

*Shall Baptists  
Abandon Baptism*

A Searching Study of Open  
Membership

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# **SHALL BAPTISTS ABANDON BAPTISM?**

By J. R. MANTEY

The term "inclusive membership" means in this article the practice of taking unimmersed people into full church membership.

The author is seeking to point out the New Testament teachings on this question; he is not attacking any particular church or individual.

The Chicago Baptist Association passed a resolution two years ago decrying inclusive membership as a policy and it appointed a committee for the specific purpose of determining what churches were practicing inclusive or open membership and to urge the churches that were practicing it to discontinue doing so. The committee reported that only two churches had adopted the inclusive membership policy. One of these is widely known throughout the denomination and its name is familiar to all who are informed in Baptist affairs.

## ***The Viewpoint of One Church***

This church has published a pamphlet giving the resolutions on inclusive membership that were adopted November 17, 1926. Following are a few quotations from the pamphlet: "We find no statement in the New Testament making baptism a prerequisite to church mem-

bership. It may fairly be doubted whether it was so regarded in the early church.

“In writing to the Corinthians, Paul said, ‘Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Good News.’ Baptism, therefore, was no vital part of the Good News....

“Not only did Jesus baptize no one, but it is a surprising fact that in all his recorded sayings there is only one mention of baptism and that single reference to it is regarded by scholars as of doubtful authenticity.”

### *The Viewpoint of Dr. Case*

There is a very pertinent answer to the first two quoted statements in *The Social Origins of Christianity* by Shirley Jackson Case, professor of early church history and New Testament interpretation in the University of Chicago. Note what he says is “perfectly clear.” “It is perfectly clear, for example, that the primitive Christians attached very great significance to the rite of baptism as the ordinance by which one gained admission to the Christian society and became entitled to its privileges. . . . . When a Gentile had acquired that attitude of confidence toward Jesus which is expressed by the word “faith,” which was in substance a confession of Jesus’ lordship on the basis of belief in his resurrection from the dead (Rom. 10:9), he was a suitable candidate for baptism. But his posi-

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tion was not secure until by the performance of the rite itself he became institutionally united to Christ and to the company over which the Spirit presided.

“When Paul upbraided the Corinthians for the party division which had arisen among them he reminded them of the fact that they had all been baptized into Christ’s name, and into Christ’s name only, consequently they were a social unit and could not consequently break up into competitive groups. Paul expressed gratitude over the fact that he had not baptized any of them himself, or had at least baptized only a very few, because otherwise those who were calling themselves members of the party of Paul might have justified their contention by affirming that he had baptized them in his own name, by which act they would have become, according to the notions of the time, sacramentally united to him instead of to Christ. Moderns have frequently misunderstood Paul in this connection. It is just because of the great significance attaching to the baptismal rite and not because of its minor importance that Paul congratulated himself on having baptized so few of the Corinthians. By this very argument, however, he makes it perfectly clear that the Corinthian Christians had all been baptized, and baptised into the name of Christ.

“Furthermore, the specific moment at which

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they became members of Christ and authentically secured a place in the Christian body was at the time of baptism.”

### ***Noted New Testament Scholars Cited***

Quotations from a few other scholars follow: F. J. Foakes Jackson in *Studies in the Life of the Early Church* says, “In early times, according to the Acts of the Apostles, no sooner did a man believe than he was baptized. . . . After baptism the candidate is admitted to the Eucharist and into full communion with the brethren.” R. B. Rackham in the *Westminster Commentaries* says, “The entrance into the society was through Baptism.” A. B. Bruce in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* says, “Baptism, the condition of discipleship—equals make disciples by baptizing.” B. Weiss on Acts 8:38 says, “The fact that he asked for baptism, the prerequisites of which Philip had of course explained to him.” James Denny commenting on Rom. 6:3 says, “There is no argument in the passage at all unless all Christians were baptized.” The fact is, I do not know of any commentator who claims that baptism was not a prerequisite to church membership in New Testament times.

### ***The Viewpoint of Dr. Mullins***

The attitude on this issue of Dr. E. Y.

