

Accepting Baptisms Different from Our Own:  
Baptist Theology that Grants Validity to Infant Baptism

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**Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind (1 Pet. 3.8)**

## Introduction

Although the subject of this paper is controversial, the goal in this presentation is the promotion of love and unity in the face of the divergence over baptism that exists in the church.<sup>1</sup> Pointedly, the purpose of this paper is to defend the claim that infant baptism is valid though not necessary. In this context, valid refers to what the church is to acknowledge and accept as baptism that is not in need of repeating. It means that admittance into church membership should follow the pattern of charity that most evangelical churches exercise when admitting Christians from different churches to communion.<sup>2</sup> Acceptance does not eliminate difference. Thus, embracing the view that infant baptism is valid though not necessary is a baptistic position: the church baptizes children growing up in her midst only upon confession of faith. There is no baptism of infants in the Baptist church, but neither is there a call for re-baptism of people who received baptism as infants.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to remember that we are speaking about the visible church with fallible administrators. Therefore, we should practice baptism with reasonable charity, and with due awareness that baptism is a sign of Christian unity (Eph. 4:1-6). In this light, it is not an overstatement to say that it is as deplorable as it is ironic that baptism is one of the great divides in the history of the Christian church. By contrast, we must ask, "to promote unity, how can we argue that *both sides* of this debate can hold to their view as an 'ought' while acknowledging validity to the opposing view?"<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the plea that this paper urges upon all its readers is that we ought to try; we ought to try to find a way to accept baptisms different from our own while preserving our convictions.

We begin this journey at the foot of a high and intimidating mountain of tradition.<sup>5</sup> The stepping stones of our ascent are three principles that help Baptists grant validity to infant

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<sup>1</sup>It is apparent that there was wider acceptance of other views on baptism before the Reformation than after it. Polarization between the reformers and the Anabaptists surfaced in the Reformation and it continues with little change between Infant Baptists and Baptists. The question that comes to mind in light of the NT call for likemindedness is: "Can we find a third way in which parties with different convictions can accept alternate baptisms without compromise?" This paper is a step in that direction. Perhaps, church historians can shed some light on attempts at a third way regarding validity in ways similar to the view offered here.

<sup>2</sup>Baptist churches tacitly grant validity when they admit baptized believers to communion without requiring or stipulating that their baptisms took place upon confession of faith. Alternatively, Infant Baptist churches also tacitly grant validity to alternate practices when they welcome parents to the Table without requiring the baptism of their infant children. In these cases, pastors do not exert discipline; instead, they allow participation at the Table despite baptisms different from their own. Surely, this is so because principles of unity and charity prevail. Is it not a simple step of consistent love to do the same with regard to membership?

<sup>3</sup>One can be a Baptist without being an Anabaptist and without being Barthian, though Barth makes some good points, one for example is this: "There is no kind of inadequacy in baptismal order and practice that cannot be removed or put right by means quite other than that of re-baptism," *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, (London: Bristol Typesetting Company, 1948). 36.

<sup>4</sup>Obviously, the thesis proposed here works within the framework of two sides to the debate regarding children of the church. This is not an attempt to eliminate strong conviction from either side; this is not an argument for a position that claims with conviction that neither side of this debate is conclusive. This "agnostic" view is not a third way, but a different way altogether in that it leaves the practice of baptism in the hands of those seeking it instead of in the hands of the shepherds of the flock.

<sup>5</sup>There is an important word of caution to raise here. We inescapably practice baptism and communion as signs of unity. In varying ways, *we each say things to the Lord in symbol*, "I commit myself by baptism (1 Pet. 3.21) to live by your holy will as one body into which we were all baptized" (1 Cor. 12.12; Eph. 4.1-6), and "I commit myself to love your family as my family because we being many are one in Christ, the one loaf" (1 Cor. 10.17). However, do

baptism. The climb will surely include some profitable clashing of steel by which iron sharpens iron. The three principles on the table for discussion are: objectivity, simplicity, and convergence.

