

# Baptism and Church Membership

By DR. JOHN C. WHITCOMB

June, 1989

Winona Lake, Ind.

**Note:** This paper was developed because of a debate taking place in the churches of the Grace Brethren Fellowship. However, the information should be helpful to anyone working through the concept of baptism and church membership.

The symbol of water baptism which our Lord taught us to observe throughout this church age (see Matt. 28:18-20) is an effective testimony and witness to the tri-unity of God. But for the human observer it is effective only to the extent that it *visibly* depicts the *three* equally divine and glorious persons who have been involved in our redemption. Our Lord Jesus Christ is none other than the Second Person of the Triune Godhead, fully and eternally equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit. *Triune immersion* visibly symbolizes this ultimate reality, while *single immersion*, on the other hand, is effective as a witness to the tri-unity of the Godhead only through the *verbal* explanations of the human baptizer, not in the symbolic form itself.

We are not saying that people who have been baptized as believers by single immersion (or even by sprinkling) have not experienced the blessing of obeying what they thought was God's commandment to them. A new believer will obey the instructions given to him by the godly pastor who baptizes him. His conscience may be clear on this question; but that does not exclude the possibility that he may receive further light from God's Word at some later time with respect to biblical ordinances and doctrines. Accepting new biblical insights (and acting immediately in the light of them) is not a mark of inconsistency and instability. The story of Apollos of Alexandria illustrates this truth very effectively (cf. Acts 18:26; 19:5).

Consider the tragic alternative. Millions of professing (and some truly born again) Christians in America, Europe and elsewhere, are resisting the voice of the Holy Spirit through His Word by rejecting further biblical illumination and binding themselves to a particular church creed. This is traditionalism and creedalism in its worst form. Christians everywhere must reject this attitude and strive, like the Berean Christians of Paul's day (Acts 17:11-12), to "search the Scriptures daily" on all matters pertaining to faith and practice in our life of obedience to Christ.

Many Christians emotionally react to the invitation to be baptized by triune immersion if they have already been baptized as believers another way. They may even feel that to be "re-baptized" would be to repudiate their former public confession of Christ. But this is simply not true. As we have seen, a spiritually discerning Christian will always act in the light of new biblical insights. If he has discovered, through studying God's Word, that triune immersion is the form which Christ really commanded the Church to observe, then he will realize that he is not actually experiencing a "re-baptism," but instead, for the first

time in his life as a believer, true Christian baptism. This should bring great joy rather than resentment.

Once this perspective is understood, there can be no further question as to why our Lord did not specifically deal with the "re-baptism" issue in His Great Commission in Matt. 28. If He intended to teach triune immersion *to visibly symbolize the tri-unity of the Godhead*, He could not, at the same time, discuss alternative forms of water baptism ("Form B," "Form C," etc.) and then specifically require that believers who had experienced "Form B" should experience "Form A." Could anything be more contrary to the teaching-style of our Lord? Any doctrine or practice or ordinance taught by the Lord Jesus Christ is ultimate and final for the true believer. Alternatives cannot even be considered--once we discover what Christ really taught! Thus, if the Lord Jesus truly intended to command the observance of triune immersion, each Christian should be triune immersed, regardless of what he or she may or may not have done before.

Millions of born-again Christians have been baptized by single immersion. When the ordinance of single immersion is performed, the pastor almost always quotes our Lord's statement of the tri-unity of the Godhead in Matt. 28:19. However, *single immersion as a form is inadequate to visibly demonstrate what our Lord wanted to demonstrate*, namely, that the man, Jesus Christ, into whose Name we are to be immersed in the Holy Spirit, was not, like Adam was before the fall, a *sinless but finite* man. In addition to possessing a full human nature (through virgin conception through the Holy Spirit in the body of Mary) he always was, now is and always will be *the infinite second Person of the Triune God*. Most Jews and other unitarians (including Muslims) have rejected and still reject this ultimate truth of biblical revelation.

If triune immersion was the commandment of our Lord to the Church, then why is it not mentioned in other places in the New Testament? For example, Samaritan believers and John's disciples were "baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8:16; 19:5); and Cornelius and his household were "baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:48).

