

Paper #1

from Paul Dreblow

Concerning the Baptism and Membership Proposal

Paul was one of the dissenting elders.

It seemed wise to us that his views be made available.

Six Points of Concern
for consideration of the proposal
to create an exception to the Baptism
by immersion requirement at BBC

Paul Dreblow

7-26-02

(WITH RESPONSE FROM JOHN PIPER IN ALL CAPS)

8-12-02

(Revised for web posting by Paul and John 11-10-05)

After reading through the document presented by [Pastor] John again and continuing to interact with a few people on this issue and with roots of conviction and past shepherding going back many years; I must still admit I am struggling deeply (in my conscience) regarding this proposal. I am grateful for the thinking it has stimulated and the presentation of ideas that we may have taken for granted. I respectfully submit the following six items of concern for our thinking and continued clarification, together with a heartfelt desire for my own continued correction, teaching and instruction.

1. **We have not really studied this issue through together and individually as elders.**

This issue is huge and precedent setting not only for BBC and the BGC but also within the larger evangelical world which no doubt will be looking in on this decision. If we are to seriously pursue this course of action it seems that each of us must take some time as individuals to really wrestle through texts, church history and present day writings on this area etc. before attempting to make any sort of informed decision. (*I realize that now, as of 7/1,02 we may be entering into a season of deeper study.*)

I REALLY WANT US TO BE BIBLICALLY INFORMED AND GUIDED. IT IS WISE TO READ SOME GOOD DEFENSES OF WORTHY VIEWS. WE SHOULD NOT BE PARALYZED, HOWEVER, BY THE IMMENSITY OF THE LITERATURE AND THE HISTORY. ALMOST EVERY LINE OF THE TBI AFFIRMAITON OF FAITH COULD TAKE A YEAR OF STUDY. THAT WOULD EFFECTIVELY IMMOBILIZE THE COUNCIL. SO, YES, BUT LET'S MAKE IT MANAGABLE FOR THE ELDERS. PERHAPS JDL AND I COULD COME UP WITH A LIST OF READINGS AND TEXTS.

2. **The Essentiality of Baptism**

Is it Essential? Baptism by immersion of born again believers is the only baptismal standard of practice described and taught in the New Testament. We can't let this realization slip by. We are people of the Word, taught by scripture and under its authority. This issue can not be compared to how we school or how we discipline our children or even divorce/remarriage. This ordinance is clearly an essential step of obedience for any disciple of Jesus Christ.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "ESSENTIAL"? YOU SAY BELOW IN THE FOOTNOTE THAT IT IS NOT "NECESSARY FOR SALVATION." I DO NOT BELIEVE IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR SALVATION. NOR DO I BELIEVE THE TIMING AND MODE OF BAPTISM IS ESSENTIAL FOR MATURE, GODLY, BIBLE HONORING CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY. TO REJECT BELIEVER'S BAPTISM FOR INFANT BAPTISM IS A MISUNDERSTANDING OF NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS, BUT, BY ITSELF, NOT SERIOUS ENOUGH TO JEOPARDIZE FELLOWSHIP, NOR, IN MY JUDGMENT AND PROPOSAL, SERIOUS ENOUGH TO EXCLUDE FROM LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

I think we have all studied and read on this topic but a thorough summary is given by W. Grudem in the text we use (in TBI) for Systematic theology, pgs. 966-971 *We can not forget that baptism is so closely tied to the act of conversion as to make them almost inseparable in the practice of the NT church*¹.

IT IS REMARKABLE THEN, THAT GRUDEM IS THE ONE WHO MAKES THE MOST FORTHRIGHT CASE I KNOW OF NOT TO REQUIRE AGREEMENT ON BAPTISM FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

No doubt this was due at least in part to the fact that at the *heart of the Great commission* was the exhortation to "make disciples, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and *teaching them to observe (obey) all that I have commanded you.* So

¹ By "inseparable" I am not in any way suggesting that baptism is *necessary for salvation*, only that it appears to be the clear priority following a conversion/profession of faith. For example: Acts 2: "So then, those who had received his word were **baptized**; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. 41 So then, those who had received his word were **baptized**; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. 8:2 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being **baptized**, men and women alike. 13 And even Simon himself believed; and after being **baptized**, he continued on with Philip; and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. 36 And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being **baptized**?" 37 *And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."* 38 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he **baptized** him. 9:8 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was **baptized**; 10:46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, 47 "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be **baptized** who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?" 48 And he ordered them to be **baptized** in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days. 11:16 "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John **baptized** with water, but you shall be **baptized** with the Holy Spirit.' 16:15 And when she and her household had been **baptized**, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us. 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. 33 And he took them that *very* hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was **baptized**, he and all his *household*. 18: 8 And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being **baptized**. 19:3 And he said, "Into what then were you **baptized**?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." 4 And Paul said, "John **baptized** with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 And when they heard this, they were **baptized** in the name of the Lord Jesus. 'For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. 22:16 'And now why do you delay? Arise, and be **baptized**, and wash away your sins, calling on His name"

