

IN RESPONSE – MEMBERSHIP AND INFANT BAPTISM

by Dennis Prutow

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Baptism is an emotional issue. Those committed to believer's baptism are adamant. Those who practice paedobaptism are equally committed. Can a family persuaded of believer's baptism be admitted to the membership of a church holding to paedobaptism? Many argue quite strenuously against receiving such families.

What is the answer?

First, we have basic definitions. Baptism is an ordinance of the visible church. It is one of the two Sacraments of the church. Baptism ushers individuals into the pale of the visible church. Baptism uses water to symbolize the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). Baptism is to be performed by ordained ministers of the church in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Those holding to believer's baptism maintain men and women are eligible for baptism upon profession of faith in Christ. Those holding to infant baptism or paedobaptism claim the sacrament for believers *and* their children. The division within the body of Christ over this issue is sufficient to produce separate churches and denominations. Those holding to believer's baptism do not accept the baptism of infants as valid baptism. They require baptism as a believer and generally baptism by immersion.

The question before us here runs in the opposite direction. If a family does not want their infants or children baptized, should a church holding to infant baptism receive the family? I say that we who hold to infant baptism ought to receive as members those who hold to believer's baptism.

Here is my argument. First, in our circles we hold to Session controlled communion. That is, the Session or board of elders hears the profession of faith of persons desiring to partake of Communion and ascertains they are also members of some visible body of Christ. The elders then approve of such persons coming to the Lord's Table.

I ask this question. Is failure to hold to infant baptism sufficient to deny men and women access to the Lord's Supper? When I have asked this question to the

adults at a church conference, the answer was in the negative. I agree. For example, we freely invite a family coming to us as committed Reformed Baptists to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. They are brothers and sisters in Christ. There is no palpable reason to deny these brothers and sisters in Christ access to the Lord's Supper in our church.

Given agreement on this question, I ask a follow up. What is it that people gain as members of the church that they do not have when we grant them access to the Lord's Supper? This is an important question and we should not take it lightly. What is the answer? There is a simple straightforward response. Persons whom we invite to the Lord's Supper gain the right to vote in the congregation when they become members. There you have it. People who join the church have the right to participate in congregational meetings. They have voting rights.

The third question is telling. Is voting in the congregation a greater privilege than coming to the Lord's Supper? I maintain the highest privilege of membership in the church is participating in the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper we celebrate our union with Christ. We celebrate our communion with the living God through Jesus Christ. Union with Christ and communion with God is central to Christianity. The venerable John Murray speaks of union with Christ in His book, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.

Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ. Indeed the whole process of salvation has its origin in one phase of union with Christ and salvation has in view the realization of other phases of union with Christ.¹

Murray goes on to say,

Here indeed is mysticism on the highest plane. It is not the mysticism

of vague unintelligible feeling or rapture. It is the mysticism of communion with the one true and living God, and it is communion with the one true and living God because it is communion with the three distinct persons of the Godhead in the strict particularity which belongs to each person in that grand economy of saving relationship to us.²

Paul asks this rhetorical question, "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). Indeed it is. The Authorized Version translates the text with familiar words. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" We celebrate our union and communion with Christ when we eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

I ask again, is voting in the congregation a greater privilege than coming to the Lord's Supper? We dare not answer, Yes. Some people think, wrongly, voting on the church budget and controlling the purse strings is more important than permitting or denying access to the Lord's Supper. However, access to the Table of the Lord is the high privilege of church membership.

Now the most telling point. We properly admit persons to the Lord's Supper upon confession of their faith and evidence they are members of an evangelical church. We may also deny them membership in the church because they do not hold to infant baptism. If we do so, we are saying that voting in the congregation is a higher privilege than coming to the communion table. Denying membership to persons who do not hold to infant baptism, while allowing them to participate in the Lord's Supper, exalts voting over communion. This cannot be.

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¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 161.

² *Ibid.*, p. 172

IN RESPONSE – MEMBERSHIP AND INFANT BAPTISM, STIPULATIONS

by Dennis Prutow

Because Of the nature of church membership, there are certain stipulations we must add to the argument I set forth in the previous lesson. After we cover these stipulations, I shall address objections to my view.

