

Issues on Baptism

By Randal Rauser

I. A Baptist Perspective on the Ordinances

In this short paper I will seek to address some practical issues regarding the Baptist, and specifically NAB position on the ordinances. Though our focus will be on baptism, the principles adduced within that context can be applied to the Lord's Supper as well. We begin however with a brief summary of a Baptist theology of the ordinances in terms of number and nature.

A. Number of the Ordinances

Baptists agree with the majority of Protestants that there are but two ordinances within the church¹: the rite of initiation: baptism; and the rite of ongoing participation: Lord's Supper. This is in contrast to the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox positions which officially define seven sacraments.²

This number is based on the consensus that the ordinances are those practices which (1) were instituted by Christ to be practiced by Christian believers, and (2) uniquely embody or symbolize the gospel message. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper were commanded by Christ (Matt. 28:19; Lk. 22:17-20; I Cor. 11:23-26), and both powerfully illustrate our identification with the death and resurrection of Christ.

B. Nature of the Ordinances

Already in this brief discussion a significant difference has become evident between those who choose to speak of "sacrament"³ and those (Baptists, Anabaptists, and other evangelical churches [e.g. Pentecostal]) who speak of

¹ Seventh Day Adventists also practice footwashing as an ordinance. Some Moravian congregations do as well, though not on the same par as baptism and communion. The Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Salvation Army are unique in rejecting "outward" sacraments or ordinances altogether. In 1520 Luther appeared to accept penance as a third sacrament, though this has not been carried over into Lutheranism.

² The Catholic position was made official at the Council of Florence, 1439, though it reflected a growing medieval consensus dating back at least to Peter Lombard's Sentences (late 12th cent.). The Orthodox tend to use the term "mystery" instead of either "sacrament" or "ordinance".

³ Or "mystery" (*mysterion*): see footnote 2.

“ordinances.”⁴ The term “sacrament” derives from the Latin *sacramentum* meaning “oath”, but within Christian theology (especially Catholic, as well as Anglican and Lutheran) sacrament identifies a visible sign of the transferal of invisible grace. That is, participation in the sacrament actually provides immediate and real spiritual benefits. Within Catholicism in particular, ongoing and frequent participation in mass (Lord’s Supper) and penance transfer a real and objective enablement of grace to live the Christian life. Part of the process of sanctification involves participating in the sacraments. The clearest place where this is evidenced is in baptism. Roman Catholicism and most other non-evangelical/free churches hold to a theory of *baptismal regeneration* in which salvation *comes through* baptism.⁵ Of course, one danger with this view is works righteousness.⁶

Baptists reject the notion of baptismal regeneration. As Henry Thiessen succinctly puts it: “Water baptism does not effect the identification: it presupposes and symbolizes it.”⁷ They support this conclusion by pointing to verses such as Mark 16:16: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” While closely linking baptism and salvation, this verse clearly views them as separable. Condemnation comes not from failure to be baptized, but from failure to believe alone. Conversely, the implication is that salvation *strictly speaking* comes from belief, while baptism is the *natural* (but not necessary) corollary thereof.

This difference over baptism points to a deeper issue. Baptists do not see the ordinances as in themselves actually transmitting grace to the participant/recipient. Rather, they are visible symbols of the grace that is already evident in one’s life. Baptists are skeptical of the traditional sacramental view as “mystical” or “magical”, placing the emphasis on some hidden and private grace rather than in the public work of God’s Spirit among his people. And so, in the words of Ted Campbell, Baptists view the ordinances as “primarily signs or symbols of God’s gracious acts and signs of human intention.”⁸ And in the words of George Lang:

⁴ This term has historical precedent dating back at least to Menno Simons in the 1530s.

⁵ Different verses cited to support this view include Titus 3:5, I Cor. 6:11, I Pe 3:21.

⁶ Though the danger is mollified given that this is usually practiced with pedobaptism.

⁷ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 424.

