

IN RESPONSE – BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP, PART 1

by Dennis Prutow

Volume IX, Number 5, May, 2000

Campus pastors at Christian colleges and leaders of para-church organizations often gather their people for the celebration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. That Communion is an ordinance of the church does not seem to impinge upon their thinking. When asked about baptizing converts to faith in Christ, they demur. Would they baptize? Many respond in the negative. Why? Baptism is a sacrament of the church. But there are two sacraments, baptism *and* the Lord's Supper. Is there real reason to treat baptism differently?

The celebration of the sacraments independent of the visible church leaches over to baptism. We had the privilege of baptizing a young lady in our congregation who was already a communicant member in another church. This is an anomaly. It is more common to meet folks who have been baptized in various churches but they are not members. Baptized rolls and membership rolls differ. In some circumstances, people are eager to be baptized but they do not want to become members of a church. They seek certain privileges without the attending responsibilities. And so baptisms are conducted without connection to the church in membership.

My objective in this short series is to set forth the biblical models displaying the connection between baptism and membership in the church. Biblically and historically, baptism is the doorway into the visible church. Baptism and membership not only go together, they are part and parcel. Biblically, there cannot be one without the other. To display this, my intent is to follow two tracks. First, the biblical model requires baptism. This requirement carries with it connection to the church in what we call membership. Second, the biblical model is covenant relationship with God expressed visibly. Baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant signifying connection to the covenant community. These two tracks are parallel.

First, the biblical model requires baptism. The Great Commission is clear. "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). Discipleship involves at least baptism and teaching. One officially and formally begins the discipleship process with baptism. Teaching commences. It lasts the lifetime.

The context in which Jesus commanded implementation of the Great Commission is the visible church. We see this by taking several steps. (1) Christ formed a visible church. (2) Christ placed officers in this visible church. (3) Christ gave these officers authority to open and close the doors to this visible church. (4) Christ commanded these officers to baptize and teach. (5) Disciples are baptized members of the visible church.

Christ formed a visible church. We find the term church in two places in the gospels. Matthew 16:18, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." Christ builds His church with people of rock like faith similar to that of Peter. In other words, Christ builds His church with real men and women, young people and children, who trust Him unto salvation. This is a very visible entity.

To be sure, there are invisible aspects to the church. We cannot see all the members of the visible body at one time. We cannot see those members of the body presently in heaven. We cannot see into human hearts to tell infallibly who is or is not born again and genuine in their faith. All of this does not obviate the essential visibility of the body of those who are believers in this world.

Matthew 18:17 is the second reference. Jesus gives directions in dealing with an offender. "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Without going into the details of the procedure Jesus outlines, it is sufficient to say that if an offence must be presented to the church, it is not presented to some invisible entity or body. On the contrary, Christ tells us to present

the case to a very visible body. Not only so, if the offender refuses to listen to the judgment of the church, this person must be placed outside the body. We must declare him an unbeliever and treat him as such. This is excommunication. The offender is no longer privileged to come to the communion table with professing believers. He is put outside the visible body as a sign of his apparent lack of true faith in Jesus Christ witnessed by his refusal to repent of known sin.

Given these texts, we say without hesitation or reserve that Jesus Christ instituted and builds a church that is quite visible. Christ also places officers within this visible church. "He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11). Pastors and teachers are not phantasms or illusions. They are real people placed within very visible bodies to carry out certain work, in particular teaching and shepherding.

In Acts 14:23 we read, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." These elders had the duties of teaching, preaching, and ruling. "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). Christ organized His church with these leaders.

Christ also gave people within the church responsibilities with regard to the elders and their teaching. "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7). "Obey your leaders and submit to them for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17). Christ gives church leaders and church people mutual responsibility in the visible body.

