
A Biblical Case for an Inconsistent Position on Baptism

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I would like to share some thoughts on the subject of baptism policy in evangelical churches. I have not come across these ideas in books, and it seems to me that most of the churches I know of either have lots of reasons for their baptism policy and end up far from the approach I advocate, or else they follow something like my approach but don't apparently have a rationale for it other than that it works. Whether what I am going to say is original is for you to judge, as is the more important question of whether it is right and true.

The Problem

What should we do about the fact that some Christians are convinced of the baptist position on baptism – its subjects and mode – and others are convinced paedobaptists – on subjects and mode, even if some of them agree with B.B.Warfield that *any* mode will do that involves applying water to the body?

What has been done? Most paedobaptist churches have said, and do say, that anyone who has been baptised at any point in the past cannot be baptised again within their life and worship, or under their jurisdiction, no matter how convinced the individual is that the previous baptism is invalid and therefore Christ wants them to be baptised (again). They might wink, or not take any strong action, if the person goes and gets baptised somewhere else one day and comes back, but “not under our roof” is the attitude. In some cases paedobaptist churches even say that a baptist cannot hold office in the church – where a full-scale confession of faith is held by the church and is not simply confessed, as what the church as a whole believes, but also used as a test for admission to office. One even hears reports of Presbyterian churches which in practice, if not in theory – I find it hard to believe they have actually signed up for such an historically un- Presbyterian idea – prevent baptists from becoming members of their churches.

On the other side, of course baptist churches do not allow infant baptisms to take place in their meetings or under their jurisdiction – we would not define them as baptists if they did! – even if some of them will grant the validity of the baptism of a professing believer who has only had water poured on him; and a few may even *practise* such affusions rather than immersions for special reasons. A good number of baptist churches will not allow a paedobaptist, especially if he was actually only baptised as a child, into church office – certainly it is difficult to become a pastor of a baptist church if you are a paedobaptist who has only been baptised in infancy, as I myself discovered when I tried becoming one the other month (I jest not). Indeed a smaller percentage of baptist churches will now allow those unbaptised (in their view) into membership. And some – notably those who used to be called Strict Baptists – will not let the likes of John Calvin and me to the Lord's table.

What a confusing situation. What a mess and a muddle, and, worse than that, what a lot of division in the Christian church, in the evangelical, Bible-believing, in many cases Reformed Christian church! What is to be done?

Responses

- 1 We can fondly imagine that we will be able to convince nearly anyone from the other side who comes near our church or wants to join or become a leader in it that their view is wrong – “we can convert them, or most of them, to our way of thinking.” Oh, the naivety of youth!
- 2 We (or at least “you”, if you are a baptist in England or a paedobaptist in Scotland) can bury our head in the sand and kid ourselves that, because in our country or circle there are not a large percentage of “the other lot”, they are all dying out, the few remaining ones are just a few dinosaurs left over, they can be ignored, they are the exception that proves the rule. “We may let them into the membership of the church but we don’t need to pay any real attention to them. The tide is against them.” Oh, the temptation to act like an ostrich when things in the little part of the world you occupy are going your way!
- 3 We can settle for the status quo and mumble about real unity being spiritual and invisible anyway – as long as we ignore any parts of the Bible that talk about people seeing our oneness in Christ!
- 4 Or you could of course do a fudge, and maintain baptist and paedobaptist policies in the same church and be disgustingly pragmatic; you could adopt what I am calling the “dual practice position.”

A Solution?