### 1A. Objectivity

First, we will summarize what objectivity means, and then we will unpack what it means.

#### 1B. Summarizing what objectivity means

Objectivity means that the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are not only testimonies that the participants give, but they are also testimonies that God gives. As God-appointed signs, they point to what God is saying in the gospel. They do not dispense grace *ex opere operato*. They reiterate the word of Scripture in prophetic enactments. When the church speaks in a ritual, God speaks; when the church baptizes, God baptizes through the church.

We must also emphasize the fact that NT rituals are not bare reminders like a heap of stones left as a testimony of someone no longer there. God is present with His family in a special way in the observance of the sacraments. Furthermore, signs are seals (as the sign of circumcision was a seal, Rom. 4:11), which means that God not only speaks in the visual aids, but He also confirms the promises to the ears of the hearers by the work of the Spirit. When received by faith, the sacraments are means by which God encourages His people along the way on their spiritual journey. God's objective word in the sacraments promises salvation by faith, calls for faith, and strengthens faith. At the Table, our Lord reiterates His promise of nourishment; in baptism, He reiterates His promise of cleansing.

In this connection, it is worthy of note that Acts 2:38-39 teaches the principle of objectivity and not baptismal regeneration: "**Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself**". Baptism reiterates the promise that through repentance sinners receive the forgiveness of sins by the gift of the Holy Spirit. It expresses God's promise of cleansing to those who turn to Christ in faith (with faith as the other side of the coin of repentance). Obviously, then, objectivity is not a denial of the subjectivity of the sacraments. The church gives its confession, and candidates for baptism confess their faith, but the church's voice is in response to the words and acts of God.

Given that the words and acts of God ought to have priority in our understanding of baptism, and given the fact that the administration of baptism is performed by God-appointed, but fallible hands, then it is safe to say that those who hold to believer baptism ought to admit the validity of infant baptism. This is simply saying that if we major on what has priority in the sacraments, the sign and seal that God gives, and if we concentrate on God's voice in sign and seal and not on the fallibility that attaches to the practice of the church, then we will acknowledge that voice by admitting validity. To reject the validity of the church's action in the sacraments is to relativize or obscure the action and voice of God in them; then, in turn, our task of clear gospel proclamation suffers.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the key to the reform of baptismal practice in Baptist churches today (as sought by Timothy George, for example) is to bring the church to full and hearty awareness of the objectivity of baptism. Like nothing else, a robust emphasis on

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we say these things symbolically in the sacraments and also hypocritically? Do we honor God with our lips but deny Him in our practice of baptism by putting ritual above family? Is this not similar to the conduct of the Pharisees whose "picayunish-ness" filled Jesus with indignant anger? Surely, we must all concede that it displeases the Lord *when we do not try our "dead level best" to build new bridges between churches with respect to baptism rather than preserving old barriers.*

<sup>6</sup>An inadequate order and practice of baptism can obscure its nature, order, power and meaning, can dull and render difficult the understanding of it. . . The paradoxical situation may result that the Church herself does not realize what she is doing in baptism or what she possesses in those who have been baptized, Barth, 35.

God's promising word in baptism is the most important principle in the restoration of baptism "to its rightful place as a central liturgical act of Christian worship."<sup>7</sup>

This summary of objectivity and its impact put us close to the top of Mount Everest in trying to ascend and transcend the tall granite of tradition. To avoid a painful fall, we need to secure each step we take by unpacking the idea of objectivity more fully.

## 2B. Unpacking the meaning of objectivity

We need to unpack the suitcase in order to support this important notion and to clarify its relevance to the question of validity, and in turn to affirm its relevance to Christian charity and church unity in the matter of church membership. We can do so by considering the following things: three basics of an actual baptism, sufficient and necessary conditions, faith, and the regular/irregular distinction.