Jesus states that to make disciples is to **identify** them with Him in this step of (immersion- "*baptizo*") baptism. In fact even covenant theologians would appeal to the fact of the "necessity" of (infant) baptism as a *means whereby the child is identified with the covenant community (as with circumcision in the OT)*. Baptism in the New Testament was the baptism by immersion of believers and *it was an identifying mark of the true follower of Jesus Christ.*

Any appeal to any other *standard or doctrine* (either to paedobaptism, or sprinkling² etc.) is simply an appeal to either

A: an argument from silence. i.e.- As in Acts 16:15,33 and 1 Cor. 1:16. However, as far as I know there is nothing in the meaning of the words used that would allow us to assume that in fact "infants" were somehow included in this group- any suggestion otherwise is simply reading into the text what is not clearly stated.

I AGREE THAT THIS ARGUMENT FOR INFANT BAPTISM FROM THE BAPTISM OF HOUSEHOLDS IS WEAK. THAT IS ONE OF THE REASONS WE HAVE NO INTENTION OF BAPTIZING INFANTS OR USING SPRINKLING.

B: a theological system (covenant theology) argument which seems to function by way of reading into the New Testament a practice (namely infant baptism) which in fact, does not seem to exist in any way that can be defended by literal, grammatical, historical exegesis. Many of us are familiar with the covenant argument and in my mind aside from the issue of baptism itself it raises serious questions regarding one's understanding of election and sovereignty of God if in fact these "covenant children" are now (via baptism) candidates for (possible? Probable?) future regeneration. Does baptism then make them more "predisposed" to God's sovereign saving grace? *If that were true then by all means we should all seek to have our children baptized as early as possible.*

I DON'T THINK THE REFORMED ARGUMENTS FOR INFANT BAPTISM "RAISE SERIOUS QUESTIONS REGARDING . . . ELECTION AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD." ONLY A MISUNDERSTANDING OF THEIR ARGUMENTS WOULD LEAD TO THAT CONCLUSION. AND THEN THE CRITICISM CUTS BOTH WAYS. FOR EXAMPLE, GEOFFREY BROMILEY, IN HIS BOOK DEFENDING INFANT BAPTISM, ARGUES THAT BAPTISTS ARE THE ONES WHO CALL UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION INTO QUESTION. HE ARGUES THAT NOTHING PORTRAYS MORE CLEARLY THE UNCONDITIONALITY OF ELECTION THAN BAPTIZING BABIES WHO CAN MEET NO CONDITIONS. THAT IS NOT A COMPELLING ARGUMENT. AND NEITHER IS THE ARGUMENT THAT BAPTIZING INFANTS COMPROMISES UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION.

C. Related to this but of a far more **serious doctrinal nature** is the fact that infant baptism is so closely related (at least to the "person in the pew") to the false teaching of Roman Catholicism and the sacramental understanding of baptism (i.e. baptismal regeneration). While some protestant infant baptizers would not see salvation occurring in the act of baptism others would, and as pointed out above it would be *very confusing to the average observer*. Given

² Though I have wrestled with this issue in the past in relationship to adult believers who have been sprinkled and it does not seem as serious as baptismal regeneration or the covenant theology view/practice of infant baptism, yet for the sake of unity it would seem wise to still require immersion baptism.

these tendencies this then would pose a *direct assault on the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ's work alone*. We can ill-afford to create any question in people's minds as to the problems with this human doctrine and practice by the creation of exceptions which would only serve to weaken their understanding of the meaning of salvation and the place or role of baptism.

FIRST, I DON'T WANT TO DETERMINE OUR DOCTRINAL COMMITMENTS OR PRACTICES ON THE BASIS OF WHAT MISUNDERSTANDINGS IT MIGHT GENERATE. WONDERFUL TRUTHS TAUGHT BY JESUS AND THE APOSTLES WERE DISTORTED BY OTHERS AND MISUNDERSTOOD, ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE.

SECOND, CREATING A MEMBERSHIP EXCEPTION FOR A GENUINE, WELL-INFORMED, WELL-STUDIED, BIBLICALLY-DEFENDED (MISTAKEN) VIEW OF BAPTISM WOULD PROBABLY INCREASE, NOT DECREASE, OUR PERSONAL AND CONGREGATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE TRUE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON BAPTISM. IT WOULD NOT REDUCE OUR VIGILANCE BUT INCREASE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT DIFFERENTIATES ONE BAPTISM FROM ANOTHER. IT WOULD BRING TO THE FORE THAT WE MAKE CRUCIAL DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN BAPTISMAL REGENERATION AND INFANT BAPTISM THAT DOES NOT CLAIM TO EFFECT REGENERATION.