Mullins, until recently, President of the World Baptist Alliance, is revealed in his book *The Axioms of Religion*. "Now the brethren who adhere to this opinion (inclusive membership) overlook a very important fact. They do not take into account that the *assumptions* of Scripture are the most binding and fundamental of its contents. The thing everywhere taken for granted, and coming to light in an incidental manner only, or assumed in everything else is most likely to belong to the group of things never doubted and always understood by readers or hearers . . . There is no express command by Christ to organize churches, but only a declaration of his own purpose to build his church. In like manner, baptism is not declared formally to be a condition of church membership, but only as a duty universally binding upon penitent believers. Yet the apostles organized churches wherever they preached, and without fail believers who became members were baptized.

"That the writers of the New Testament do everywhere assume that baptism precedes church membership is easily made clear by a glance at a few passages . . . Such passages might be multiplied. They do not contain a distinct declaration in a formal and explicit way that every believer must be baptized before uniting with the church. But underlying them

all is this assumption. It was understood by all and disputed by none. . .

“To deny the necessity of baptism as a condition of church membership, because not explicitly commanded, requires that we also deny faith and repentance and regeneration as conditions. For nowhere are these explicitly commanded as conditions. They are everywhere assumed.”

### ***Did Jesus Command Baptism***

But I was amazed by the following startling and sweeping statement in that pamphlet to the effect that the command to baptize is an interpolation in the great commission. “It is regarded by scholars as of doubtful authenticity.” The writer of the pamphlet did not even insert the word “some” before the word “scholars.” But even those “scholars” who have ventured such an assumption did so purely on a hypothetical or speculative basis. There is not one iota of positive historical or manuscript evidence for such an assumption. To ascertain whether some new light had been discovered on this passage I consulted *The Four Gospels—A Study in Origins* by Canon B. H. Streeter, who is generally recognized as the greatest English-speaking authority on manuscript traditions and sources. Although he, with minutest detail deals with doubtful readings in the New

Testament, he never even hints that Mt. 28:18-20 or any part of it may not be genuine. Not content with that, I consulted the world's standard authority on manuscript readings, Tischendorf's *Greek New Testament*, eighth edition. And he not even so much as mentions a manuscript or version or church father that omitted this passage from Matthew's gospel! There is just as much evidence that the Sermon on the Mount does not belong to Matthew as there is that the great commission does not.

Dr. Plummer in his commentary on Matthew says regarding the claim on the part of a few extremists that Eusebius, when quoting the great commission, omitted the part dealing with baptism: "Dr. Chase has conclusively shown the fallacious character of this argument. Eusebius quotes the verse, with the command to baptize into the name of the Trinity, when he requires the command for his purpose; when he requires the rest of the verse but not the command, he omits the latter. The verse is found in every extant Greek Manuscript, whether uncial or cursive, and in every extant Version, which contains this portion of Mt. . . . . It is incredible that an interpolation of this character could have been made in the text of Mt. without leaving a trace of its unauthenticity in a single Manuscript or Version . . . The evidence for its genuineness is overwhelming."



## *New Testament Professors in Our Seminaries Give Their Views*

Some time ago a questionnaire was prepared and sent out to our New Testament professors in the hope that their answers would prove helpful and interesting to our Baptist brotherhood. These men have very graciously, with scarcely an exception, responded, and their viewpoints are surprisingly similar. A representative statement from each reply is herewith given.

Dr. Frederick L. Anderson, Newton Theological Institution:

“The fact that from the day of Pentecost onward baptism was demanded as an initiatory symbol, with no passage suggesting the opposite, goes to prove two things, 1) that Jesus must have given some such direction about baptism as is recorded in the Great Commission, or at least that it was not contrary to any expressed will of His, and 2) that all the apostles must themselves have been baptized, else they could not have demanded baptism of others, which looks a little as though baptism had not wholly lapsed during Jesus’ Galilean ministry.

“The unbroken testimony of the Acts and the Epistles is that no one was counted a Christian unless he was baptized. Faith made a man a Christian, but the proof of the reality of faith was the willingness to confess Christ before the

world in baptism. All Christian bodies except the Friends and a few small extremely liberal brotherhoods have taken the view that baptism is an initiatory ordinance. To create a religious body making it optional would be to add one more sect to Christendom.”

