

Report of the Study Committee on Mode of Believers' Baptism with Regard to Membership

Introductory thoughts

The Bible Fellowship Church is an expanding fellowship of churches united to make disciples of Jesus Christ who are growing to maturity in doctrine and life. We have always been willing to reexamine our doctrine and practice to ensure that we are consistent with the truth of God's Word. We are a denomination committed to the biblical practice of believers' baptism by immersion. This paper will not seek to change that commitment. Rather, we will address what has become a tension for an increasing number of pastors – is it right for us to exclude from our membership someone who has been baptized *as a believer* by a mode other than immersion? Is it in the spirit of Christ to forbid membership in the BFC from someone who, acting in good conscience and under the authority and conviction of their God-ordained leadership, was obedient to Christ's command to be baptized *as a believer*, albeit by another mode?

This committee will not reexamine what has already been declared by the Study Committee on Baptism and Church Membership (2002). This committee wholeheartedly affirms that only believers are candidates for baptism and the biblical mode of baptism is immersion. This is a reaffirmation of Article 20 in our Articles of Faith. However, we will address the application of these declarations in light of the nature of the church, and whether it is biblically sound to forbid from membership in the BFC a person who is truly regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Our current position creates conflict at worst and tension at best between some parts of our Faith and Order—excluding from membership someone who is a part of the universal body of Christ.

It is likely that a BFC pastor has had to explain to a prospective member that, though we acknowledge the person's genuine salvation, yet we cannot receive him or her into our fellowship – *not* because such a one has refused believers' baptism, but that their believers' baptism was not valid in our eyes. While many have submitted to the BFC doctrine and practice by being rebaptized as a believer, there are many who are unable to do so because of personal conscience and conviction. To force them into a rebaptism against their personal conviction is to put a stumbling block in their way and cause them to sin.

It is our desire to present a cogent case that the BFC is acting most consistently with the spirit and truth of Christ when we include for membership an individual who is clearly a member of the body of Christ but who has been baptized as a believer by another mode. To that end, we will first present a summary of our intentions and conclusion, including what we are proposing as a change to Article 202-3.1. Then we will present what we deem to be biblical support for this change and an appeal to the unity of the body. We will conclude by raising potential objections and our response to those objections. We have also included an appendix which elucidates the rationale for sprinkling and pouring, not with the intention of convincing our people but of informing them that many believers interact with the same biblical terms but arrive at different conclusions than we do.

In further explaining the challenge facing numerous pastors and congregants, we have found that there are a number of truly regenerated attenders in the Bible Fellowship Church who are thrown onto the horns of a dilemma by our well-meaning theological position. This particular group strongly desires to covenant with the BFC but is heretofore prevented from joining our churches as full members. It is not that these people reject salvation by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ; neither are they showing false evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in their lives. Nor are they trying to subvert Article 20 on the Ordinances. Quite the opposite—they are heartily with us! They meet all of the requirements of our Article 14 on Regeneration, yet for one reason or another they are unable to undergo what they see as a second baptism.

We might come to the hasty conclusion that such people are willfully resistant to spiritual leadership and thus are disqualified for application to membership. Indeed, that may be the case in some instances. However, as Oswald Chambers once said, "There is always one fact more in every man's case about which we know nothing." It is this committee's desire to "draw...out" such people (Proverbs 20:5). Instead of turning truly regenerated candidates away from our churches, it is our intention to gently correct their position over the course of time (2 Timothy 2:25). We earnestly hope that those who apply for membership would eventually submit to the BFC's theological understanding of baptism as well as follow in baptism by immersion, but while we wait, we want to "... be quick to hear, slow to speak" (James 1:19). We know from pastoral experience that motives other than pride or willful stubbornness might be in play. In many cases, we don't perceive a spirit of pride and defiance. It is to such people that we want to give an ear.

We recognize that some candidates for membership have put in a considerable amount of time studying the different modes of baptism. After weighing the evidence, they in good conscience are still not persuaded that the modes of pouring or sprinkling are deficient. Many such people, in their search for a church home, have found that the church closest to their theological position is the BFC. They are almost entirely in agreement with our Faith and Order; however, they believe their past baptism by pouring or sprinkling is in full compliance to Jesus' command to be baptized. They may even cite John Calvin, who once said, "But whether the person being baptized should be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, whether he should only be sprinkled with poured water—these details are of no importance, but ought to be optional to the churches according to the diversity of countries."¹

Such people are perplexed at our rigidity when such a venerable Reformer disagrees with our stance. They may ask, "If such a notable evangelical disagrees with our position, why would we not allow a truly regenerated person to join the BFC?" So they are in a Catch-22, caught between their theological position and a faithful church's doctrinal statement. They believe that for them to submit to a second baptism would be tantamount to Esau despising his birthright. We believe it is unfortunate that they are currently barred from covenanting with us.

There are Christian believers who are convinced that baptism is better pictured by sprinkling or pouring. They emphasize the significance of purification and washing over and above immersion. It is not that they deny being plunged into Christ's death and resurrection, but in their minds the emphasis and imagery focuses more on cleansing rather than on union with Christ's death and resurrection. Since they prefer this imagery,

they are resistant to being baptized a second time. We are saddened that these brothers and sisters are prevented from joining with us.

We would be remiss to ignore others whose reasons may be less noble, but whatever the case, and through various circumstances, such people have been providentially led to BFC churches. For them, the BFC is home! In addition, many of us know of godly people who fear standing before groups. It took a momentous step of faith and courage for them to be baptized by pouring or sprinkling; now, seeking membership in the BFC, they are informed that their fortitude was all for naught. Our insistence on immersion is too much for them. Other candidates are reluctant because they were poured or sprinkled by a minister who played an influential role in their spiritual formation. Or it may be that their family has deep respect for their previous baptism; such persons believe that submitting to baptism again would agitate family relationships or friendships. While we know that fear should not be a reason to resist what God has commanded, however, in the minds of many, they have already submitted to the waters of baptism. They think we are straining at theological gnats by insisting on Baptism 2.0. It is this committee's heart to not cut them off. We desire to work with them over time, encouraging them to do the right thing as their biblical understanding and courage increases.