Or is it so disgustingly pragmatic? Some of the people who adopt it do admittedly seem a fairly pragmatic bunch, and they do not usually appear to have a complex Biblical rationale worked out for what they do; but does that necessarily mean it is unprincipled? I trow not; in fact I’m convinced not, and I would like to argue now for dual practice in the local church on baptism. And in case there is any remaining confusion, I mean by this that it is a valid, principled, Biblical option to have some elders in a church who are baptists and others who are paedobaptists, and if someone is converted who has been baptised as an infant, one elder gently, respectfully and not at great length tells them they should be baptised and why, and another elder tells them in a similar manner that they don’t need to get baptised (again) and why; and the person goes away and decides which they believe before God to be right; and the church accepts their conclusion, and if this means they are to be baptised, the baptist elders arrange it and perform it in the church, with the paedobaptist elders sitting there in supportive disagreement. And the same kind of the things happens (in dual practice baptism) when a baby is born: the parents decide what they believe to be right and the church respects it and carries it out, and it’s sometimes the turn of the baptist elders to be extra gracious. And of course this also means that you may even get a situation where a 16 or 18 year old, who has been baptised in the church as a baby, decides they need to be baptised on profession of their faith; and the church does this too, hence the word inconsistent in the title of this article.

Now you may be feeling that I will need to perform a remarkable feat of theological escapology to get anywhere near justifying such procedures other than on a pragmatic

basis; but I don't think my task is as hard as you may believe, at least to get you near, even if I don't convert you. I adduce four principles which I hold to be Biblical:

The Rationale

1 The real nature of eldership and spiritual leadership

Elders have responsibility for the flock and rule over it. But does this mean that we are to decide everything for the people under us? The main way in which we care for the flock is by teaching and feeding it. A survey of 1 Timothy 4 should soon convince us of that. Even as an apostle Paul does not lay down that all the weak vegetarians, teetotallers and holy-day-keepers in Romans 14 must loosen up. Elders and pastors are putting Christians more and more in touch with God and his word by teaching it, so that they can respond to God.

Only this understanding of spiritual oversight as mainly teaching, rather than telling everyone exactly what to do all the time, fits in with the truth of "the right of private judgment", rediscovered at the Reformation. What is the difference between the priest telling the faithful to believe and do what the church teaches without understanding why, and the high-powered pastor or elder telling the convert to get rebaptised, or to refrain from doing so, "because it is God's will for you to submit to us in the Lord, even if you don't understand the whys and wherefores on baptism"? Not a lot. Of course the elders have the right to say, "The morning service starts at 11am; please arrive then, not half an hour later"; but in a matter of direct and personal covenanting with Christ, such as baptism, does the principle of submission to leadership apply in exactly the same way? Surely not. That would smack far too much of the Romish definition of faith as believing whatever the church teaches.

We may not force someone to do what we say on baptism, but just keep them "helpfully" ignorant. But is keeping a new convert, or a fairly new Christian who has just had a baby, entirely in the dark about the fact that millions of their fellow believers around the world would take a different view from the eldership on baptism – is this very different from spiritual authoritarianism? I don't think so. It is certainly out of keeping with the fundamental instructing, teaching function of the undershepherd. Ignorance is not, after all, the mother of devotion. Rather, we must enable people as best we can to see things straight and make the right decision, instead of hoodwinking or browbeating them into doing what we have decided to be the right thing.

Putting it practically, should we hide from Christians the "other view" on baptism? No, unless we can justify treating them as children. But then the moment we expose them to the other view, there is the possibility that they may embrace it – and then, if we are strict in baptism policy, they may not be able to join our church or at least become officers in it. Is this good? Can this God's will?

2 The enormous importance of visible, expressed unity in the church

The New Testament puts repeated and massive emphasis on the importance of visible unity in the church. And there is not the slightest hint that the visible unity sought for is merely among those who agree on everything, or nearly everything. We must agree in the Lord even when we don't agree on all points. Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians

3 pretty obviously disagreed about something and had no doubt talked about the issue; but they are bidden to agree in the Lord, which must mean to agree to disagree on the basis that they were one in Christ.