⁸ Ted Campbell, *Christian Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 249.

The nurture of our souls likewise is found in our partaking of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the Baptists disagree with all of the communions which place sacramental value upon these practices. The ordinances are symbolical acts which give evidence of a spiritual experience.^{9, 10}

C. Baptist Views on Baptism

With that background we can take a closer look at baptism. For Baptists, baptism includes three dimensions: (1) a statement of personal faith and entry into the Christian community (I Cor. 12:13); (2) a symbolic representation of one's identity with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4); (3) the sealing of the covenant with God (I Pe 3:21).¹¹

The NABC position on baptism can be found in the "Statement of Beliefs" (1982) concerning ordinances:

The ordinances of the church are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20). It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's identification with the death, burial and resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ (Romans 6:3-5).¹²

Here we see that baptism is (1) immersion in (and emersion from) water; (2) it

⁹ George Lang, *A Baptist Handbook* (Forest Park, IL: Roger Williams Press, 1959), 31.

¹⁰ Interestingly, both Reformed theologians Emil Brunner and Karl Barth came to disagree with pedobaptism and affirm instead credobaptism. Barth wrote: "Christian baptism is in essence the representation of a man's renewal through his participation by means of the power of the holy Spirit in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and therewith the representation of man's association with Christ, with the covenant of grace which is concluded and realized in Him and with the fellowship of His Church." *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, trans. Ernest Payne, (London: SCM, 1948), 9.

¹¹ Cf. Stanley Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation: A Guide to Baptist Belief and Practice* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985), 34.

¹² It continues: The Lord's Supper is the partaking of the bread and of the cup by believers together as a continuing memorial of the broken body and shed blood of Christ. It is an act of thankful dedication to Him and serves to unite His people until He returns (I Corinthians 11:23-26)."

is for a believer¹³; (3) in the triune name¹⁴; (4) it is an act of obedience; (5) it symbolizes our identification with the death and resurrection of Christ. It is this last point which brings us to the central symbolic significance of the rite as we see in Roman 6:3-4:

don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Cf. Col. 2:12)

As such, (5) brings us back to (1). Baptism is appropriately undertaken by immersion into water and emersion from it because the central symbolic message it communicates is that the Christian is publicly identifying with Christ in his death and resurrection. It marks our willingness to die to self, take up our cross and follow Christ (Lk 9:23).

While this states the NAB perspective on baptism, it leaves some questions to be addressed to which we now turn. We will first be concerned with (A) the legitimacy of non-immersion baptisms (this concerns points (1) and (5)). Next we will turn to two issues not specifically addressed by the NAB "Statement of Faith": (B) the identity of the baptizer; (C) the relationship between baptism and church membership.

II. **Concrete Issues**

A. **The Form of Baptism**

There are two Baptist positions on the relation of baptism to communion and church membership:

- (1) **Strict or Close:** believer's baptism by immersion is necessary for communion and/or membership to be offered to an individual
- (2) **Open:** believer's baptism by immersion is not necessary for communion

¹³ That is, one cognitively able to grasp the gospel. However, some Lutherans justify pedobaptism with the claim that the infant has implicit faith and thus, *pari passu*, is a believer of sorts. Such Lutherans could conceivably claim the title "believer's baptism" for a pedobaptism.

¹⁴ Throughout Acts the pattern is baptism into the name of Jesus. However, to counteract various heresies (in our day Oneness Pentecostalism) the Church has long taken Jesus' pronouncement in Matt. 28:19-20 as the authoritative pattern.

and/or membership to be offered to an individual.¹⁵

There are three likely combinations one may find practiced in individual congregations:

- (i) “Strongly” Close: no membership or communion is offered to non-immersion baptized individuals
- (ii) “Moderately” Close: no membership is offered to non-immersion baptized individuals, but communion is
- (iii) Open: membership and communion are offered to non-immersion baptized individuals