Dr. Thomas Wearing, dean of the Colgate Theological Seminary:

“Let me say that my background leaves me very averse to what is called ‘the open membership’ in Baptist Churches. Perhaps you know that this is only my fourth year in Colgate and I have the background of the churches of the Convention of Ontario-Quebec, Canada. This makes it at present impossible for me to look upon a Baptist church as other than made up of those who have been immersed upon a profession of faith.”

Dr. Enslin, Crozer Theological Seminary:

“I have never felt the Bible to be either a creed of faith or a text-book of conduct, so see no particular cause for alarm from the fact that some folks, fully as good Christians as myself, feel that a loyalty to the principles of Christian discipleship does not entail the perpetuation of this rite [baptism] any more than it does that of foot-washing or indiscriminate osculation.”

The following are responses to this particular question:

“Was baptism a prerequisite to church membership?”

Dr. Adams, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary:

“Yes. This seems to me to be the only interpretation that can be drawn with any degree of certainty from the New Testament.”

Dr. Bailey, Berkeley Baptist Theological Seminary:

“The New Testament assumes baptism for all believers and assumes church fellowship for all believers. It is the uniform assumption that baptism preceded acceptance into the fellowship. I know of nothing to warrant the statement that there were exceptions to this general rule. Even Acts 19:1-6 presents no exception.”

Dr. Dana, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary:

“As a general rule it was, and exceptions are unknown.”

Dr. Robertson, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary:

“Yes.”

Dr. Stafford, Kansas City Baptist Theological Seminary:

“All the facts I can recall point in that direction.”

### ***Conserving Baptist Solidarity***

Which of the following methods would con-

serve Baptist solidarity best and at the same time prove effective in checking open membership?

1. Do nothing. (This in spite of Jesus' clear-cut command and unmistakable example!)

2. Permit only immersed members to be delegates.

3. Allow representation only in proportion to the number of immersed members.

4. Refuse to seat delegates from open membership churches.

5. Refuse to seat delegates from open membership churches with the understanding that the action is not to be retroactive, i. e., to apply only to such churches as adopt open membership in the future.

In view of the incorporation of the mission property of Free Will Baptists in 1910 many Baptists have conscientious scruples against taking any action that might offend the Free Will Baptists. Also a large number hesitate at taking such drastic action as excluding any church that is already practising open membership. But the vast majority of Baptists surely are not averse to taking definite, effective steps to check a movement which is not only contrary to New Testament teachings but which has also failed to vindicate itself in England where it is widespread and has been in existence for scores of years. If associations adopted the policy sug-

gested in number five a church would automatically exclude itself by adopting open membership.

### ***Ministers Especially Are Responsible***

The minister should be the chief champion of all Jesus' teachings. Any opinion not in accord with Jesus' recorded opinion should be anathema to him. In fact, the word minister, a translation of the Greek word meaning servant, implies that some one else is master. The word preacher is an interpretation of the Greek word herald, one who proclaimed a message for somebody else—not his own. And the word ambassador, especially, implies that ministers are commissioned to advocate and proclaim nothing contrary to what Jesus taught and all that he taught—"teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you."

### ***The Testimony of Specialists***

The men whose opinions have been recorded above are because of their training and positions specialists and experts in the field of New Testament interpretation. All but one (and that is doing well for Baptists) have committed themselves as being against open membership; and at least six out of eight feel that it is unscriptural. Knowing of Jesus' example and

command as to baptism, and remembering our boast that "the New Testament is the only ground of our faith and practise" how can we—yea how *dare* we—allow any innovation that has the appearance, at least, of flouting our Lord's command and of ignoring his example? To some people baptism seems trivial and inconsequential. But shall we be governed by their opinion or that of Christ, who said, "The word that I spake, that will judge him in the last day?"

Our convention and our associations are always free to admit or exclude delegates from churches, providing a majority of the voting delegates deem it wise to do so.