We believe that our Faith & Order currently includes unintended confusion in regard to our position on baptism relative to our understanding of salvation. Subcommittee A of the 2002 *Study Committee on Baptism and Church Membership* suggests that “. . . our Faith & Order create[s] a conflict between our doctrine and our practice” (p. 187). We agree.

For instance, our Articles of Faith and our Principles of Order both confess that all those whom Christ saves are part of the church:

Article 14—Regeneration

Regeneration...is an instantaneous creative act of God...whereby divine life is imparted to those dead in sin, **making them members of the family of God.**

Article 18—The Church

The Church is the body of which Christ is the head. All those redeemed **by His blood and born of His Spirit are members of that body....The invisible Church is composed of all those born of the Spirit.**

Principles of Order, Article 202-1.1—The Church Universal and Particular

Jesus Christ has established His rule on earth in the church. The universal church consists of **all those persons, in every nation, who make profession of faith in Christ and yield submission to Him and His rule.**

However, in another place our Principles of Order creates a contradiction. We say that the BFC retains for itself the right not to accept people as members of the Bible Fellowship Church who are already part of Christ's church because they have not been immersed.

Principles of Order, Article 202-3.1—Qualifications of Church Membership

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 and be **baptized by immersion subsequent to salvation**, and manifest holiness toward God and separation from the world.

In the judgment of some members of the Committee, the statement in Article 202-3.1 is in contradiction to Articles 14 and 18 and Article 202-1.1—a contradiction to what Paul writes in Ephesians 4:4-5, where he states that there is “one body...one faith, one baptism.” We state in one place that all believers are members of the church but insist in another that believers must be immersed to become part of the church.

We believe that Subcommittee A is correct in its assessment. Our Articles rightly state that members of the church universal are regenerated, redeemed, and born of the Spirit. But in practice, we insist that in order to be recognized as part of a BFC church, candidates must be baptized by immersion. It seems to us that we have added a step. We are concerned that our actions divide us from truly redeemed individuals that desire to be among our fellowship.

It is not our intention as a committee to deal with the paedobaptist/infant baptism position. We did not see that as part of our initial assignment, which according to p. 132 of the 2022 *Yearbook* is as follows: “Resolved, that the BFC Conference appoint a committee to study the issue of recognizing if the Bible Fellowship Church could recognize a believer’s previous baptism by another mode, particularly as to membership in the Bible Fellowship Church.”

We further noted, in last year’s report, “It is not our assignment to determine whether believer’s baptism is the practice of baptism that we see in Scripture. It is also not our assignment to search the Scriptures to determine whether the recognized mode of baptism practiced in the Bible is immersion.” Those are settled issues in our minds; the theological and Scriptural legwork dealing with such matters has been conducted before and is available in our 1999, 2000, and 2002 *Yearbooks*.

For the sake of framing our report, we affirm that immersion is the mode of baptism that we believe is presented in Scripture. We further affirm that immersion is and will continue to be the mode of all baptisms in Bible Fellowship Churches, and that believer’s baptism needs to continue to be a requirement for membership in the BFC.

The question with which we are dealing is both narrow and relatively simple: can we accept, as members, brothers and sisters in our churches who have previously been baptized as believers, but by a different mode than immersion?

We *are not* proposing any alteration to Article 20 – Ordinances (baptism). We *are*, however, proposing two changes.

First, as First Reading legislation, we bring the following motion related to Article 202-3.1 of the Principles of Order – Qualifications and duties of church membership—which currently reads as follows:

Qualifications. 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 **by immersion** subsequent to salvation, and manifest holiness toward God and separation from the world (Acts 2:41-47).

Whereas, the BFC's current position requiring immersion for everyone, including those who have already been baptized as believers by another mode, creates conflict at worst and tension at best between some parts of the Faith & Order, thereby excluding from membership someone who is a part of the universal body of Christ, and

Whereas, some who have been baptized as believers by another mode and truly desire to be a member of the BFC are precluded from membership because personal conscience and conviction forbid them to be rebaptized as believers, and

Whereas, it is more consistent with the spirit and truth of Christ to receive such individuals as members who, acting in obedience to their God-ordained leadership at the time, were baptized as believers by another mode, therefore be it

Resolved, that we eliminate the words "by immersion" from the qualifications for church membership. Article 202-3.1 in the Principles of Order would read as follows:

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 further Resolved, that the "Resources" section of the Principles of Order, Suggested Forms, page 2:215, would read as follows:

"Since the time that you were born again, have you been baptized as instructed in the Word of God. If so, answer 'Yes.'"

It is our study of Scripture, focusing on analogies and on a persistent plea for unity in Christ's church, which has led us to these conclusions. We now turn to the Bible in order to clarify our conclusions.

Biblical supports for our position

While we believe that the Greek word *baptizo*, which means to immerse or dunk, is to be most clearly understood as teaching baptism by immersion, it is our contention that we do our brothers and sisters who have been baptized, as believers, by other modes a disservice by denying them membership because we do not accept their baptism as genuine.

The overarching question that this committee seeks to address is, "How can we both hold to our position while extending grace and courtesy to our fellow believers, many of whom have come to the Bible Fellowship Church from other denominations because they strongly support our consistent emphasis on the Bible and desire to adhere to what we believe it is teaching?" Are we essentially denying the validity of their

professions of faith simply because they believe Scripture to be teaching, or at least allowing, another mode of baptism?

We believe that the Bible offers two primary supports for welcoming as members those who have come to us from other denominations where they acted in good faith and in obedience to leadership by being baptized, as Christian believers, by pouring or sprinkling. First, we will look at some analogies from Scripture that might apply to our contentions concerning baptism and members, and then second, we will focus on the New Testament's persistent plea for unity in the body of Christ.