### 1) Three basics of an actual baptism

It seems reasonable to think that we can agree that at least three basics are necessary for a baptism to occur.<sup>8</sup> There must be the stated intent of obeying the command of Christ, the use of water, and recognition of the trinity.<sup>9</sup> These emerge from Jesus' *commission and command* to baptize with *water* in the name of the *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (Mat. 28.19-20).

#### a) Intent

This is not an attempt to probe the heart. At issue here is simply the stated goal of the use of water *in the context of the church and her proclamation*. Accordingly, using water to baptize as a prank between teenagers is not sufficient for a valid baptism because it obviously lacks the intent to fulfill the command of Christ. That is true if one sprinkles the other three times; it is true even if he dunks his friend three times forward in the backyard pool.<sup>10</sup>

#### b) Water

Could we grant validity to a church practice that intends to fulfill the command of Christ, but that sprinkles the candidate with ashes? On the basis that Jesus commanded the church to go and baptize with water in the performance of a purifying ritual (a ritual that symbolizes purification, forgiveness, and the cleansing of sin, Jn 3.22-26) it is extremely difficult to grant that sprinkling with ashes fulfills an essential requirement of a baptism: using water in a cleansing ritual.

#### c) Trinity

This "silly" idea of baptizing with ashes brings us to the third requirement of a baptism: recognition of the trinity. Consider again the case of someone coming to join the church claiming that he was baptized with ashes. We should not accept his claim to baptism and we should call this person to receive water baptism. This odd case turns out to be parallel with the case of the

<sup>7</sup>*Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds. Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2006) xvii.

<sup>8</sup>Again, church history may furnish lessons for us in this regard if we look for them. The church history experts in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds. Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2006) reveal instances where infant baptism is permissible (valid) but not necessary (170, 178, 182, 188), but, disappointingly, they make nothing of it. In the chapter on practical implications for local church practice, Mark Dever pulls all of the chapters together with the less than irenic conclusion: "a baptism of an infant is in no sense the baptism commanded in Scripture," which in context means that infant baptisms are outside the boundaries of what a local congregation may accept as true baptisms" 343. It seems clear that the book lacks the charitable and irenic spirit that Schreiner and Wright hoped the book would have when they wrote its introduction, 1. With unashamed bias, I affirm that a charitable and irenic spirit that gives fresh examination to difficult topics (xiii) will try to find a way to grant validity to infant baptism while preserving baptistic conviction. This, I claim, is the way to the "unity in love" that is also "unity in truth" that Timothy George presents in the foreword to the book (xix).

<sup>9</sup>Although not a hard and fast point, we can include the preaching of the word here in the stated intent of obeying the commission of Christ to teach and proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth...in both word (preaching) and deed (baptism) proclamation.

<sup>10</sup>It would still fail to be valid if he splashed his friend three times, irreverently pronouncing the names of the triune God.

disciples in Acts 19 who were allegedly “baptized” without ever hearing about the Holy Spirit. Those baptized with ashes were baptized without ever hearing about water; they had some radically anomalous understanding of baptism. In both cases, there is failure regarding an essential requirement (water for one and the trinity by implication for the other). Acts 19 shows us that these disciples were never baptized in the first place because the ritual lacked recognition (proclamation) of the Holy Spirit and, by implication, proper recognition of the trinity (thus, when they were actually baptized, it was in the name of Jesus, 19.5).

Therefore, we have three essentials: the church intending to obey Christ (in a bond of baptism with proclamation), the use of water, and recognition of the authority of the triune God. These three essentials do not decide the question of Baptist versus Infant Baptist practice; they decide the question of baptism, of what is necessary for a baptism.

### 2) Sufficient and necessary conditions

These essentials are necessary, but are they sufficient for an actual baptism? When these three conditions are met do we have the reality of baptism? Yes we do, if the right mortar bonds the three essential bricks together into a solid wall.