Membership in the visible body of Christ presupposes the desire of members to engage in a thoroughgoing process of discipleship. Christ makes this clear in the Great Commission. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). Baptism introduces us into the visible church and into the discipleship process. Those who become members of the visible body, through baptism, therefore commit themselves to the teaching and government of their particular church.

Discipleship and discipline within the church begins with teaching. Persons who become members must be willing to sit under the teaching of the church, including the teaching of the church with regard to the sacraments. If a family does not want to sit under the teaching of a particular church, it makes little sense for that family to formally unite with that church.

I therefore stipulate a family that does not hold to infant baptism may indeed become a part of our fellowship if they are willing to sit under the teaching of the church. In addition, this family must realize they will witness, in the regular worship of the church, the baptism of infants as well as adults. They must realize they will witness baptism by affusion or sprinkling and not by immersion. Families of baptistic persuasion must take these circumstances as opportunities to examine their own convictions in light of Scripture and teach their children who will undoubtedly ask questions concerning the practice of the church.

At the same time, the church must exercise patience. Baptism is not the only area of doctrine and practice where members may differ from the position of the church. For example, many question the propriety of considering individuals as

believers who are arminian in their approach to the gospel. Others may come from Roman Catholic background and carry with them certain aberrations, perhaps with regard to the after-life and purgatory. Some may come from a church that vigorously maintains the Lord’s Supper is not a means of grace but simply a memorial. These same people may see baptism as a symbol of their confession of Christ rather than an emblem of the work of the Triune God. Individuals do not divest themselves of all aspects of a lifetime of teaching overnight. We must exercise patience with such people and be willing to wait upon God as He applies the teachings of Scripture to their hearts. We must be willing to allow for sanctification. The doctrine of baptism is no different. There is therefore obligation upon those who unite with the visible church, upon the current membership, and upon those having teaching responsibilities.

Patience and allowing room for sanctification in these matters is not compromise. Officers in the church are sworn to uphold the standards of the church. They are also sworn to teach the standards of the church. All parties must understand this is the case. The membership must willingly sit under the teaching of the church. The leadership must teach and uphold the positions of the church.

I also stipulate that persons not holding to infant baptism may become members of the local church with the realization their position bars them from becoming officers in the church. Again, pastors, ruling elders, and deacons must subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms. As already mentioned, this means the officers of the church, are under oath to uphold these Standards as faithful summaries of the teaching of holy Scripture. This is a solemn duty and responsibility. Those who do not hold to infant baptism cannot subscribe to the Confession and Catechisms. They therefore bar themselves from becoming officers while they maintain their position. Of course the same would hold true for other doctrines such as divine election.

This also means that congregations are not privileged to vote for men as eld-

ers or pastors who do not hold to infant baptism or divine election.

Early in my pastoral ministry in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, I had an unfortunate experience with a congregation. When I arrived, I learned several member families were committed to dispensational theology. Not only so, several of the men were elected as officers, as either deacons or elders in the church. Because of their personal theology, these men could not and would not take vows in which they subscribed to the Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms. This fact was known among the membership. This being the case, the men should not have stood for office nor should they have been elected.

In order to move the church forward, I asked these men to step aside so that others might be elected to office. One by one, as I asked these men to step aside, they refused to do so. Only one man, as I recall, responded positively. As a result, we instituted the process of church discipline. It was only after two full-length church trials and the pronouncing of formal censure that we could move forward in this congregation.

I relate this story for two reasons. One, charity demands that all prospective and current members of a congregation respect the law and order of the church. Respect requires ears open to the teaching of the church. Neither members nor officers are privileged to push their personal agendas and act contrary to the law and order of the church.

Charity also demands that we open ourselves to the possibility of formal discipline in the church. Complete agreement on all issues cannot be achieved in this life. Membership within the church is upon credible, believable, profession of faith. Men and women will stumble and fall in doctrine and or life. We cannot assure ourselves difficulties will not arise when we receive persons not holding to infant baptism. However, the possibility of difficulties is not a bar to membership.