Analogies that support a charitable response

We believe that one of our strongest supports for extending liberty and charity to our brothers and sisters by granting them membership comes by way of analogy. What do we mean? We are in agreement that we believe the Bible teaches baptism by profession of faith and by immersion. That said, we also believe that in several instances, Scripture emphasizes unity of the body over strict adherence to matters that, while important, ought not to separate believers from fellowshiping with one another.

We find that the ruling of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 provides one such correlative. As Paul and Barnabas met with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem over the matter of whether Gentile believers needed to “keep the law of Moses” in order to be saved, James, the Lord's brother and the head of the Jerusalem church, responded after considerable deliberation, “My judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20). The letter that was sent to these Gentile churches informed them that, beyond what James had conveyed, the council's decision was, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements... If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well” (Acts 15:28-29). Translation: while Jewish Christians still saw great value in keeping the Law of Moses, they would not require their Gentile counterparts to follow every kosher law in order to be welcomed and accepted into the visible church.

This seems to us to be a reasonable parallel to the issues we are dealing with. Should baptism by immersion, while important to us, be a disqualifying factor from allowing our brothers and sisters to hold membership in a Bible Fellowship Church? While still teaching and stressing immersion, we see the value of extending grace by not burdening our fellow believers by forcing them to be re-baptized. We should not assume that the reluctance of many to be re-baptized by immersion is merely a pride issue. J.I. Packer expressed it simply: “Baptism is real and valid if water and the triune name are used... No prescription of a particular mode of baptism can be found in the New Testament. The command to baptize may be fulfilled by immersion, dipping, or sprinkling; all three modes satisfy the meaning of the Greek verb *baptizo* and the symbolic requirement of passing under, and emerging from, cleansing water.”²

In other words, what is most important: the mode of baptism, or the meaning? Is it not the profession of faith that understands baptism to be an outward, public expression of an inward conviction that is more important than the amount of water that is used in the ordinance of baptism, and whether every inch of the baptismal candidate is submerged?

As the Jerusalem Council met to consider this important early challenge to the

unity of the church, Luke says that upon the return of Paul and Barnabas from their first missionary journey, where they witnessed large numbers of Gentiles coming to faith in Christ Jesus, opposition arose from Jewish believers. “But some men came down from Judea [to Antioch] and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” While Paul and Barnabas saw these Gentile believers as full members of the church of Jesus Christ, their Jewish counterparts denied that this was true. Unless they were circumcised, they maintained, they remained unsaved and unacceptable to the church.

While we would not go so far as to treat those who were baptized by, say, pouring, as non-believers, are we not saying the same thing, at least implicitly? Aren’t we saying, “The Bible declares that all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ are saved, and what follows saving faith as a public identification with Jesus is baptism, but since you were baptized by a mode other than immersion, we do not believe you are worthy of full inclusion in our BFC churches”?

The Jerusalem council concluded that Gentile Christians need not become circumcised in order to be members in good standing in the New Testament church. James concluded that to do otherwise would be to add a “heavy burden”—and an unnecessary one at that—to people who had exercised genuine faith in Christ. Are we then adding a heavy burden by requiring those who were baptized by another mode, even though their prior baptisms were accompanied by professions of faith in Christ, to be rebaptized because we believe *baptizo* demands an immersion position—even though many pastors and theologians we hold in great respect (and quote in our sermons as trustworthy resources) come to other conclusions about mode, though they have engaged in the same word studies we have?

We believe that by not extending grace to our brothers and sisters, we run the risk of adding too heavy a burden to fellow Christians, and that we further run the risk of losing them from our churches because they will only be accepted as members if they submit to our rules, even though they can argue that they were previously doing so when they received baptism in their previous churches—by another mode.

The Jerusalem Council reached its decision only after considerable study and prayer. Acts 15:21 strongly suggests that James and the council took circumcision and the law of Moses very seriously. James reported that the reasons he listed for commanding these new Gentile Christians to “abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20) was because “from ancient generations, Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath from the synagogues.” In other words, it was not because these church leaders disregarded the Mosaic law but *because they held it in such high regard* that they lightened the burden upon their Gentile counterparts rather than requiring them to be satisfied. They clearly did not fear that by being lenient they risked a “slippery slope” into antinomianism or easy-believism. They were not concerned about diluting the purity of the church by being gracious.

Prior study committees have taken the position, supported by the Annual Conference of the Bible Fellowship Church, that unless you are baptized as a believer by immersion, you cannot be a member in good standing of a Bible Fellowship. This is no unwritten code, but an official position held in the BFC. In our estimation, we are imposing a “heavy burden” that goes against the spirit of the Jerusalem Council’s decision. While

we do not have windows on men's souls and cannot determine in each case whether a refusal to be rebaptized constitutes a sinful pride issue (as some have argued), we have to conclude that there are many sincere believers in our congregations who represent parallels to those initial Gentile believers who were welcomed into the church. We ask, along with Subcommittee A of the study committee that reported to the 2002 Annual Conference, "Does Jesus Christ receive as members of His body, the church, un-immersed regenerate saints?" And we conclude, as brothers Carl C. Cassel, Donald T. Kirkwood, and Clayton E. Weber before us, "We believe the BFC would by unanimous vote say, 'Yes, Jesus Christ would include all such.'"³ If our Savior would include those who were poured or sprinkled, after a valid profession of faith, in the universal church that He purchased with His blood, should we not also include them in our local churches and not deny them membership with all its benefits and responsibilities?