The majority of Baptist churches (NAB included) have held to close membership,¹⁶ but there has been more diversity on communion. However, the immediate issue before us concerns not pedobaptists partaking of communion, but rather non-immersion believer’s Baptists being received into membership.¹⁷

1. Immersion as Necessary

We begin with the historically dominant position among close Baptists, that immersion is necessary for baptism such that non-immersion baptisms are not baptisms at all.¹⁸ This view appears in the influential Philadelphia Baptist Confession of 1688 (based on the Westminster Confession): “Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance.”¹⁹ It is also confirmed within other historic Baptist confessions including the New Hampshire Baptist Confession and the Confession of the

¹⁵ The same issues are repeated in the question of communion. Close communion is that limited to those who have undergone credo (immersion) baptism, whereas open communion admits those who have been pedobaptized.

¹⁶ According to James Leo Garrett, the exceptions are the American Baptist Churches USA and most English Baptists. See *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 534.

¹⁷ There are various nuances here including (1) one who was non-immersion baptized but now recognizes that baptism as *inferior* in form and (2) one who was non-immersion baptized but still *does not* recognize that baptism as inferior in form.

¹⁸ Some caution here is in order, for in many cases historical documents that identify baptism with the form of immersion may not explicitly be excluding affusion or aspersion. As such, there is some interpretive “wiggle room”. This will become more clear when we come to the “normative but not necessary” position.

¹⁹ (Of Baptism, 4).

Free-Will Baptists (1834, 1868).²⁰ This view is also reinforced by important Baptist theologians of the past such as John Gill²¹ and Augustus Strong who wrote: “nothing but *the absence of immersion*, or of an intent to profess faith in Christ, can invalidate the ordinance.”²²

Evidence of the view that immersion is necessary is also found within the NABC. Though the NABC “Statement of Beliefs” (1982) does not *specifically* address the issue of non-immersion baptisms, the *Statement of Beliefs Study Guide* does: “Although there have been exceptions, persons not immersed after professing faith in Christ have not been considered members in Baptist churches.”²³ The context of this historical notation suggests normative value. The study guide suggests that non-immersions are not real baptisms because they fail to maintain the central image of death and resurrection: “Immersion alone is baptism because immersion alone portrays death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3f), immersion alone requires reclothing (Galatians 3:27), immersion alone represents total washing (Hebrews 10:22-25).”²⁴

Among these, the strongest point is the failure of non-immersion to capture the imagery of death and resurrection encapsulated in Romans 6:3-4. We now turn to consider whether that point is fatal to non-immersion.

2. Immersion as Normative

Given this testimony, there would appear to be strong grounds to consider immersion the *sole* legitimate form of baptism, and thus the sole form by which an individual could be admitted into membership within an NABC congregation. That said, there is another perspective which one could possibly adopt, that of regarding immersion as *normative* but *not necessary*. As such,

²⁰ Cf. New Hampshire Baptist Confession, XIV; Confession of the Free-Will Baptists, 1834; 1868, XVII.

²¹ See *Body of Practical Divinity*, Bk III, 1, fourth pt. where Gill argues that immersion is not merely the mode of baptism, but it is baptism so that “sprinkling ... cannot, with any propriety, be called a mode of baptism; for it would be just such good sense as to say, sprinkling is the mode of dipping, since baptism and dipping are the same;”. *Body of Divinity*, Atlanta: Turner Lassetter, 1957 (1839), 910. On the symbolism of immersion, Gill adds: “not sprinkling, or pouring a little water on the face ; for a corpse cannot be said to buried [sic] when only a little earth or dust is sprinkled or poured on it.” (911)

²² Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), 949.

²³ Oakbrook Terrace, IL: NABC, nd.

²⁴ Oakbrook Terrace, IL: NABC, nd. Cf. Lang, *Baptist Handbook*: “Baptists hold that baptism is by immersion only.” P. 31.

affusion and aspersion baptisms could be admitted as legitimate even though they deviate from the normative form of immersion. There are two central concerns with such a position. First, *how* can a different form maintain the same meaning of the symbol? Second, will allowance for alternate forms undermine or weaken the central normative significance of immersion?