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IN RESPONSE – BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP, PART 2

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The visible church organized by Jesus Christ is a church concrete and observable in form. In it both leadership and people have responsibilities with regard to teaching. As Jesus Christ builds a visible church and organizes her with particular leaders, Christ also gives these leaders special responsibilities in ruling as well as teaching. They open and close the doors of entrance to the visible body. Matthew 16:19, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”

Matthew Henry is straightforward. Christ gives the keys of the kingdom. That is, Christ “invests all the apostles and their successors with a ministerial power to guide and govern the church of Christ, as it exists in particular congregations or churches, according to the rules of the gospel.”¹

Binding and loosing has to do with opening and closing, admitting and expelling. “Christ’s ministers have a power to admit into the church; ‘Go, disciple all nations, baptizing them; those who profess faith in Christ, and obedience to him, admit them and their seed members of the church by baptism.’”² In addition,

They have a power to expel and cast out such as have forfeited their church-membership, that is binding; refusing to unbelievers the application of gospel promises and the seals of them; and declaring to such as appear to be *in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity*, that *they have no part or lot in the matter*, as Peter did to Simon Magus, though he had been baptized; and this is a binding over to the judgment of God.³

Jesus Christ builds a visible church, organizes this church with particular leaders tasked in part to teach, and gives these leaders authority to open and close the doors to the visible church. At the same time, Christ commands baptism and

teaching as the two major steps of discipleship.

Again, note the command of Christ. “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, italics added). As already observed, discipleship involves a minimum of two things, baptism and teaching. One officially begins the discipleship process with baptism. Teaching commences and lasts a lifetime.

There is little doubt regarding the connection of *teaching* to discipleship. The same connection exists between *baptism* and discipleship. Christ requires *both* baptizing and teaching. Further, I maintain the body ordained of God for making disciples is the visible church organized with leaders for the purpose of baptizing and teaching. Acts 11 confirms this line of thinking.

A mission from Cyprus resulted in the conversion of a large number of people, both Jews and Greeks, in Antioch (Acts 11:20-21). The apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabus to investigate and consolidate the gains (Acts 11:22-24). At this point, there were simply a number of converts in Antioch. Barnabus went to Tarsus to enlist the help of Paul in the work of planting a church (Acts 11:25). That Barnabus sought the help of Paul in planting a church in Antioch seems clear because this was the outcome of their work as indicated in Acts 11:26. “And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”

Note several points. There is no longer a loose confederation of believers in Antioch, there is a church, a visible body. If what we have said already concerning Christ’s institution of the church is correct, Paul and Barnabus would move to form a visible body of disciples with elders in which there would be ongoing teaching. The converts become disciples. How so? They are baptized. Paul and Barnabus would never disobey the explicit commission of Jesus Christ to *both* baptize and teach. Where there was a

number of believers, there is now a visible church. Where there were a number of converts, there are now disciples.

Note the further progression. Where there were a number of people who responded to the preaching of the gospel, there are now *Christians*. I draw this distinction. It is not converts who are called Christians. As already noted, converts are not necessarily disciples. Disciples are baptized converts who receive teaching under the discipline of officers established in a visible church by Jesus Christ. *It is disciples who are called Christians*. That is, Christians are people who are disciples. They align themselves with the visible church by way of baptism and enjoy the teaching of the officers in the church appointed for this task.

Acts 11:26 declares, “The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” The disciples, as we have described them, *were called* Christians. Who called them Christians? The people of Antioch called them Christians. Why did the people of Antioch call the disciples Christians? They were organized as a visible body with leadership in Paul and Barnabus. To signify their alignment with the visible body, they were baptized in accord with the command of Christ. They regularly met with Paul and Barnabus to receive their teaching. So organized, these followers of Christ, caught the attention of others. Formally organized as disciples of Christ, they were called Christians by others in the city.

Acts 2:41-42 also confirms this thinking. “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” We plainly see the pattern of the Great Commission. Converts were baptized. They were added to the number of the disciples, the visible church. They sat under the teaching of the apostles in the church. Do baptism and membership in the visible church go together? Indeed they do.

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¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 5:232.

² *Ibid.*, 5:234.