While we do not want to revisit the extensive research conducted by the study committee whose extensive work can be found in the 2002 *Yearbook*, we note that the majority decision of that study committee was that we should hold to baptism by immersion as a requirement for membership in a Bible Fellowship Church. One of the arguments posited by Subcommittee B in 2002 was that while prior baptism by a non-immersion mode may have been a "meaningful experience" and "the answer of a good conscience before God" for those who were poured or sprinkled, a greater understanding of Scripture that comes through sitting under teaching in the Bible Fellowship Church would lead them to conclude that immersion is the only acceptable mode of baptism according to Scripture, and that by submitting to believer's baptism by immersion, they would help to guard the purity of the church.⁴ They further concluded that "an individual who has been 'baptized' as a believer by a mode other than immersion should be immersed."⁵

While we again note that we believe baptism by immersion is what the New Testament teaches—to the best of our understanding—we return to the position that what is most important in baptism is a right profession of faith in Christ and not the mode itself. To support that, we can cite multiple examples, including the baptisms that followed Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2, the baptism of the Philippian jailer and his family in Acts 16 and the baptism of Cornelius and others who heard Peter tell of his vision from heaven in Acts 10—Gentiles upon whom the Holy Spirit fell in the presence of circumcised believers.

In each of the aforementioned cases, baptism came almost immediately upon profession of faith. Indeed, it seems that the Philippian jailer and his family were baptized mere moments after their conversions. The question should be asked: How much did they know of Christian doctrine? At Philippi, these apparent Gentiles knew only what Paul and Silas could share with them in the short time between the jailer's frantic question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" and their baptisms later that same night. As Gentiles, they were quite likely ignorant of the Christian faith up until that night, but they knew enough to understand the importance of baptism as a public identification with Christ, and they responded in obedience. We believe that the most important thing in their case, and in the case of Cornelius, and also in the case of many of our brothers and sisters who come to the Bible Fellowship Church where the gospel is preached but another baptismal mode is practiced, is that the gospel has been believed and professed. Greater understanding can come later and may lead to a decision to be rebaptized by immersion, but we believe the

Bible Fellowship Church should accept prior baptisms accompanied by professions as valid because said professions are expressions of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Other analogies might also prove pertinent to our discussion. In Philippians 1:15-18, when asked about others who preached Christ out of envy for and rivalry with the apostle Paul, Paul answered that they were not to be prevented from preaching even if their motives were suspect. Why not? Because Christ was being proclaimed. The gospel was the main thing. Isn't that the same priority in terms of this discussion: that if the gospel is believed and a public profession of faith in Jesus is declared, shouldn't that be sufficient for membership?

Paul's bottom line in Philippians 1 was to be liberal and charitable in his support for those whose motives were questionable but whose declaration of the gospel was clear. He refers to such people as "brothers" (Philippians 1:14). With that in mind, how are we to view those who have been baptized as believers but by another mode? Do we see them as rivals or inferiors, or do we extend to them the same graciousness that Paul extended to those who preached Christ "thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment"? It is our judgment that most of those in our congregations who wish to become members but are currently prohibited from doing so because of the mode of their baptisms acted as they did out of obedience to those who were their leaders. They believe that their prior baptism was genuine and that they were submitting to authority. This is not for most of them a matter of sinful, stubborn pride but of feeling like second class citizens who are being punished because they were not baptized "the right way."

For our Mennonite friends in particular, their desire to become part of a BFC church is a sincere desire to return to strong biblical roots; they largely believe that Mennonite churches have strayed away from close adherence to biblical teachings in pursuance of social concerns and inclusivism. They want to join our churches but the step of rebaptism, many feel, is onerous to them: an unnecessary burden placed upon them. Can we treat them with liberality and generosity as Paul did in Philippians 1?

Another possible parallel by way of analogy: in Mark 2:23-28, Jesus found Himself criticized by the Pharisees because His disciples, walking through grain fields on the Sabbath, were plucking heads of grain and eating them. "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" Jesus was asked. Technically, the Pharisees were right in the sense that the Twelve were indeed violating the Sabbath as it was understood through the lens of the rabbis' traditions. And behind those traditions was a desire to take the Sabbath seriously—a good thing, to be sure. So what was Jesus' response? Did He chastise His disciples for breaking Sabbath? No, He countered by pointing His critics to an Old Testament example from 1 Samuel 21:1-6: that of David, who in a time of deprivation entered the house of God, asked Abiathar the priest for sustenance, and ate the bread of the Presence. Jesus' conclusion in Mark 2:27 was this: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In other words, the Sabbath had been designed by God to be a benefit for His people, not a burden.

How does this translate to our understanding of baptism? What is the point of baptism? Is it not that believers in Jesus Christ make a visible display of their faith? We say (Article 20-1) that "water baptism, the immersion of the believer, is a visible testimony to the work of regeneration and a mark of identification and union with Christ." While we believe that immersion is the mode supported by Scripture, is the main idea the mode? Or is it the visible testimony? If it is the latter, can we not recognize that

our Mennonite brothers and sisters also underwent baptism for that reason, and extend to them leniency and grace while still stressing that we believe the Bible teaches and evidences the mode of immersion?

The biblical appeal to the unity of the body

If we believe analogies from Scripture promote a charitable and compassionate approach to professing Christians who come to our churches having already undergone credobaptism but by a non-immersion mode, we also point to the New Testament's strong and persistent plea for unity between believers, recognizing that there is but one church and that unity in this present life prefigures the unity we will experience in glory as all true believers—no matter how they were baptized upon profession of faith in Jesus Christ—will share heaven together for all eternity.

In Ephesians 4:4-5, Paul wrote, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” The question must immediately be asked: What baptism is Paul referring to here? Some believe He is referring to water baptism while others insist that the baptism about which Paul writes is the spiritual baptism of being baptized into Christ—into His body. We are of the opinion that Paul isn't actually speaking about water baptism but of that which marks our union with Christ: our belief and subsequent profession of faith in Jesus and the gospel. But whether this is about water baptism or faith in Christ, Paul is saying that there's only one baptism that marks and identifies all Christians: the baptism of faith-profession. And if there is but “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” then it behooves us to accept as true brothers and sisters those who have made that same profession of faith in Jesus Christ as we have and to welcome them into our fellowship.