Objectivity, the principle of God’s objective word in baptism, is the mortar that holds the basic requirements together to form an actual baptism. God’s speech per the visual aid is what makes the three requirements both necessary and sufficient for baptism to occur. When objectivity factors into the picture with intent, use of water, and naming the trinity, then we have a baptism. God’s voice bonds the essentials into a working whole because His objective word is unshakable, solid, and sure. We know His word is present in baptism because He instituted it and speaks through it. Therefore, we ought to grant validity to baptisms that meet the three necessary conditions. Now, we need a comment about faith.

### 3) Faith

The model that God’s word is present in baptism and that it gives sufficiency to the three requirements leaves faith out of view. This seems like a big omission and it raises a significant question. Why is confession of faith not part of what is necessary for the reality of a baptism? The simple answer is that if we suspend the reality of baptism on faith, we relativize and obscure the action of God in the sacrament by affirming that God’s speech and promise can only be present in the sacrament if man’s faith is present. Without minimizing the place of faith, objectivity stresses the important point that faith depends on the promise of God that He reiterates in the sign of baptism (because baptism is a gospel sign). In this connection, we note again that Acts 2.38-39, one of the clearest passages on the duty of baptism, teaches that baptism promises what the gospel promises: cleansing of sin by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The reality of baptism involves the reality of God’s speech through it; He instituted the sign; it is His sign, it is His testimony to the cleaning promise of the gospel.

Two comments are necessary to confirm this view of faith. On one hand, objectivity avoids the notion of false or illusionary baptisms. For example, consider the often repeated cases of believer baptisms of young people who then turn away from the gospel to live in overt denial of Christ for many years, and who eventually come to repentance. When they come to repentance years into their adult lives, does the church call them to baptism on the basis that they were never baptized because it is now self-evident that at the time of their “baptism” faith was lacking? If the church *does* call them to baptism, then they are not being “re-baptized,” but “baptized” because on this view, there was no original baptism. However, if no baptism occurred, then most importantly, God’s speech through baptism promising cleansing did not occur, even though it appeared to be there originally. How could you have the thing signified without the sign that signifies it? This approach makes God’s promise through a simple visual aid dependent on man’s faith *for its existence*, as judged by one’s own introspection or by the observations of others from the outside looking in.

On the other hand, the objectivity of baptism preserves faith's true dependence. If we grant that the three requirements are necessary and sufficient for baptism because God's objective word cements them together into a gospel giving whole, then faith is put in proper perspective. *Faith depends on God's word reiterated through baptism*; God's word reiterated through baptism does *not* depend on faith.

Therefore, we call for faith in the *administration* of baptism not to make baptism something real or actual, but to direct sinners to the promise of the gospel that God gives in the sign He instituted. The call to faith is extremely important as a matter of clear gospel proclamation through good order and proper administration of the sacrament. In this model, confession of faith is a requirement for proper administration of baptism, but it is not a requirement that brings an actual baptism into existence. This brings us to the regular versus irregular distinction.

#### 4) Regular versus irregular distinction

Because we call for faith in the administration of the sacraments, we accent the important relationship of faith to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Without questioning the reality of baptism that meets the three necessary and sufficient requirements, we can ask about good order, diligent administration, and regularity. We can ask, "Should we baptize only when there is confession of faith?" At this point, the door opens to the discussion of Baptist versus Infant Baptist practice and it puts this discussion on a different footing from validity. Because of the objectivity of baptism, the use of *water to obey Christ in the name of the trinity* are sufficient for an actual baptism that we should all recognize, identify, and work with as valid. Here God's promise does not depend on man's faith, but precisely because faith depends on God's promise, it is extremely important to determine the place that faith has in the practice of baptism. That determination comes by debate regarding good order, diligent administration, and the regularity of baptism.

Therefore, someone practices baptism in irregular way. Each side has reasons for their own practice and they consider the other baptismal practice to be irregular: "We practice baptism regularly and you practice it irregularly." If we can adopt this posture, then we take *a great step* forward toward unity without minimizing the important discussion of Baptist versus Infant Baptist practice. *Both agree that the other side practices baptism* in which both can thankfully rejoice in the gospel that God gives through His cleansing sign. The Baptist can observe an infant baptism and rejoice in the good news!<sup>11</sup> Then, the debate regarding the baptism of children growing up in the church can take place in a fresh orbit of thought and with a healthy tone because both parties give priority to God's voice in the sign and seal of baptism.