The second point can be dealt with rather quickly. Recognizing that non-immersion forms of baptism may be legitimate need not of itself undermine immersion *so long as immersion is viewed as the superior and normative form of baptism*. Consider an analogy. One could worry that recognizing families that do not have two parents as truly families could undermine the traditional two parent family. To stave off that possibility we can simply stipulate that God's normative pattern for families is that there be two parents, but that in some cases (divorce, death), this normative pattern is not met. Likewise, non-immersion forms of baptism could be legitimate even through they deviate from the standard of full immersion.

The first question is more pressing: can alternate forms of baptism (and here we mean specifically affusion [pouring] and aspersion [sprinkling]) be considered legitimate? Thiessen writes, "If baptism is primarily a symbol of the believer's identification with Christ in his burial and resurrection, then the mode should correspond as nearly as possible to that symbol."²⁵ The question then is whether non-immersion forms so fail to conform to that symbol that they are no longer legitimate.²⁶

In contrast to the historical assessment of theologians like Gill and Strong, many contemporary Baptist theologians including Stanley Grenz, Wayne Grudem and Millard Erickson appear to support this reasoning that immersion is the *normative* but not *necessary* form of believer's baptism. Stanley Grenz expresses the normalcy of immersion thusly: "under normal circumstances it ought to be the preferred, even the sole practice of the church."²⁷ Notably absent in this carefully worded statement is any assertion

²⁵ Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 425.

²⁶ Interestingly, the General Baptists who stand at the head of our heritage were deeply influenced by Anabaptism and so practiced pouring for the first three decades of their existence (1609-41). See Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 689.

²⁷ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 691. This assessment is echoed in The Baptist Congregation: "More vividly than either pouring or sprinkling, immersion depicts the burial and resurrection of Jesus, the severing of ties with the old life in order to seal a covenant with God, and the public confession of personal faith. For this reason, this mode ought to be the standard practice of the church." P. 37.

that immersion is the *only possible* form of baptism. Erickson echoes this judgment, speaking loudly through what is left unsaid: “While it may not be the only valid form of baptism, it is the form that most fully preserves and accomplishes the meaning of baptism.”²⁸ Grudem goes even further (indeed, further than most Baptists would be willing to go), by suggesting the possibility that both credobaptism and pedobaptism could be taught and practiced in the same denomination.^{29, 30}

What could justify this new modesty? For one thing, we should keep in mind that there are a range of images that baptism draws upon. Certainly death and resurrection is central (Rom. 6:-3-4; Col. 2:12), and indeed is arguably *the central* image of baptism. But there are other images that are captured in the act as well, including washing from sins (I Pe. 3:21; Isa. 1:18), the image of sacrifice, and the reception of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:13). Affusion seeks to symbolize the reception of the Holy Spirit and washing from sin³¹ while aspersion captures the images of sacrifice and cleansing.³² One may then legitimately see these alternate patterns as maintaining sufficient continuity with the central picture that the individual is identifying with Christ, even if the central symbolic representation of that reality is inadequately represented.

B. Who are the Baptizers?

The NABC *Study Guide* also notes two specific issues that are continuing avenues of debate, but to which it unfortunately refrains from providing guidance, unfortunate because they are the same two issues to be dealt with here!³³

²⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 1114.

²⁹ Grudem’s position is rooted in ecumenical concerns on common evangelical commitments. He cites the Evangelical Free Church as a working example of this model. See *Systematic Theology*, 982-3.

³⁰ James Leo Garrett, perhaps the most learned Baptist theologian in recent decades, does not render a judgment on this issue.