Says Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “This is the true meaning of ‘one baptism.’ When and as we all realize this, and when we all live in the light of it, there can be no division. Christ is not divided, the body is one; it has an organic unity. There must not be schism in the body, there must not be civil war. We are each and all ‘in Him’ the living Head, and His life is in us, permeating our being, filling us with its power, shedding its love abroad within us. Thus we see what the Apostle means by this ‘one baptism.’ He is not thinking in terms of the rite; it is not anything magical; it is this realization that there is only one name and one Lord, there is only one life, the life of the Son of God, who has redeemed us,”⁶

Sinclair Ferguson adds, “Christ has only one body. By definition its members are members of one another. He has only one Spirit who indwells each and every believer.”⁷ Denominations have real purpose, allowing for different positions on important matters, but more important is membership in the body of Christ. We do not believe that, by offering membership to believers who have been baptized as such by another mode, that we are or should back away from our conviction that the Bible teaches and prescribes baptism by immersion; what we are doing is saying that those who find their way to our BFC churches, having made the same profession of faith in Christ that we have, ought not to be denied membership because they too are part of the “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” described in Ephesians 4. While John MacArthur maintains that Ephesians 4 is about water baptism, he stresses that unity and union represent the primary thrust of Paul's words. “Believers were not baptized in the name of a local church, a prominent evangelist, a leading elder, or even an apostle, but only in the name of Christ,” he writes.

“Those who by one Lord are in one faith testify to that unity in baptism.”⁸

Paul deals with similar material in the same fashion in 1 Corinthians 12:13 as he writes, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” These words fall within the context of an extended discussion on the Corinthians’ frequent disputes, most pointedly about spiritual gifts. What is v. 13 saying, with its use of the *baptizo* verb (in first person plural aorist passive indicative mood), about our “oneness” in Christ Jesus? Where is the emphasis? Is it on rigid adherence to the mode of baptism—that everyone in the church was baptized by immersion? Or is it on the fact that these Corinthian Christians are part of “one body”—no matter their differences (Jews or Greeks, slaves or free)? I think it is the latter. The differences were considerable; it is hard to imagine a greater distinction, for instance, between “slaves” and “free” people. But that which draws slaves and free persons, or Jews and Greeks, into the same fellowship is that, as 1 Corinthians 12:12 notes, all are members of the body of Christ. Believers who are free are not seen as greater than those who happen to be slaves. They are all part of “one body.” And if that’s the case, are we minimizing our unity and maximizing our differences by denying membership to Christian brothers and sisters who were baptized by another mode – but as believers by profession of faith in Jesus Christ?

We may ask about 1 Corinthians 12, “Is this about water baptism or about something else? And if it isn’t about water baptism, is it still relevant to our discussion?” Paul has been speaking at length about spiritual gifts and their use. Spiritual gifts have been a source of division in the Corinthian church, but Paul says they are to be a source of union, for all who possess and use spiritual gifts do so as a mark of their regeneration as Christian believers, since each and every Christian possesses at least one spiritual gift. There may be many gifts, Paul acknowledges, but there is just one Holy Spirit who gives them. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord...it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.”

Starting in v. 12, Paul uses the analogy of the individual parts of the body to the body itself as an illustration of our unity in Christ. In v. 12 He writes, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” This brings us to v. 13. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” The primary question is, “What does Paul have in mind here: physical water baptism or metaphorical baptism?” If he’s writing about the sacrament/ordinance of baptism, this certainly applies to our discussion, but if he’s writing metaphorically, does that rule it out of our discussion? Doesn’t the principle Paul is stressing still apply to the matters to which we are concerned? We contend that the apostle’s plea for unity applies to both possible interpretations, and that Paul’s point is that faith in Christ transcends any and all distinctions.

Simon Kistemaker writes, “Here Paul stresses the unity of the church in its diverse forms. He notes the racial, cultural, and social differences that existed in the Corinthian church: there were Jews and Greeks, slaves and free. Regardless of their status and position in life, these people came together to worship God in one church. If the church should practice discrimination, it would be in direct conflict with the law of love. All people who are spiritually renewed in Christ are equal to one another.”⁹

Those who have been baptized into Christ—physically or otherwise—are one body and are equals. And they should be treated as equals. Immersion is important; we continue to believe that it is the mode practiced in the New Testament and indicated by the meaning of *baptizo*. But we should not withhold church membership, as an expression of our equality in Christ, from brothers and sisters who, like us, acted in obedience to Christ’s command to be baptized, though they did so by another mode. If all who are joined by the Holy Spirit into a common faith in Christ—a common faith that is by common profession of Jesus as Savior and Lord—should we not welcome them into our churches, as full members? For as Charles Hodge (who believes 1 Corinthians 12 refers to spiritual baptism) writes, “‘Into one body’ means, ‘so as to constitute one body.’ No matter how great may have been the previous difference, whether they were Jews or Greeks, bond or free, by this baptism of the Spirit all who experience it are merged into ‘one body’; they are all intimately and organically united as partaking of the same life.”¹⁰

The matter of unity was obviously close to Paul’s heart as he wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth. He opened his letter with a plea that divisions within the church would cease after hearing that some were followers of Paul while others claimed to be disciples of Apollos and still others adherents of Cephas (Peter). With considerable anguish Paul responded in 1 Corinthians 1:13, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Each question of course demanded a negative response; the Corinthians—who we must remember were called “saints” in Paul’s opening greeting—were to remember their one-ness in Jesus. They were part of the same body and needed to see themselves in that light.

We might ask, in the same light, whether our differences in mode (Were you poured? Were you sprinkled? Were you immersed?) give us any right to be divided or to lay claim to greater spiritual maturity. The answer is no, we are part of the same greater body that is the church of Jesus Christ. If we see water baptism as the equivalent of the wedding ring that seals that we are married to Christ, the mode is of relative unimportance compared to the vows we say to one another: promises that we make in good faith. It is the vows that make us married.