### ***The Significance of Baptism***

A careful study of the New Testament reveals that to New Testament Christians baptism was not a mere ceremony as some people today aver but that it was a rite of such sacredness and importance that no Christian could afford not to be baptized. It was the public rite by which each convert declared his personal faith in Jesus as Savior and his allegiance to Him as Lord. The fact that among the Jews baptism was likely to mean, to the new convert, disinheritance on the part of the parents, social ostracism on the part of friends, and boycott on the part of business men, im-

plies that it would not have been universally required by Jesus nor the apostles if they had not deemed it vital to Christianity. If Paul meant to minimize the importance of baptism in I Cor. 1:14,17, why did he require the Christians mentioned in Acts 19:1-7, who had already been baptized once, to be baptized again?

### ***The Evidence Needed***

It does not need to be proved that baptism was a prerequisite to church membership. It is necessary merely to establish this fact, that baptism regularly occurred prior to or in conjunction with entering into church membership, in the practise of New Testament Christians. If this can be done, the advocates of inclusive membership have no scriptural grounds for their position.

Baptism is mentioned ninety-three times in the New Testament. In some passages it is used figuratively; in others the principle of baptism is discussed. But in twenty passages specific instances of baptisms and, in four, specific commands to baptize are found.

### ***Jesus' Practise and Command***

John makes an interesting statement about Jesus (Jn.4:1) when he declares of him that he was making and baptizing more disciples than

John. Evidently discipleship as Jesus defined it carried with it public profession of faith in Jesus as expressed in baptism. That passage tells us of Jesus' habit of requiring baptism, while Mt. 28:19 gives us Jesus' command as to baptism. "Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you." Three things are commanded: make disciples, baptize them, teach them. Notice the order, too, in which these things are commanded, teaching does not come second but baptism does. A very significant declaration is that we are to observe all things that Jesus commanded, which includes baptism. The pronoun "them" implies that every one who is led into discipleship is also to be led into the baptismal waters. Thus discipleship and baptism are inseparably bound together, both in Jesus' practise as well as his command. Also, note the accompanying, all-important declaration that we teach "them" (all converts) to observe every command of Jesus. How serious a matter it is to seek to set aside or to disregard such a declaration of Jesus is indicated in Jn. 12:48: "The word that I spake the same shall judge him in the last day." The minister, it seems to me is primarily accountable for seeing to it that the new disciple is taught and constrained to conform to Jesus' life and teachings.



He should feel that divine compulsion that Jesus gave expression to regarding baptism: "It becometh us to fulfil all righteousness."

### *The Apostles' Practise and Commands*

The book of Acts in unequivocal language makes clear that the apostles insisted upon baptism as being necessary to obedience to Christ on the part of every disciple. We find commands to that effect in 2:38; 10:48; and 22:16. As Jesus commanded experienced believers to see to it that every new believer be baptized, so we find the apostle Peter discharging his responsibility in that regard when he said, "Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." Notice that he said "every one." It is a sad commentary on our own twentieth century remissness that some of our ministers, as far as practise is concerned, seem to claim a fuller knowledge of Jesus' mind than Peter, who was an intimate companion of Jesus, had. The 41st verse indicates that everyone who gave heed to Peter's advice was baptized. So he not only urged baptism but also demanded it as a sine quo non to discipleship. Observe, too, that he used the imperative mood. The aorist imperative occurs here in the Greek and it is the most urgent form of command that can be uttered in that language, according to Dr. A. T. Robertson.

## *Converts Baptized Prior to Membership*

Since many, if not most, of the unimmersed members in Baptist churches never obey Christ in regard to baptism, it is a pertinent question as to how soon after conversion New Testament Christians were baptized. Was it just following conversion or was it a matter of indifference as to how long after conversion they were baptized? Where the details are given it is categorically stated that the converts were baptized soon after conversion, frequently within a few hours after. The following quotations make that clear: Acts 2:41, "They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls." Note the order, baptism, then church membership. If baptism was not a prerequisite here it was at least prior to membership. Also, note the time, "in that day." Acts 8:14-17: the Samaritan Christians had already been baptized before Peter and John visited them - "they had been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus." Acts 8:38: "And as they went on the way they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch saith, Behold here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?" Acts 9:18: (The example of the