³¹ Pouring is meant to symbolize the Holy Spirit being poured into one’s life. (I Cor. 12:13; Acts 2:33; Acts 10:45); Rom. 5:5: “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

³² I Pe. 1:2: who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood. Ex. 29:16, 20, 21; Lev. 1:5; Isa. 52:15. Ez. 36:25: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.”

³³ The text reads: “More recently, some have said that any Christian may baptize a believer, or

Let us first consider the question of the legitimate baptizer. In short, should only ordained clergy be baptizers? At the outset it should be stipulated that few Christian communions hold this position in an *absolute* sense. Even Roman Catholics recognize that in extreme situations (e.g. imminent death) a Protestant may baptize a Catholic! Rather, the real disagreement is whether baptism by non-ordained members of the congregation can be viewed as a *normative* practice rather than an *exceptional* one.

Certainly, the traditional Baptist position is that such baptisms would be exceptional. Lang provides an example in *The Baptist Handbook* where the exception is carefully stipulated:

It is customarily recognized by Baptists that ordained ministers are those especially qualified to administer the ordinance of baptism. Though this is true, nevertheless, a Baptist church, isolated from the larger fellowship because of circumstances and faithful in carrying out the ordinances and work of the Lord, needs not deny itself the blessing of obedience and work of the Lord in administering the ordinance of baptism, by waiting on the coming of an ordained minister. One of their number could be appointed by the church to administer it.³⁴

This paragraph illustrates the commonly held position that normatively the pastor of a congregation baptizes, the sole exception noted here being if a pastor is unavailable for an extended duration of time.

Such may be the practice, but can it be sustained? Few theologians in my survey interact with this issue, Wayne Grudem being an exception. He points out that Scripture provides no clear restrictions on the role of baptizer. Moreover, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers suggests there is no ground to *in principle* limit baptisms to ordained clergy (I Pe 2:4-10).³⁵ As such, there could be times where it is appropriate to have someone else baptize: “For example, someone effective in evangelism in a local church may be an appropriately designated person to baptize those who have come to Christ

that a Christian may be baptized without joining the church which baptizes.”

³⁴ Lang, *Baptist Handbook*, 31.

³⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 983.

through the practice of that person's evangelistic ministry."³⁶

Whether this brings us so far as to admit the practice as *normative* is unclear. Grudem himself suggests that given that baptism symbolizes one's entry into the body of Christ (and specifically into a particular congregation), it is appropriate under normal circumstances to do it (1) within the fellowship of the church and (2) with an officially designated representative of the church, which is most appropriately, but *not necessarily*, ordained clergy.

Given that the issues are rather unclear, it may be helpful to find recourse to church tradition. Here we find that the vast majority of Christians – Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and specifically Baptist – have seen the normative baptizers as deriving from clergy.

C. Baptism and Membership

Finally, this leads to the question of the relationship between baptism and membership, and specifically whether membership immediately follows from baptisms carried out within the local congregation. Here too we do not find a clear scriptural treatment of the issue. What is clear is that baptism is *normatively* linked to membership:

The ordinance constitutes the act through which the individual seals his or her covenant with God, and the ordinance administered in the context of the church followed by the “right hand of fellowship” denotes the mutual covenant between convert and congregation.³⁷

The question now before us parallels that considered above regarding immersion. Just as we asked whether believer's baptism is *necessarily* by immersion, so we ask whether baptism *necessarily* leads to particular membership.³⁸ Could there be cases where baptism does not lead to membership? Again, we have the issue of necessity versus normalcy. And so the same points can be repeated. To recognize the exception need not weaken the

³⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 984.

³⁷ Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation*, 49.

³⁸ Lang addresses the process of becoming a member of the Baptist congregation wholly in terms of baptism. After being interviewed by the deacons, the individual “is then voted upon to receive the ordinance of baptism by immersion.” *Baptist Handbook*, 13. There is no sense of baptism plus membership.

general rule. As such, there *may* be cases where, given certain circumstances, it is possible that an individual could receive baptism without membership, but these circumstances would have to be carefully delineated.