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IN RESPONSE - MEMBERSHIP AND INFANT BAPTISM, OBJECTIONS

by Dennis Prutow

I am taking the position that a church committed to infant baptism may receive families into membership who do not hold this position. Two primary objections were raised to my position when presented in the family conference context.

The first objection relates to the Covenant of Church Membership in the Reformed Presbyterian Church. Question Five asks,

To the end that you may grow in the Christian life, do you promise that you will diligently read the Bible, engage in private prayer, keep the Lord's day, regularly attend the worship services, observe the appointed sacraments, and give to the Lord's work as He shall prosper you?

The objection is that since our Covenant of Church Membership specifically requires us to observe the sacraments, a repudiation of infant baptism disqualifies a person from membership.

My answer is simple. Those convinced of believer's baptism do not totally repudiate the ordinance of baptism. They repudiate an aspect of the ordinance, that granted, paedobaptists deem important, but they do not repudiate the ordinance itself. Let me explain.

I say that infant baptism is an aspect of baptism. What do we see most frequently in paedobaptist churches? We see the baptism of infants. Because this is what we frequently see, we tend to think infant baptism is normative baptism. We tend to get the idea that in the normal course of things, we baptize infants. This is true within the believing paedobaptist community. But this in itself does not make infant baptism primary or normative.

We realize, with our baptistic brothers and sisters, that baptism is a witness to the work of God in Christ by the Spirit. Titus 3:5 reminds us, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." Baptism witnesses the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit. Recall those who heard Peter preaching on the Day of Pentecost.

Now when they heard this they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter

and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37-38).

In the first instance, baptism is an ordinance for those who confess Christ as Lord and align themselves with the visible church.

Infant baptism is an appendage. That is, we will baptize only the infants of those who confess Christ and align themselves with the visible church by way of baptism themselves. Otherwise, we will not baptize an infant. For example, we will not baptize the infant of a family that does not profess Christianity or is not a member family. From this perspective, adult baptism by confession is primary and infant baptism is secondary.

I therefore maintain those who hold to believer's baptism do not repudiate the ordinance or the centrality of the ordinance. They neglect an aspect of baptism. They observe the sacrament but in not all the aspects paedobaptists deem correct.

The second objection raised to admitting families that do not hold to infant baptism has to do with ancient Israel. The objection was stated something like the following. Suppose a Moabite family converted to the faith of Israel. Can you imagine the priests of Israel admitting the Moabite family to membership in the covenant community if the parents refused to have their children circumcised? The expected answer to the rhetorical question is obviously no. End of debate.

However, this does not end the debate for me. I think the objection begs the question. It does so by using a seemingly parallel situation and assumes the answer. But the situation is not parallel to the question we are addressing. How so? The laws of Israel were well known. God was specific.

And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a

servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants (Genesis 17:11-12).

The command is direct. Is there evidence in the Old Testament of the scenario just contemplated? There appears no such evidence.

Further, the overall culture of Old Testament times was patriarchal. There is little reason to expect fathers and children from Moab to have a dramatically different view of family responsibility than fathers and children in Israel. The picture given of Laban's family in Haran in Genesis 29-31 is typical. In deference to the culture, we speak of the patriarchs.

Finally, there is no hint of the idea of believer's circumcision in the Old Testament, the logical parallel to believer's baptism today. Reread Genesis 17:11-12.

The apostle Paul does define circumcision in Romans 4:11. "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them."

Paul does say circumcision is "a seal of the righteousness of the faith." We might infer from this that faith was required for circumcision. This is certainly not Paul's point. He knew full well God commanded the circumcision of eight-day-old males. Paul also compares baptism and circumcision in Colossians 2:11-12. But there is no hint of the idea of believer's circumcision as a parallel to the modern idea of believer's baptism. I therefore say the second objection raised against receiving families into church membership that do not hold to infant baptism is invalid.

I am open to further debate on this issue. Perhaps some will say I'm not sufficiently Reformed or Covenantal. My point is not to prove my own Reformed or Covenantal credentials. I'm simply interested in properly addressing a very practical present day issue.