The answer seems quite clear. No Jew or Samaritan or Gentile proselyte (like Cornelius) would have questioned the Lordship of God the Father. But to think of Jesus of Nazareth, a genuine (and apparently mere) human being, *as being also fully and completely God our Creator and final Judge, and thus our ultimate LORD*, was spiritually beyond the capacity of sinful man (Matt. 16:17; 1 Cor. 2:14; 12:3). Thus, the point of such abbreviated baptismal formulas was not to reduce the tri-unity formula of Matt. 28, or to provide an alternative formula for new converts, but *to emphasize the one part of that formula which was humanly impossible for an unsaved person to comprehend and accept*.

We would hopefully all agree that *a mere form without the content of faith is worse than worthless*. But an abandonment of all symbolic ordinances of the church is obviously not the answer either! For the true Church (as for ancient Israel), God-honoring faith, *together with a proper use of God-given symbols to visualize vital aspects of His redemptive work on our behalf*, constitutes the normative biblical pattern.

How we respond to our Lord's command concerning water baptism is therefore an *important* test of obedience. He said, "if you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). And if it is important, then how can it best be *protected* from misunderstanding and compromise, and effectively *perpetuated*? The only answer is to *obey His instructions* reverently, carefully and consistently. I believe, therefore, that to allow people to become members of churches that teach triune immersion without personally experiencing it themselves is to weaken the commitment of such churches to this symbol which our Lord has entrusted to us. *The only effective way a local church has to perpetuate its form of baptism in the long term is to make it a requirement for membership.*

The early church found itself in a situation very different from ours. There were *no* options or alternatives available regarding water baptism or church membership. *Every* professing Christian was assumed to be a member of a local church (for identification with the visible manifestation of the body of Christ on earth and for indoctrination and discipline in the Word of God), and *every* member of a local church was required to be properly baptized. During at least the first three hundred years of church history the form of water baptism was the same in all churches, namely, triune immersion. The infant church was spared the confusing diversity of baptismal forms we see today, because *all* Christians at the very beginning of the church age were taught by none other than the twelve apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ! Thus, they "were baptized . . . and were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:41-42). But now triune immersion is being experienced by only a tiny minority of true Christians, and its symbolic message is understood by even fewer.

Of course, the mode of baptism which a local church observes cannot be an ultimate test of the spiritual maturity of its members. Sadly, many Christians who have been baptized by triune immersion are immature in other areas of Christian life or understanding. By the same token, it is perfectly obvious that many who have been single-immersed or sprinkled, or who have not even experienced believer's baptism at all, have achieved a much higher level of spiritual maturity than some of those who have submitted to the biblical form of baptism.

But all of this is really beside the point. If carried to its logical conclusion, there should be no Christian ordinances at all, because they cannot guarantee spiritual maturity. However, New Testament guidelines for local church government and ordinances cannot be invalidated by the fact that some "spiritually mature" Christians do not observe them.

Just because local churches during the apostolic era emphasized spiritual priorities such as prayer and witnessing does not mean that they were loose and flexible assemblies without membership roles and requirements. Otherwise, how could the total number of believers have been known (Acts 1:15, 2:41, 4:4)? How could church officers have been elected (Acts 6:2-5)? How could believing widows over 60 years of age have been "put on the list" (1 Tim 5:9)? And how could a professing Christian be ex-communicated (1 Cor. 5:13)?

In some evangelical circles today, especially within "para-church" groups, membership requirements determined by local churches are often considered to be "legalistic" restrictions upon the freedom of the individual Christian and thus a surrender to denominational traditionalism or "creedalism." But if requiring water baptism is considered to be legalistic, then logically it should not be required of church elders either. Where in Scripture do we find such a division between "clergy" and "laity" with regard to the Great Commission requirement of water baptism? No, biblically-based guidelines for local church membership and church government do not constitute a legalistic millstone around the neck of the Christian believer and a hindrance to healthy church growth. The wholesome and faithful participation of each Christian in the ordinances given by Christ to His Church may be a relatively small part of God's plan for this age. But it is at the same time a significant and important part of His plan.

God desires a re-dedication of our hearts to believe and to obey "all things" He has commanded us in His infallible Word. Then, and then only, may we expect a "well done" from our Lord at his judgment throne in heaven, and on earth a true and lasting revival and an effective Gospel outreach to all nations, in the power of the Holy Spirit and for the glory of God's dear Son.

As we seek His strength and wisdom to obey the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible, we can count on receiving the spiritual strength and unity that only He can give us.