³ *Ibid.*

IN RESPONSE – BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP, PART 3

by Dennis Prutow

In brief, my two-track argument that baptism and church membership are inseparable is quite simple. First, the biblical model requires baptism. This requirement carries with it connection to the church in what we call membership. Second, the biblical model is covenant relationship with God expressed visibly. Baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant signifying connection to the covenant community. These two tracks are parallel. We now turn to the second track.

The fact believers are in covenant with God through Jesus Christ comes through clearly in the institution of the Lord's Supper. The apostle Paul says of our Lord, "He took the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me'" (1 Corinthians 11:25).

The blood of Christ is the blood of the covenant. The words of Jesus harken back to Exodus 24 where God's covenant with Israel was ratified. Moses had an altar built at the foot of Mount Sinai and commanded offerings and sacrifices.

Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exodus 24:6-8).

God made a covenant with the people. This covenant prefigured the covenant God affected through Christ. The blood sprinkled on the altar and on the people prefigured the blood of Christ. God stipulated the people had certain responsibilities under the term of the covenant.¹

The people freely agreed. "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" They did so as a very visible body. Again, looking at the parallel

with Christ, the relationship we have with God through Christ is that of covenant. We have certain profound privileges in this covenant relationship. We also have responsibilities.

The analogy used in Scripture to display the covenant nature of our relationship with God through Christ is marriage. God describes a husband's wife in this way. "She is your companion and your wife by covenant" (Malachi 2:14). Proverbs 2:14 describes the adulteress "that leaves the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God." Marriage is, in its essence, a covenant relationship in which the parties have both privileges and responsibilities.

Paul reminds us, "the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church" (Ephesians 4:23). Paul draws out the comparison. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 4:25). Our relationship to our spouse is one of covenant. Our relationship to Christ is one of covenant. As we have responsibilities within marriage, we also have responsibilities within the covenant relationship with Christ.

Note the similarity of language the apostles use with regard to responsibility within marriage and within the church. Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord." Within the covenantal structure of marriage, a certain submission is required. Hebrews 11:17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account." Within the covenant structure and community of the church, certain submission is required.

The parallel between Old Testament and New is drawn out in the visible nature of the body. The people of God at the foot of Mount Sinai were, as a very visible body, entering into covenant with God. God spoke through Moses,

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all

the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6).

And so the people entered into covenant with God *as a body*.

When Paul rehearsed the institution of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, he did so in a letter addressed to the church at Corinth. He salutes the people of God collectively and individually. "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Paul upbraids this church and reminds the people that the blood of Christ is the blood of the covenant. The church is in covenant relationship with God through Christ. This visible body therefore has certain privileges but it also has clear responsibilities.

We therefore maintain that the church is a visible community in covenant with God through Christ. Understanding this is the case is important as we consider how one becomes a part of this covenant community. Broadly speaking, one must adhere to the covenant. In order to adhere to the covenant, one must be deemed.

This is the pattern we see in Israel. God says, "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself" (Exodus 19:4). The people at the foot of Mount Sinai were a redeemed people. So it is in our day.

Converts solemnly enter into covenant with God on the basis of the redemption purchased by Christ. Redemption includes the benefits of justification, adoption, and sanctification. We will look at these benefits in terms of covenant. When adult converts adhere to the covenant, they enter the covenant community by way of baptism. They also have access to the table of the Lord, the covenant meal, the Lord's Supper. We will also look at baptism and the Lord's Supper in terms of covenant.

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¹ See 'In Response' regarding church membership and the propriety of a covenant of church membership, the September, 1999 issue.

IN RESPONSE – BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP, PART 4

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The church is a visible community in covenant with God. The community and the people who are members of it have privileges derived from the redemption purchased by Christ. The people also have certain responsibilities in this covenant relationship with God. The benefits accrued in redemption include justification, adoption, and sanctification.