“Oh, but unity is only in truth.” Yes but No. In other words, how much truth? Infralapsarianism? The traducionist view of the origin of the soul? The church as the company of visible saints? Your view of baptism? Mine?? One way or another, using one terminology or another, we have got to acknowledge that some issues are “1 Corinthians 5-type” issues (a man was having an affair with his stepmother and this was not to be tolerated by the church; fundamental, unmistakable morality was at stake; if we waffle and fudge and do nothing here, it is very difficult to maintain our hold on Christ who is holy). Over these we cannot compromise or maintain unity because of pragmatic considerations. On the other hand we must grant that some issues are “Romans 14-type” issues, where it is entirely understandable that, given the fallen, imperfectly sanctified nature of Christians and the less clear nature of some Biblical teachings (cf 2 Peter 3:16), real believers differ. In this latter kind of case, we should maintain unity despite muddle and disagreement concerning truth. And if there is one thing that the history of the church to this day shouts at us loud and clear it is that baptism is a “Romans 14-type” issue. So we should act accordingly.

Is the matter of a tidy, well-worked out government, a set of rules telling every Christian exactly what to do about baptism, rebaptism, infants, etc as important as the visible unity of the church? If you are inclined to say Yes, I would ask you, “Where in the Bible do we get any indication that having a razor sharp policy on contentious issues is more important than unity?” I cannot see it. And if church unity is more important than having a very tidy church constitution, how can we be right to act in a way that guarantees the existence of two evangelical churches in every village and urban area, just for the sake of having everything tidy? For that is what anything other than a dual practice baptism policy tends to promote: even if we admit “the other side” into membership, once we stop them becoming church officers we lead any who have leadership gifts and a right desire to exercise them into looking for another church, or even setting one up. In other words we promote the visible disunity of the church.

3 The kingdom has come yet the kingdom has not yet fully come

We are in the period of tension between the *already* and the *not yet* of the coming of the kingdom of God. The believer is imperfectly sanctified and so is the church. So why should we try and have a perfect constitution with a policy on everything in the church? I can understand people feeling that it is terribly inconsistent for the same local church to baptise a baby and then baptise the same person 18 years later; or to have one elder advising someone to have their baby baptised and another elder advising them against it. I plead guilty; but have we removed inconsistency by passing a law that one of these godly men cannot be an elder or cannot say what he believes when asked? What good does that do? It is just papering over the cracks. The fact is that the evangelical church on earth and in Britain has not decided on baptism. We – corporately – do not know. Therefore let us acknowledge this in the local church and have an honest, humble, non-perfectionist “Biblical inconsistent” position. This is fully consonant with confessing our sins and our spiritual blindness and the fact that we do

not know everything, as well as with the provisional nature of the kingdom of God at present. If we have a limp, let's limp by God's grace to heaven and not pretend we have everything sorted out. I am tempted to use the phrase "perfectionist doctrine of the church" but will try to refrain. I will however quote Ralph Waldo Emerson who said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." What is wrong with an inconsistent position on baptism, if we can only have a consistent one by excluding from church leadership, possibly even from membership, people who belong in it? An inconsistent baptism policy appropriately reflects the church's present imperfect enlightenment.

It may be objected, "Peter gave a clear, authoritative answer to the question 'What must we do to be saved' in Acts 2, and that answer involved baptism; so why shouldn't elders today tell people authoritatively exactly what to do in this area?" Because Peter was an apostle, and there was then no New Testament, and he was talking presumably to rational, comprehending adults who had never received Christian baptism of any kind. We are not apostles, the New Testament has been written but we don't fully understand everything written in it, it is a major part of our task to teach the Bible and enable Christians to see what it means and how it applies to them; and the subject of baptism is a difficult one to understand and teach. Furthermore the people who come to us have sometimes been baptised after a fashion already; and sometimes they are asking us what to do with their children. So all in all it is a totally different situation and "circumstances alter cases."