Alistair Begg, in a recent *Truth for Life* broadcast, noted, “In baptizing as we do... we’re not actually arguing for a certain amount of water being necessarily involved—at least I’m not. I know that Baptists with a big-B are very concerned about how deep the tub is and everything else. That to me is a very, very secondary issue. The issue is not about the amount of water involved... The issue is about whether faith precedes baptism or whether baptism precedes faith. And intellectually I came to the conclusion that faith precedes baptism and not the other way around.”¹¹

We are obliged to take the approach our Lord took in Mark 9:38-41 when John came to him with a potential problem. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” Jesus responded, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in My name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For the one who is not against us is for us.” Brothers and sisters who have professed faith in Christ Jesus and have acted upon their profession by being baptized, though by pouring or sprinkling, are *for* us, not *against* us, and it is our determination that while we will continue to adhere to immersion because we believe the Bible teaches baptism by immersion, we want these dear fellow believers to be *with* us, as members in good standing of our BFC churches.

“Let us not be more restrictive than was Moses,” William Hendriksen stresses. “Let us not be less broadminded than was Paul (Phil. 1:14-18). Let us follow the teaching of Jesus and, while maintaining what we ourselves regard as purity of doctrine, let us reach out the hand of brotherhood to all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ and build upon the firm foundation of His infallible Word.”¹²

Possible objections and responses

Objection # 1: Baptism by a mode other than immersion is not biblical.

Response: Based on our scholarship as a denomination, we believe that baptism by a mode other than immersion, is not most consistent with our understanding of Scripture; however, we understand that throughout much of church history, that has not been the consensus of interpretation with many traditions and denominations that we recognize as authentically evangelically orthodox.

Objection # 2: Extending membership to those who have been baptized as believers by other modes compromises our theological convictions.

Response: While we have theological convictions about the meaning and mode of baptism, we also believe that there is grace and freedom in God. Paul had strong theological convictions but understood that there can be convictions that differed from his (see Romans 14). He taught that since God welcomed them, they are responsible to God, not to us, and that we all will give an account to God one day. Therefore, we should not judge or despise but should respect what was done in good conscience in honor of God.

Objection # 3: Accepting as members those who have been baptized by other modes weakens our commitment to sound exegetical teaching.

Response: Recognizing that other traditions within the Church of Jesus Christ hold different distinctives in a number of areas, including baptism (as well as eschatology, where we allow as members those who hold an eschatological position other than premillennialism as long as they are “in sympathy” with the BFC – See Article 202-3.1), and further recognizing that in some cases a regenerate individual, in obedience to the command to be baptized (although by a mode other than immersion), did so in faith, as an act of obedience, and in good conscience, does not weaken our commitment to sound exegetical teaching.

Objection # 4: Receiving members who have not been baptized by immersion when we believe that immersion is the biblical means of baptism causes confusion.

Response: While there is potential for confusion, any confusion can and should be overcome with clear, comprehensive, and consistent teaching over time regarding the meaning and mode of baptism.

Objection # 5: One’s view of baptism, including mode, affects one’s view of key doctrines such as salvation, sin, and the Holy Spirit.

Response: In the New Testament accounts cited earlier in this paper, the gospel was presented and people who responded by believing in Jesus for salvation immediately received baptism. There is no evidence of them receiving detailed theological explana-

tions into the significance and symbolism of baptism; they simply understood that it was commanded and that it identified them as followers of Jesus. Besides the 3,000 who were baptized immediately following Peter’s gospel sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Cornelius and his household, and the Philippian jailer and his household, are notable examples of people who heard the gospel, experienced regeneration, and were immediately baptized.

Objection # 6: If we believe that to baptize is a command and baptism means to immerse, but we accept into membership those who have not been immersed, we are annulling a command of Scripture as taught by Jesus in Matthew 5:19.

Response: We would be annulling or circumventing Jesus’ command if we practiced a different mode within our churches. By teaching and practicing immersion as the mode found in Scripture, we affirm the biblical command regarding the significance and symbolism in baptism. However, by recognizing the baptism of a believer post-conversion, even though by another mode, we believe we are recognizing the spirit versus the letter of the command and are respecting that the obedience of said person was done in faith and with a good conscience.

Objection # 7: Recognizing the baptism of people who were baptized by modes other than immersion and accepting them into membership weakens the theological and practical purity of our churches.

Response: Our current doctrinal and practical requirement in all other theological areas only requires members to “be in sympathy with our *Faith & Order*” (202-3.1). We have received members who do not hold our view of election or premillennialism, and yet we do not consider these deviations a threat to our doctrinal purity.

Objection # 8: Receiving into membership those who have been baptized by pouring or sprinkling opens the door for a man who is not committed to the mode of immersion becoming an elder or a pastor in one of our churches and potentially puts our denomination on a slippery slope of having men serving in church leadership, and as delegates to BFC Conference, who could work to change our position that the mode of immersion is the biblical position.