The implication for charity and love is this: once we grant validity to baptisms different from our own (as the principle of objectivity helps us do), we can accept brothers and sisters into membership without re-baptizing them because we grant that *they were baptized as infants*, even though the baptism came about *in some irregular way* (as we see it). In the promotion of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, love covers a multitude of irregularities.<sup>12</sup> Thus, this principle helps us grant validity and promote unity.

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<sup>11</sup>The Baptist is not tempted to look over at some orthodox Presbyterian church and think that the use of water over there in a ritual is a "blank," an illusion, or a non-baptism attempt at baptism.

<sup>12</sup>Love of course must be grounded in truth, but we must also not forget that truth (how we hold it and carry ourselves knowing it) must be guided by love. Therefore, on one hand, we cannot argue that baptism, whatever the subjects may be (or in a separate context, whatever the mode may be), is an indifferent matter such that the church can take an agnostic stance and elders can leave all decisions of whom and how in the hands of those seeking baptism. No, we ought to have convictions and seek to lead the church by those convictions. On the other hand, the fact that baptism and communion are signs of Christian unity ought to weigh heavily on our consciences with respect to how we use the knowledge we have, with respect to how we handle our convictions. This means, at the least, that we *try to find a way* to promote the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, especially in the areas of baptism and communion that *token our unity* in Christ.

We can now, with greater brevity, move in thought to two other principles that also help us grant validity to baptisms different from our own. The next one we take up is simplicity.

## 2B. Simplicity

A significant hurdle in accepting the validity of all Christian baptisms performed in the name of the triune God is the thought that some (those who hold the other view) are in breach of the command of God.<sup>13</sup> If we ought to baptize children in the way of the obedience of faith (and thus not as infants), then this question arises, "how can we look lightly at the breach of a divine 'ought' and accept infant baptism?" Likewise, some ask, "if we ought to baptize infants by divine command, then how can the church fail to sanction or discipline those parents who break God's covenant (say, to discipline by barring them from communion)?" The objectivity of the sacraments gives us a foundation on which to build an answer to these concerns. Is it not reasonable to conclude that since God's presence and speech in the sacraments is a blessing despite human failure in general, then it is a blessing despite human failure in particular breaches regarding ritual detail? Does this not apply either way, no matter which view one thinks is incorrect on details?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>The issue of divine command is important to both sides in this debate. The following considerations give perspective that reduces polarization.

First, once we state the difference between Paedobaptists (those who baptize infant children growing up in Christian homes and thus growing up in the church) and Baptists (those who baptize older children growing up in Christian homes and thus growing up in the church) in this way, it should be clear to all (though some may struggle more than others to agree as to what is clear) that the adherents of both positions must reach their conclusions by logical implication. For in the NT, we have no explicit account of the baptism of infants. Similarly, in the NT, we have no explicit account of the baptism of older children on confession of their faith (children growing up in the church from infancy).

Second, this fact of logical implication is not a bad thing since we must reach conclusions as paramount as the doctrine of the trinity by "good and necessary consequence." Likewise, it is not a bad thing to ground beliefs about baptismal practice in logical deductions from what is explicit in Scripture to something we believe is therefore implicit in Scripture.

Third, we can go further in comparison with the trinity and argue that despite its inferential character *we are no less duty bound* to believe historic trinitarian doctrine. The same applies to baptismal doctrine: we are duty bound to believe what Scripture teaches by good and necessary consequence regarding the baptism of children growing up in the church. Being bound to such beliefs must surely dictate our practice in the church. This reinforces the earlier point that people of *conviction* ought to seek to find a way to accept the validity of baptisms that others evangelical Christians practice with *conviction*.

