

Report of the Study Committee on Mode of Baptism for Believers with Disabilities and Infirmities

The study committee believes Article 202-3.1 should be changed in order to allow the pastors and elders of each Bible Fellowship church to exercise discernment and discretion in their spiritual direction of believers regarding membership and appropriate mode of baptism in unusual cases. Furthermore the committee believes that the Bible Fellowship Church should add a Biblical Principle of Living that affirms the importance of accommodating believers living with disabilities as a guide to the elders of particular churches in their considerations of membership for those who are living with disabilities.

The following are the Committee's reasons to propose the change in Article 202-3.1 and to add a new Biblical Principle of Living:

- One reason for this change is to remove a possible barrier to membership for those living with disabilities that make baptism by immersion impossible—people who breathe through a tracheotomy, those who use wheelchairs, or have otherwise impaired mobility, etc.
 - The disability community worldwide is about 15% of the population—a significant group of people. Many people in that community are believers, but the majority are unreached. It behooves the church to adopt policies that will welcome those living with disabilities into our church community.
 - It is to be expected that many among the disability community will come to faith as they are included in Bible Fellowship Church communities and hear the gospel. It would be an abdication of spiritual care to fail to disciple some among them in obedience to the Great Commission by denying them baptism according to the Lord's command (Matt. 28:19-20) simply because they cannot be baptized by immersion. It is doubtful that Christ's command (which doesn't specify a mode) was intended to exclude people who come to faith from being baptized if they cannot be baptized by our preferred mode.
- A second reason is to preserve the seriousness of the ordinance of baptism:
 - Historically, the church has confessed and recognized that there is one baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Eph 4:5).¹ Our Articles of Faith affirm that such baptism is properly a believer's baptism, a sign testifying to the believer's faith. While the Articles of Faith do not explicitly state that this is an ordinance to be performed once, the implication of the Scriptures and the common practice of Bible Fellowship Churches accords with the historic recognition that baptism is not an ordinance to be repeated.
 - Theologically, baptism signifies a believer's identification with Christ, regeneration, and incorporation into the body of Christ (Rom. 6:3-4; Titus 3:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-13). As the elect of God pass from death to life only once, it would be improper to baptize

¹ This is also historically confessed in the Nicene Creed.

a believer on profession of faith a second time. This, of course, recognizes that infant baptism, by its nature, cannot testify to faith, and therefore is not considered a true baptism by the Bible Fellowship Church.

- There are occasions when a believer's baptism has been administered subsequent to salvation, but by a mode other than by immersion. The Bible Fellowship church Articles of Faith specify that the mode of baptism we assume and prefer is baptism by immersion (Article 20-1). Furthermore, when a believer has been baptized subsequent to salvation by a mode other than immersion, the changes to Article 202-3.1 proposed by the Study Committee on Mode of Believer's Baptism with Regard to Membership and amended by the Conference would permit those baptized by another mode to become members of a BFC church. We propose that an exception should also be permitted for those who cannot be baptized by immersion because of disability or infirmity.
 - Note that this study committee is in favor of the original proposal to change Article 202-3.1 made by our brothers on the Study Committee on Mode of Believers' Baptism with Regard to Membership—simply omitting “by immersion” from the original language of the article—rather than the proposed amendment adopted by the 140th Annual Conference, which retained “by immersion” and added the words, “or have had water applied.” It seems to us that this casts doubt on the idea that baptism by another mode would truly count as baptism, and therefore places the BFC in the unenviable position of affirming as a member of the church someone who is not recognized as having been truly baptized.
 - Furthermore, the proposed language of “or have had water applied” would raise questions regarding the status of people with disabilities who cannot be baptized by immersion if they were to be baptized by the elders of a BFC church by another mode. We consider this to imply that they are not truly baptized, and therefore would leave the BFC in the position of having failed to obey the Lord's command to baptize His disciples under our care according to Matt. 28:19-20, if “water applied” by another mode is to be distinguished from a Christian believer's baptism.
- Ancient and historic practice of the church has recognized that baptism by various modes constitutes true Christian baptism, and as such re-baptism by another mode would be a serious mistake, essentially nullifying a previous administration of the ordinance which was given as the answer of a good conscience before God (1 Pet. 3:21). It seems that such practice would diminish the seriousness of baptism.