Response: In order for a man to serve as an elder or a pastor in a BFC church, he must affirm that he is “in agreement with the *Articles of Faith*” (401-1.8 and 1.9), and not just “in sympathy” with them. That means he would have to be in agreement with Article 20, which states that we believe the mode of baptism taught in Scripture to be immersion. Further, in order to become ordained in the Bible Fellowship Church, a man must be examined by the Ministerial Candidate Committee “concerning their beliefs and practices, endeavoring to approve only those who are committed without reservation to the authority of the Scriptures and the doctrines and practices of our church as the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures” (Article 511-4.3 (5)). Once credentialed as an ordained minister, he must annually state that he subscribes without reservation to our Articles of Faith and will endeavor to follow our Rules of Order (Article 511-5.2 (4)), and that “No minister shall be allowed to hold credentials in the Bible Fellowship Church who does not subscribe to our Articles of Faith and endeavor to follow the Rules of Order except as allowed by the Ministerial Credentials Committee” (Article 511-5.2 (4.1)). So, if a man, wishing to serve as an elder or pastor, had been baptized by another mode, he would need

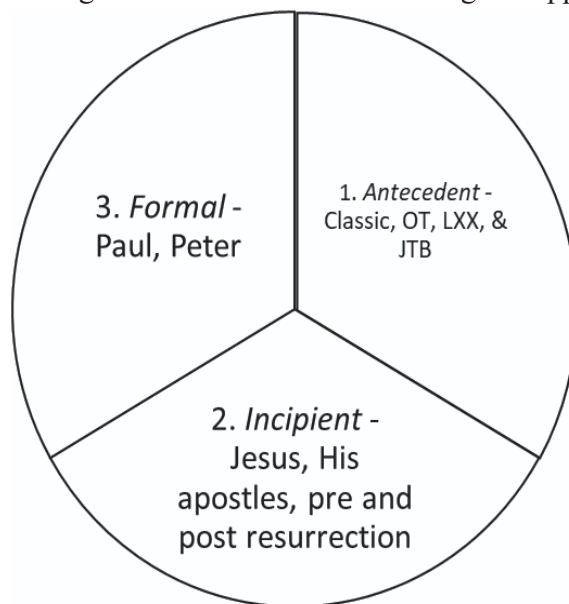
to be rebaptized by immersion to demonstrate his agreement.

APPENDIX

We recognize that some BFC pastors may believe they would be compromising their conscience if they agree to accept credo-baptism by non-immersion. Perhaps some information as to why those who practice another mode could enable a pastor to be at ease in doing so? Read the following as explaining their side of the practice—*not as an attempt to change your view*, but to understand theirs. As Scripture says, “blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.” Romans 14:22.

It has been said that some of the teachings of Scripture could be written in blood, some in ink, and others in pencil. What is remarkable in BFC history is how some teachings once regarded as “blood” have been reassigned to “ink” and others even to pencil. This change in category has caused cognitive dissonance in the pastors, and relational tension in our churches. This appendix is an attempt to prevent such consequences if possible. We admire the men of the past who courageously challenged reigning assumptions and led us to our current position. Is it possible the same movement of the Holy Spirit is afoot regarding this topic?

Perhaps a diagram, a chart, and some thoughts that illustrate how the other views of mode are taught could assist us in alleviating our apprehensions regarding membership.



First, the diagram.

Three categories of classifying the usage of baptism (*bapto*, *baptisma*, *Baptismos*, *Baptizo*). Taking all the references outside of and inside of the Scriptures, it is safe to say that the main concept is the function of identifying a person or object as belonging to someone or something. This includes identifying certain ideas associated with that identification.

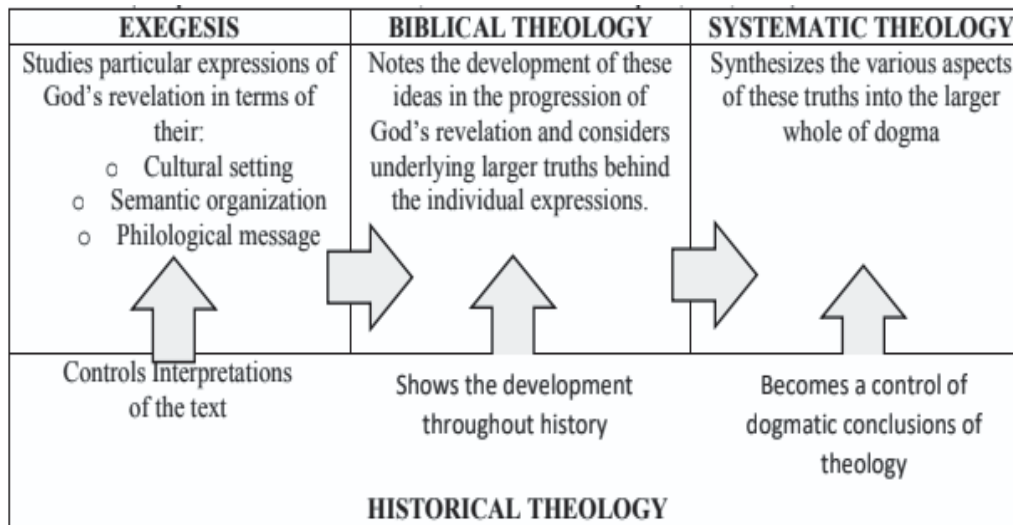
1. *Antecedent meaning*: In the ancient world, prominent figures were baptized by various modes. In the Old Testament, the mode of sprinkling or pouring was used to demonstrate purification or the presence of the Spirit. One could dip or immerse an object as well for the same reasons. The crucial ideas are mainly one of naming and relationship.

2. *Incipient*: In the OT/NT transitional time we have Jesus’ baptism by John. John belonged to the old covenant but was used by God to show the initiation of the new by the One who was promised. Jesus commanded baptism for those who would enter the kingdom of God by the preaching of the apostles, who primarily ministered to the Jewish population and diaspora. Immersion would be a jarring innovation away from the theologically informed Mosaic modes. As in the Antecedent usage, naming and relationship are the important ideas when Jesus gave His commission to the disciples.

3. *Formal*: The apostle Paul provided a more theological approach to the subject, using the analogies of death, burial and resurrection, circumcision, and clothing. The exodus parallel in 1 Corinthians 10:2 is not about water, but identification with Moses as deliverer and covenant leader, a type of Christ. Paul’s concepts are an addition to, not a subtraction or reduction of, the antecedent and incipient uses.

The earliest depictions of Christian baptisms are of sprinkling and pouring. This makes sense in a geographical context, given the scarcity and costliness of water. This accommodates the New Testament instances of baptizing at a home or in a prison (for example, Paul was baptized standing up; the Philippian jailer and family).