Fourth, however, we should be open to the possibility that the inferential nature of the convictions that drive our sense of duty is not a barrier to finding a position of compromise; it may even help us find one. For surely, we can all appreciate the fact that *inferred duties* regarding baptism are not on the same level with *explicit imperatives* of Scripture, such as the Ten Commandments and the two commandments of love. With respect to the doctrine of the trinity, we must also grant the great difference that exists between a cardinal doctrine of theology proper (what is the nature of God?) and a ritual (upon whom should we apply water in a simple ceremony?).

These considerations of logical implication and the difference between cardinal doctrines and simple ceremonies, however important the ceremonies may be, coupled with a deep sense of love and a firm commitment to find ways to promote unity between churches, ought to soften our grip on how we view the failures of others regarding the baptism of children growing up in the church. That is, without altering our convictions, we ought to recognize that if we are wrong in our beliefs, then our failure is not quite the same as violating one of the Ten Commandments (of course, failure is not a little thing; knowing and doing with is right regarding who we ought to baptize is vital). Such failure is not as serious as misunderstanding the nature of God and the person of Christ. Now, if we can agree on this point while looking at ourselves, can we also agree when we look at our brothers in the church? In keeping with the golden rule of love, can we say the following whole-heartedly: If our brothers who lead other churches are wrong in their beliefs in some aspect of the sacraments (surely we think they are wrong indeed on aspects of *baptismal* doctrine), then their failure is not quite the same as violating one of the Ten Commandments? Can we agree that such failure is not as serious as misunderstanding the nature of God and the person of Christ? We ought to be able to think this way; otherwise, we may all too easily violate the commandment of love!

<sup>14</sup>Objectivity also helps answer these concerns by noting that God's command with respect to the place of faith pertains to good order and the proper administration of baptism and *not to the reality of a baptism and its validity*.

This brings us to the core of the simplicity principle. The fact that new covenant ritual observance is much simpler than old covenant ritual observance gives meaningful support to this line of thought in which we “wink” at breeches of ritual detail.

Of extreme importance is the fact that there is simplicity to new covenant rituals with respect to both their number and the rigor of their practice. In the new order brought by Christ, there is no longer a long list of ritual requirements specifying amounts of water, proper mixtures, detailed procedures, extreme sanctions, and severe penalties. This last fact of severe penalties is most important to our discussion. It is remarkable that the NT lacks what the OT possessed to an unusual extent: extreme penalties and sanctions for breeches of the *smallest* ritual detail. For example, *touching* the ark brought death even to those who grabbed it to keep it from falling to the ground (2 Sam. 6:6-7; 1 Sam. 6:19-20). However, there are absolutely no sanctions whatever attached to baptismal practice in the NT, and those attached to communion concern personal faith and interpersonal fellowship, not divinely stipulated details of observance.<sup>15</sup> Eating too much food and getting drunk (1 Cor. 11) are not violations of divine stipulations regarding the Lord's Table ritual; they are violations of faith and obedience among those who profess attachment to one loaf and family with one Father and one baptism. In fact, *the Corinthian example shows how important it is to promote love and unity with respect to the sacraments.*

Therefore, additional to the foundation supplied by objectivity, the simplicity of new covenant rituals leads us reasonably to conclude that nuances of ritual detail, such as the timing of baptism, ought *not* to be promoted by the force of penalty or sanction. This is especially so when the penalties sever fellowship between one family member and another who are one loaf incorporated into Christ by one baptism! If we accent the voice of God and de-accent sanctioning others for failures of ritual detail, then acknowledging validity to baptismal practice that we view as irregular is both reasonable and prudent. We should give preeminence to the objectivity of the sacraments and to their NT simplicity in the context of the one body and one loaf symbolized by baptism and communion.

We turn now to the principle of convergence, which is a practical principle that helps us deal with the loose ends of irregularity.

### 3B. Convergence

Pointedly, convergence means that the differences between believer baptism and infant baptism are eventually eliminated as confession of faith is added to infant baptism, and baptism is added to the nurture of children whose baptism comes after their confession of faith.