Now if our security at the end of the day – our assurance that God is with us and that we are accepted and that he will answer our prayers and establish the work of our hands upon us – is based on God's love for us, on Christ's death for our sins, and on justification by faith alone, then I think we will be able to handle some sanctified muddle and Biblical inconsistency, especially when we not only have free justification in Christ but when the Spirit is with us to enlighten us, and we know that if on some point we are mistaken and really need to change, "that too God will make clear to you" (Phil. 3:15, NIV). However, if our security before God and in the church is to some significant extent based on getting everything right, having everything worked out and knowing all the time exactly where we stand – on having a thought through policy on everything – then we will certainly not want any so-called sanctified muddle. But isn't this more religious than authentically Christian? Haven't we got to be content, after a fashion, to be, as Luther put it, *simul iustus et peccator*, at the same time justified and yet a sinner?

4 The gospel is for propagating, not just protecting

It is possible, I would like to suggest, to emphasize the need for guarding the gospel at the expense of propagating it. Paul says more to Timothy about preaching, teaching and spreading it than he does about guarding it.

This point overlaps somewhat with my first point; it is at least implied in what I said about the primacy of teaching over discipline in the elder's function. Is Paul saying in 2 Tim.1:14 that we must guard not only the gospel but our entire constitutional position, even when this includes all kinds of views on secondary matters (the Romans 14-type ones of point 2)? And that we must regard any loss of constitutional position or of church clarity on secondaries such as baptism as sinful, even when it may lead to

more people hearing the gospel and more people being taught what we believe on secondary matters? I don't think so – Paul says “Guard the gospel” not “Guard the line on eating meat.” Are we really guarding the Reformed faith, let alone the Gospel, when we refuse to let a “4-point Calvinist” into church leadership, even though he is godly, fervent and gifted? What is likely to be the result? Either that he will simply do less for the Lord and that the faith, Calvinistic or nearly Calvinistic, will spread less through the church; or he will move to another church and become an elder there. The church that is treating maintenance of the full constitutional position as a *sine qua non* of its life will quite possibly still teach exactly the same things in 100 years time, but how many potential elders and, quite likely, members will it have lost or never had, and, much worse, how many non-Christians that could have been reached will have remained untouched by the gospel? If on the other hand the man is allowed onto the eldership, and if he is a very vigorous leader and teacher of the faith, then one of the *worst* case scenarios is that the church will end more 4-point Calvinist than 5. And on that I cannot do better than quote John Newton, as Josiah Bull quotes him on p. 212 of the biography recently reprinted by the Banner of Truth Trust: “If I thought a man feared sin, loved the word of God, and was seeking after Jesus, I would not walk the length of my study to proselytise him to the Calvinistic doctrines.”

In other words, there is the danger, if we try preserving too much, that an ever-decreasing number of people hold to the full position and God uses other Christians altogether to reach the world. Propagating the gospel leads to preserving it every bit as much as preserving it leads to propagating it.

The Last Blast

Am I seriously saying it is wrong to be in a Strict Baptist or strict Presbyterian or strict Congregational church? No, not if doing otherwise in the short-term will cause dishonour to Christ, disunity to the church, and a general lessening of the propagation of the gospel. But I am very seriously suggesting that in this imperfect phase of the kingdom we should not even *aim* at having a form of church constitution that answers every question and provides totally neat and tidy solutions to every problem; and that church leaders should focus mainly on teaching and propagating the faith (you don't make more Calvinists or Baptists or paedobaptists, let alone Christians by stopping godly and gifted people from getting into office in the church); and that visible unity despite theological differences is far more important in God's eyes than many anti-ecumenical Christians realise; and in a word **that some kinds of muddle can be sanctified and that inconsistency on baptism is Biblical**. Not only so, but I believed this long before I (a presbyterian) received and accepted a call to be minister of a Brethren Assembly that is being replanted, through the substantial assistance of an Anglican church, as an Independent Evangelical church!

See his Shorter Writings, vol. 2, pp. 329-350: “It is much understating the matter to say that it [the New Testament] does not prescribe a mode of baptism. It does not even suggest one mode as preferable perhaps to another.” p. 335.

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