The Chart. (Adapted from Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, IVP, 1991)



The value of the chart is to provide perspective for us: the other side considers all of the above as *essential* factors in developing the doctrine and practice of Baptism. To the other side, the view of the BFC is quite narrowly focused, i.e., merely on exegesis. In their view, we are myopic—just using the one eye of the New Testament; they claim to see through both eyes of the Old and New Testaments.

Thoughts from the other side.

1. If we use a *wide-angle lens*, we may think of the FUNCTION of baptism. The main function seems to be to IDENTIFY the recipient as a disciple of Jesus, as per Matthew 28:18-20. Paul later ADDS the word picture of burial and resurrection. Is it NECESSARY to narrow the focus to only this symbolism? Our union with Christ and its wonderful benefits includes other analogical illustrations such as ingrafting, building of a house, heart of flesh, familial loyalty, etc. Why only focus on one aspect?

2. The totality of Scripture conveys the use of blood to cleanse from sin, and to indicate purity. In the Old Testament, this is repeatedly done by sprinkling. Isaiah 52, which Phillip explained to the Ethiopian eunuch as pointing to the Messiah, states that He will sprinkle many nations, indicating they would be included with the people of God. Honesty would cause us to permit a sprinkling here, because it would be consistent with Jewish practice of 1500 years. In the mind of both Phillip and the eunuch, it is a theological fulfillment. And how much water is available in a desert?

3. Honesty also would cause us to admit, as most evangelical scholars do, that ALL of the verses that use *bapto* or *baptizo* can be read as an immersion (and should be if etymology is the only factor). However, each instance could be read as a pouring or sprinkling (if theological continuity is an appropriate factor). Consider even the metaphorical use by Jesus about his suffering (a torrential downpour).

4. If prepositions are considered, why didn't any of the New Testament authors ever use *hupo* (under) with any of the baptism occasions? In addition, a few passages are non-sensical if immersion is seen as the only meaning (such as Mark 7:14 and Hebrews 9:10, 13, 19, 21). *Apo*, *eis*, and *en* can easily be understood as spatial relationship, not modal relationship; e.g. going ankle deep into the water, walking away from the springs, etc.

5. Jesus appeals to the origin and authority of John's baptism to justify His own. John need not use immersion, since it is pre-gospel and was only for repentance. John's argument with the Pharisees was purification, especially if John was sprinkling or pouring, because it would mean he claimed to have authority to offer righteousness with God, sealed by such a mode as Moses used.

6. Without exception, when the Father and the Son baptize, they do so by pouring.

a. Prediction: pointing in the latter to days the pouring of the Spirit (Joel 2); baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire predicted by John the Baptist; Jesus commanding disciples to stay in Jerusalem for Baptism of the Spirit.

b. Fulfillment: Peter stating that the pouring of the Spirit is the fulfillment of Joel 2, and recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit in the home of Cornelius as falling upon them, connecting that event to John the Baptist's and Jesus' predictions.

7. Finally, the view of the other side is that they have exegetical, expositional, theological, and historical legitimacy and doctrinal soundness. They also see themselves as evangelically ecumenical because they will practice all three modes and will accept into membership any genuine believer who was baptized by any of the three modes.

In summary, the Greek words may have, depending on one's point of view, a *monosemic* (one meaning) value or a *polysemic* (more than one meaning) value. If we can grant the latter, then we need not feel that we are compromising our consciences by accepting credo-baptism by another mode.

Summary

Hopefully this brief perspective from the "other side" has enabled the reader to understand and appreciate the reasons for non-immersion credo-baptism. There is obviously more to be said, but for brevity's sake, this can only serve as an introduction. There are many scholarly resources available for further study.

Some final considerations

1. Is it possible that nothing of ultimate doctrinal value is lost with understanding baptism to have *semantic pliancy*? Is it possible that unity, spiritual, functional, and numerical growth and fruit could be lost if we must demand *semantic rigidity*?

2. We can continue to maintain redemptive integrity by accepting believers baptized as a believer by another mode.

3. We have accepted Reformed teaching in the area of soteriology (election) and ecclesiology (government by elders). Perhaps we can also make room for acceptance in this area of membership, remembering that membership itself is a post-New Testament invention? Charles Hodge: "the words *bapto*, *baptizo*, and their cognates are used with such latitude of meaning as to prove the assertion that the command to baptize is a command to immerse, to be utterly unauthorized and unreasonable."

4. To date, has our interpretative Procrustean Bed (A standard that is forced upon people for the sake of conformity and involves the sacrifice of what is useful; according to Greek mythology, Procrustes was a robber who killed his victims in a most cruel and unusual way. He made them lie on an iron bed and would force them to fit the bed by cutting off the parts that hung off the ends or by stretching those people who were too short) caused the loss of needed believers for our local fellowships? In fact, are we in violation of 1 Corinthians 1:10?

Study Committee on the Mode of Believers' Baptism with Regard to

Membership: William G. Schlonecker, Convener; Ronald L. Kohl, Secretary; James Arcieri, Mark R. Orton, S. Wayne Rissmiller.

Endnotes

- 1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 4, chapter 15, section 19, p. 599.
- 2 James I. Packer, “Baptism: This Rite Exhibits Union with Christ,” available at <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/packer/baptism.html>.
- 3 2002 *Yearbook*, Bible Fellowship Church, p. 191.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980), p. 130.
- 7 Sinclair Ferguson, *Let’s Study Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2021 ed.), p. 101.
- 8 John MacArthur, *Ephesians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishing, 1986), p. 130.
- 9 Simon Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), p. 430.
- 10 Charles Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1995), p. 227.
- 11 Alistair Begg, *Truth for Life*, January 31, 2023 radio broadcast.
- 12 William Hendriksen, *Mark*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004 edition), p. 363.