- There is ancient precedent for preferring baptism by immersion while at the same time recognizing that circumstances might require the use of a different mode. The *Didache*, the earliest manual of church practice we have (dating to the early second century), affirms believers' baptism but allows for several modes:

Baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living [flowing] water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.²

- There is also ancient precedent for baptism by pouring, administered to those who were on their sickbed and unable to be baptized by immersion, indicating that disability was accommodated in the administration of baptism. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage argued thus:

You have asked also, dearest son, what I thought of those who obtain God's grace in sickness and weakness, whether they are to be accounted legitimate Christians, for that they are not to be washed, but sprinkled, with the saving water.... I think that the divine benefits can in no respect be mutilated and weakened; nor can anything less occur in that case, where, with full and entire faith both of the giver and receiver, is accepted what is drawn from the divine gifts. For in the sacrament of salvation the contagion of sins is not in such wise washed away, as the filth of the skin and of the body is washed away in the carnal and ordinary washing.... In the sacraments of salvation, when necessity compels, and God bestows His mercy, the divine methods confer the whole benefit on believers; nor ought it to trouble any one that sick people seem to be sprinkled or affused, when they obtain the Lord's grace, when Holy Scripture speaks by the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel, and says, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit will I put within you."³

The reason for adding a Biblical Principle of Living regarding believers with disabilities is simply to affirm their full status as members of the body of Christ and to give guidance to the elders of particular churches regarding the importance of fulfilling our responsibilities before God to our disabled brothers and sisters.

Therefore we propose the following:

Whereas, our brothers and sisters who have a physical or emotional disability desire to follow the Lord in obedience in baptism but cannot be baptized by immersion, and

² *Didache*, 5 (Roberts-Donaldson translation).

³ Cyprian of Carthage, Ep. 75.12 (ANF).

Whereas, Christ, in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), commands the church to baptize disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and

Whereas, the Scriptures further command that believers repent and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:28), and

Whereas, these commands do not admit any exceptions to the requirement to be baptized, even though there may be cases in which a believer may be in a circumstance which does not permit baptism by immersion, and

Whereas, based on the considerations and precedents cited in this report, and

Whereas, the committee believes its proposed change will remove barriers to membership for those Christians living with disabilities and preserve the seriousness of the ordinance of baptism, and

Whereas, there are ancient precedents allowing for a mode of baptism that would accommodate those with disabilities, therefore be it

Resolved, that Article 202-3.1, relating to Qualifications for Membership, be changed to read as follows:

Article 202-3.1

Anyone desiring to be a member of the BFC shall give testimony and evidence of faith in Christ and the new birth. He shall be in sympathy with the *Faith & Order*, be baptized subsequent to salvation, and manifest holiness toward God and separation from the world (Acts 2:41-47).

And furthermore, **Whereas**, people with disabilities and infirmities are human beings created in God's image (Gen 1:26-28), and

Whereas, as God's grace allows, people with disabilities and infirmities are able to believe in Jesus Christ, and

Whereas, according to the gospel, whoever believes in Jesus Christ has everlasting life (John 3:16), is transferred into his kingdom (Col 1:13), is indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13-14), and becomes a member of the Body of Christ (Eph 2:13-16), therefore be it

Resolved, that Article 157 be added to the BFC Biblical Principles of Living, reading as follows:

Article 157 – People Living with Disabilities

Every human is created by God and bears his image (Gen 1:26-28), and is “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). This applies to all humans without exception, including those with disabilities of various kinds. God our Savior desires that all people would be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4), and this would include people with disabilities and infirmities. When God, by His grace, grants faith in Jesus Christ to a person (Eph. 2:8-9), it is the responsibility of the church to teach them to obey all that Christ commanded (Matt. 28:19-20) and to shepherd them faithfully as members of the flock of God (1 Pet. 5:2). For people with disabilities, this implies a responsibility on the part of the elders of each particular church

to understand the needs of the members of their congregations living with disabilities or infirmities and to seek to include them, as far as possible, in the activities of their particular church, including in church membership and service as far as they are able. This would include making accommodations that would permit them to be baptized by another mode of baptism if they cannot be baptized by immersion, to partake of the Lord's Supper, to participate in regular worship, to serve the body of Christ, etc., as deemed appropriate by the elders of a particular church.

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