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IN RESPONSE – WEEKLY WORK, SABBATH REST

by Dennis Prutow

The French atheist Voltaire observed that the best way to undermine Christianity would be to do away with the Christian Sabbath. Modern culture and society marches down this road. Sabbath observance has gone by the board. The first day of the week is like any other day. It is business as usual. Are Christians to follow suit? Are Christians to forsake the observance of the Fourth Commandment as useless legalism?

If not, are those favoring a return to Sabbath observance to denounce our culture? Are we to issue laundry lists of don'ts? Or should we major in the virtues of Sabbath observance? Should we set forth the positive testimony of Sabbath rest and the meaning of the institution? I favor the latter course. I take my lead from John Calvin in this. And I offer a brief look at the meaning of the Sabbath and the Sabbath rest.

The Fourth Commandment reads as follows in Deuteronomy 5:12-15,

Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

We note that Moses ties the Fourth Commandment to redemption. We set aside the day to recall and meditate upon our salvation. This salvation is rooted in God's work on our behalf.

Calvin therefore gives us the main purpose of the Fourth Commandment. "Under the repose of the seventh day the heavenly Law-giver meant to represent to the people of Israel spiritual rest, in which

believers ought to lay aside their own works to allow God to work in them."¹

The Sabbath is a spiritual rest. The day points to heaven, the final rest of the believer. How does a person attain this final spiritual rest? We must rely upon the work of God in Christ and not rely upon our own works. We therefore lay aside our weekly labor on the Sabbath in testimony of the grace of God. By our weekly Sabbath rest we testify that it is not our work that saves us. Rather, we testify to the fact that it is God's work in Christ's perfect life and perfect sacrifice on the cross that saves us.

Calvin adds,

Wherefore, lest we should make any mistake in the meaning of the Commandment, it is well to remember its analogy and conformity with the thing it signifies; *i. e.*, that the Jews might know that their lives could not be approved of God unless, by ceasing from their own work, they divest themselves of their reasons, counsels, and all the feelings and affections of the flesh.²

The Fourth Commandment teaches us that approval before God does not come on the basis of our own works. We must divest ourselves of the notion that our labor gains us merit before God. This is the first part of the lesson.

Calvin goes on. He says of the Jews, "They were only called away from their own works, that, as if dead to themselves and to the world, they might wholly devote themselves to God."³ Sabbath observance therefore signifies we are a people justified by faith. We are a people set aside to God for His service.

This turns the lesson of the Sabbath to sanctification. Calvin says "we must see the sum of this sanctification, *viz.*, the death of the flesh, when men renounce their earthly nature, so that they may be ruled and guided by the Spirit of God."⁴

We are set aside for the service of God in our justification. Thoroughgoing change occurs as we live out our status before God as men and women set aside for His service.

So what is the Sabbath about? It is a testimony given by God's people to a watching world. We really do believe our work does not get us to heaven (Ephesians 2:8-9). At the same time we really do believe we are set aside by God for good works (Ephesians 2:10). The setting aside of one day in seven for weekly rest and worship is the testimony.

The idea of this testimony pushes us. What do we really believe about our jobs? Let me offer two practical illustrations of the struggle. Men and women in our society are known by their work. They identify themselves and are identified by their occupations. The first question we ask people when we meet them, in order to further the conversation, is simple. "What do you do?" Our work is central to who we are. Our work is central to the value others place upon us. This is how we measure our wages and salaries.

It is quite easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking our work is of value to God. Somehow God must need me and my work. It is an easy step over the line. The Sabbath Day reminds us of our dependence upon God. We set aside *our* work. We rest in God and His work.

The second illustration presses us further. When we are ill or injured, what comes first? Is it our employment or school work or is it the Sabbath Day with its required rest and worship? Most of us think nothing of absence from worship in order to prepare our bodies for work. Work takes priority.

I realize this is can be a very touchy issue. But I raise it to illustrate where we are in our society. The pressures of the world are very strong. The pressures of work are enormous. But we must ask a crucial question. What carries the greater weight in our lives? Is it our work or is it God and His commandments. The Sabbath rest is designed to emphasize our dependence upon God not our own work. 'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1999 by Dennis Prutow.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2-8-28.

² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 2-434.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*