cannot know with absolute certainty that they were regenerate before, let us make sure by baptizing them again." Children might end by getting rebaptized five, six, even ten times. The absurd, bizarre character of such a practice speaks against it. People may therefore be more willing to stick with one baptism, because that is the only defensible alternative.

These changes in viewpoint also affect our attitude toward Christians who transfer from other churches. Such Christians may not be as mature as we would like. They may not be as doctrinally sound as we would like. We are therefore tempted to be rigoristic toward them. But once we have avoided rigorism with children, it becomes easier to avoid with adults as well. Yes, we ask for a credible profession of faith. But no, we do not attempt to settle all points of doctrine first, *before* we receive them. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God"

⁶ Acts 19:1-7 records an instance where disciples had received John's baptism, and subsequently Christian baptism. But only one baptism, the second, was "into the name of the Lord Jesus" (19:4). The narrative serves to show only that John's baptism was *not* identical with Christian baptism.

(Rom 15:7). “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters” (Rom 14:1).

Among such disputable matters is the mode of baptism—do we immerse, do we sprinkle, or both? We may have our convictions on these matters. But the correct answer is not obvious. In view of the occurrence of the Greek root for *baptize* in Mark 7:4 and Luke 11:38, it is clear that the words for “baptize” and “baptism” do not always *mean* immersion.⁷ Since the New Testament does not directly and obviously teach the exclusive validity of one mode, the question of mode is a disputable matter in the sense of Rom 14:1.⁸ To insist on agreement as to mode *prior* to receiving a brother is to be rigoristic and unloving, by the standard of Rom 14:1 and 15:4.

Similar considerations, I would reckon, lead to not rebaptizing people who have been baptized in infancy.⁹ We have seen that the temporal order of regeneration-followed-by-baptism is not essential to the practice of baptism. Baptism can be valid even if the order is reversed. Hence, there is no necessity for requiring rebaptism.

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⁷ In favor of immersion, see, e.g., Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 967; Alexander Carson, *Baptism in its Mode and Subjects* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1845) 18-168; for allowance of sprinkling, James W. Dale, *Classic Baptism: ΒΑΠΤΙΖΩ: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word as Determined by the Usage of Classical Greek Writers* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989); James W. Dale, *Judaic Baptism: ΒΑΠΤΙΖΩ: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word as Determined by the Usage of Jewish and Patristic Writers* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991).

The lexical difficulty can be illustrated by simply trying to translate Mark 7:4 and Luke 11:38 as if βαπτίζω meant “immerse”: “When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they *immerse* [βαπτίζονται]” (Mark 7:4); “But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus was not first *immersed* [ἐβαπτίσθη] before the meal, was surprised” (Luke 11:38). In fact, the Pharisees *washed* before eating. But it is completely unrealistic as well as unhistorical to imagine that they immersed their whole body in water.

⁸ Grudem implies that immersion is the proper mode, but also maintains that the differences ought not to lead to church division (*Systematic Theology*, 967). Thus he substantially agrees with my view on the issue of accepting baptisms that took place using an “incorrect” mode.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 983.