It is important to factor the dynamic nature of the Christian family into this discussion of valid baptism. Dynamic refers to the opposite of static; it means that the family cannot be viewed as somehow frozen in space and time as it hears the commands and promises of God through the sacraments. In this light, another consideration supports the acknowledgment of the validity of both infant baptism and believer baptism.<sup>16</sup> It enables tolerance and latitude if we embrace the reality that *over time the irregularities iron themselves out.* Eventually confession of faith on the part of children is added to baptism in orthodox Infant Baptist practice, and baptism is eventually

Concern with God's command justifies an earnest debate between Baptists and Infant Baptists, but concern with the objectivity of baptism (the reality of God's speech through it) is primary and this debate is subordinate to it.

<sup>15</sup>For example, various sanctions exist regarding departure from God's commandments including the punishment of eternal death by the Lord (1 Cor. 6-9:10) and the withdrawal of the right hand of fellowship by the church (1 Cor. 5:9-11). By contrast, does Scripture sanction breaches of order (or regularity) regarding the two NT rituals? Scripture does not do so. Again, God's severe discipline of Corinthian practice at the Table was due to breeches of love and unity and not ritual detail. This accents the need to promote unity regarding differences of baptismal conviction. The promotion of unity by accepting the validity of infant baptism is not a denial of the duty we have to maintain good order. Baptists who accept infant baptism as in fact baptism continue to practice the baptism of children growing up in the church only on confession of faith; they continue this practice because of God's command *regarding good order* in the administration of baptism.

<sup>16</sup>Because of the asymmetry that pertains, this means that Baptists accept the validity of infant *baptisms* and Infant Baptists accept the validity of the Baptist *practice* of not baptizing children of the church until they confess faith.

added to the nurture of children in Baptist practice. When we couple patient longsuffering with the pursuit of unity in the bond of peace, then we can wholeheartedly acknowledge validity to those ritual practices we deem irregular *at a particular moment and for a short season*. They not only express the voice of God in a context of ritual simplicity and church unity, but by the grace of God, *they also regularize themselves* in the unfolding process of family and church life. In time, a convergence surfaces (though each side may still emphasize the irregularity of the other side in reaching this convergence).

## Conclusion

We conclude with the following observations.

### 1) Church membership

Based on the three principles of validity (objectivity, simplicity, and convergence), Baptists of conviction can accept infant baptism as valid and they can accept people baptized as infants into local church membership with no sanctions (i.e. no re-baptism).

### 2) The irenic spirit

Study of the three principles, trying to come to terms with them, and working at their application is foundational and contextual for the debate over the timing of the baptism of children growing up in the church. This *discussion of the three principles ought to come first*; it is the way to a fresh start in the study of baptism that opens the door of love in the Christian family. These principles release the pressure of the polarization pressure cooker that prevents creative thinking. With these principles in place, we can truly help one another scale the heights of tradition and, by the blessing of the Spirit, even transcend it.

### 3) The nurture of children

The principles of validity and acceptability have a priority in local church instruction as well. Pastors (on either side) ought to *teach these principles first as a foundation* on which to tackle the Baptist-Infant Baptist debate. If members learn and embrace these principles, they can heartily subordinate their personal views of ritual detail to local church practice. They ought to take up the best means available to them for instruction in the whole counsel of God. They ought to do so at the church most available to them whatever its baptismal practice may be. Per the validity of baptism, they can do this in good conscience with the great goal of nurturing their children in the gospel they receive in word and sign. This aids heartfelt submission to the church and her eldership, even if there are differences on baptism between members and leaders.

### 4) Gospel good news

The practice of these principles elevates and highlights the gospel. It places a premium on God's promise that He gives us in the gospel of the NT *and in the sign of baptism*. In this way, baptism (as a doctrine in the NT, as something we receive, and as something we witness when others receive it) testifies to us of God's saving promise, gives us comfort, and strengthens our faith all the days of our lives.