Upon trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as the only adequate payment for our sins, we are justified in the sight of God. “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). On one hand, we receive the forgiveness of all our sins based upon Christ’s payment for those sins in His death. Remember, the blood of Christ is the blood of the covenant.

On the other hand, we receive the gift of all the good deeds performed by Jesus Christ as He lived a perfect life in this world. All our sins are covered by the blood of Christ. We have the good life of Jesus Christ to present to God as our access into heaven. The “past” is covered; the “future” is insured.

To adhere to the covenant, we publicly declare our faith in the blood of the covenant. We publicly declare trust in the death and perfect life of Christ. We profess faith in His death died on our behalf and His life lived on our behalf. Jesus teaches us, “Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:32).

Christ extends church leaders the keys of the kingdom. Based upon a sound understanding of the work of Christ, they are privileged to hear the confessions of men and women and thus to receive them into the covenant community.

Adoption is a benefit of redemption. In it “we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.”¹ As in the case of justification, adoption also takes place upon faith in Jesus Christ. “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12). In civil adoption, children legally become part of

a new family. The family is obviously a very visible entity. The parents have responsibility for the child and the child has new responsibilities in his or her new family. Because adoption is a legal transaction, a child has *covenant* privileges and responsibilities.

So it is in the covenant community of the visible church. There is a familial aspect to the covenant community. Believers receive the Spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15). Believers look to God as their Father (Matthew 6:9). Members of the covenant community refer to each other as brothers and sisters (James 2:15, among many many references). Younger members of the covenant community are to treat older men as fathers and older women as mothers (1 Timothy 5:1-2). From this perspective the covenant community is a family into which children come by way of adoption.

A third benefit of redemption is sanctification. Here we see covenant responsibilities come into play. Men and women set aside for the purposes of God grow more and more in grace toward the image of God in Christ. Of course Jesus Christ kept the whole law perfectly. From this perspective, the moral law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments reflects the perfect image of Christ. Conformity to the image of Christ means conformity to the moral standard summarized in the Ten Commandments.

In addition, if the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us (Romans 5:5), we express love for God. How do we visibly express this love? The apostle John answers. “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). The Ten Commandments offer us a vehicle through which we may display our love for God. Following the commandments to display love stems from a hearts filled with the Spirit.

We are back to Exodus 24 and the covenant ratified with blood at the foot of Sinai. The covenant stipulations the people embraced were summarized in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). Sanctification involves conformity to this covenant and a pledge to live in accordance to this

covenant within the covenant community as the believers’ family and primary support group.

The sacraments are part of this scheme. Baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant. As those who confess Christ enter the covenant community they receive the sign of the covenant, baptism. Circumcision was the sign of membership in the covenant community in the Old Testament (Genesis 17:10, Acts 7:8, Romans 4:11). Baptism replaces circumcision in the New Testament (Colossians 2:11-12).² Baptism is therefore the sign of membership in the covenant community. Baptisms performed without those being baptized also embracing the covenant community and embracing covenant privileges and responsibilities is disobedience to Christ.

In the Lord’s Supper, participants outwardly partake of the body and blood of Christ set before them in bread and the fruit of the vine. Of the bread, Jesus says, “This is my body which is given for you.” Of the fruit of the vine, Jesus declares, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:19-20). Paul warns that we must discern the body. “The Corinthians came to the Lord’s table as to a common feast, *not discerning the Lord’s body*— not making a difference or distinction between that and common food, but setting both on a level....”³ If we make no distinction between the sacrament and a common meal we may well invite anyone to the sacrament as to a common meal. The sacrament loses its uniqueness as a meal *for* the covenant community.

The church is a visible community bound to God by covenant. She receives special privileges from God and pledges herself to specific duties. Embracing the covenant involves confession of Christ and service to Christ. Those embracing the covenant receive the sign of membership in the covenant community, baptism. ‘In Response’ is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 2000 by Dennis Prutow.

² For an exposition of this point see my “Reformed Baptism” and In Response, April, 1993.

³ Matthew Henry, 6:565-566.

¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer 34.