Apostle Paul) “And straightway there fell from his eyes as it were scales, and he received his sight; and he arose and was baptized and he took food and was strengthened.” Acts 10:48: “And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then [after baptism] prayed they him to tarry certain days.” Acts 16:15: “And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us saying, ‘Come into my house and abide there.’ ” Acts 16:33: “And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his immediately.” Acts 18:8: “Many of the Corinthians hearing were believing and being baptized.” The Greek tense implies that the two, belief and baptism, went together just as the other passages indicate. Is it not reasonable, in view of the above quotations to conclude that New Testament Christians regularly were baptized just following conversion and prior to church membership? Can the church, then, that tolerates inclusive membership with sincerity claim that its practise is in accord with the Northern Baptist Convention declaration, “The New Testament is the only ground of our faith and practise?”

### *A Difficult Problem*

Advocates of inclusive membership, in order

to substantiate their position, need to point out at least one instance in Scripture where some one joined a church without baptism. Since it is undeniable that several were baptized either before they became church members or at least on the very day they became members advocates of inclusive membership cannot even use to advantage the "argument of silence" to cloud the issue. Even if it could not be proved that baptism either preceded or was simultaneous with entering into church membership, it at least can be proved that it took place.

### *The Value of a Symbol*

Do not symbols play a very important part in every activity of life? Just as a citizen by saluting a flag expresses his loyalty to his nation, so we through baptism preach Christ's resurrection and at the same time declare our allegiance to him. Is such an object lesson and such an experience without intrinsic value?

### *What About Freedom*

While most advocates of inclusive membership admit that baptism is obligatory upon all because it is commanded, they claim that it is an individual matter and that the church should not infringe upon the individual's liberty by insisting upon baptism. Is not any divine demand an infringement upon human freedom?

And while there is not an express command that every believer unite with a church, there is that every believer be baptized (Acts 2:38). Why insist on church membership, then, and not baptism? Since the New Testament uniformly joins baptism and church membership together, does it not savor of license to attempt to separate them?

### *Some Pertinent Questions*

Advocates of inclusive membership argue that they urge those who join their churches without having been immersed to be immersed, but do they insist on it? What per cent of these unimmersed members decide later on to be immersed? If they are sincere in their claim that they urge unimmersed members to be immersed, the failure of such a policy is apparent for very few of them submit themselves for baptism. Have not the pastors of such churches, knowingly or unknowingly, flouted the teaching of the New Testament on baptism by consenting to let people come into membership without baptism? In case such members were urged to be immersed, is there not likelihood that some of them would regard such advice as impertinent? And would not the pastor of such a church be inclined to preach rarely and with undue reservation on baptism?

## *Some Inescapable Conclusions*

There is no implication in the entire New Testament that baptism was not a prerequisite to church membership. Neither is there any record of any person in early church history who, without baptism, became a church member. On the other hand, there is every implication, both in the New Testament and early church history, that every church member was baptized either before he became a member or as he became one.

When not even one passage of Scripture can be used as a precedent in favor of inclusive membership, what weight shall we attach to the statements of the individuals who claim baptism was not a prerequisite to church membership?

Churches practising inclusive membership admit some people into church membership who never intend to be baptized. The pastors of such churches are allowing unimmersed people not only to join their churches but also to continue being members with full privileges in spite of willful and persistent disobedience, on the part of those members, to the teachings of the New Testament. If that is not condoning disobedience to the New Testament, what is disobedience? With how much consistency can they concur with the Indianapolis Convention

declaration: "The New Testament is the only ground of our faith and practise, and we need no other?"

It is evident that we Baptists can no longer consistently claim that "the New Testament is the only ground of our faith and practise" unless we discontinue condoning the unscriptural practise of inclusive membership.

As far back as we have Baptist history, the authority of the New Testament has always been regarded as final and supreme among Baptists. Let us continue holding to this unassailable and successful policy. And at the same time let us carefully avoid even the appearance of disregarding one of its teachings.