THIRD, KEEP IN MIND THAT THIS MOVEMENT TOWARD A WIDER FRONT DOOR IS PARALLELED BY A MOVEMENT TOWARD A NARROWER ELDER DOOR (AGREEMENT WITH TBI AFFIRMATION OF FAITH), WHICH MEANS THE CHURCH WILL BE MORE CAREFULLY PROTECTED FROM ROMAN CATHOLIC ERRORS THAN IN THE PAST BECAUSE OF THE DOCTRINAL DEPTH AND BREADTH OF THE ELDERS.

FOURTH, ANOTHER FACTOR TO KEEP IN MIND IS THE DANGER OF ARGUING THE WAY PAUL DREBLOW DOES HERE. IN TYING THE ISSUE SO CLOSELY TO "THE MEANING OF SALVATION," THE MODE AND TIMING OF BAPTISM IN ESSENCE BECOMES A MAJOR DOCTRINE AND NOT A SECONDARY ONE. WHAT'S DANGEROUS ABOUT THIS IS THAT IT LEADS TO AN ALL-OR-NOTHING MENTALITY WHICH ESSENTIALLY CAN TURN ALL BIBLICAL ISSUES INTO ULTIMATE ISSUES. THERE IS A FLAW HERE IN THIS KIND OF THINKING BECAUSE IN THE END IT MAKES ALL DOCTRINES CRUCIAL DOCTRINES BECAUSE THEY ARE ALL CUT FROM THE SAME CLOTH OF TRUTH, AND IF ONE OF THEM IS UNRAVELED, THE WHOLE CLOTH UNRAVELS – SO THE ARGUMENT IMPLIES.

FIFTH, ANOTHER FACTOR TO REALIZE IS THAT WE ARE NOT CHANGING OUR VIEW OF WHAT THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHES ABOUT BAPTISM OR HOW WE WILL TEACH IT OR PRACTICE IT. THE ISSUE IS WHAT MEASURE OF AGREEMENT ON A SECONDARY DOCTRINE IS REQUIRED FOR MEMBERSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH? PAUL DREBLOW MINIMIZES THIS ISSUE WHILE MAXIMIZING THE DOCTRINAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MODE AND TIMING OF BAPTISM.

SIXTH, KEEP IN MIND WHEN PAUL DREBLOW SAYS THIS CHANGE WOULD "POSE A DIRECT ASSAULT ON THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION BY GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST'S WORK ALONE," THAT THIS PRECIOUS DOCTRINE MAY BE THREATENED ANOTHER WAY. IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO CREATE A POWERFUL ARGUMENT THAT KEEPING

SOMEONE FROM MEMBERSHIP IN THE VISIBLE BODY OF CHRIST FOR FAILURE TO AGREE DOCTRINALLY ON A SECONDARY MATTER UNDERMINES THE FREEDOM OF GRACE AND THE DOCTRINE OF UNION WITH CHRIST BY FAITH ALONE. I AM MORE INCLINED TO MAXIMIZE *THAT* ISSUE THAN THE WAY PAUL DREBLOW MAXIMIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TIMING AND MODE OF BAPTISM

4. **Saints of the past argument-** It is troubling in my mind to appeal to 'great saints' of the past (Edwards, Owen, etc.) and present (Sproul, Packer etc.) with arguments such as they "*could not be members or elders in our church....*" For me this argument is driven mostly by respect for great thinkers (which is good!) and seems to appeal more to the emotional attachment we may or may not feel towards them. From this reasoning one could ask:

A. Are we dealing with concern for a *form* of unity ? Admittedly the whole area of unity within a diverse body of Christ is a growth point for me and I am weak both in understanding and application at times. I sense in the argument the deep desire to bridge gaps which may exist for less than scriptural grounds. Yet, when we interview people who say "I struggle with the baptism issue esp. in light of my prior sprinkling or my parents reaction or etc...." we must be careful to *shepherd by truth* which alone sets people free. At the above point we have a discipleship issue and we must tenderly, yet with the firmness of a shepherd's hand "carefully and patiently instruct them...." (2Tim. 4.2). This is not the time to compromise.

YES WE SHOULD INDEED SHEPHERD WITH TRUTH AND WORK LOVINGLY AND FIRMLY TO PERSUADE. BUT YES, IT IS PRECISELY THE TIME TO COMPROMISE. MEMBERSHIP IN THE VISIBLE BODY OF CHRIST IS A MASSIVELY IMPORTANT THING. AND NOT TO COMPROMISE ON NON-ESSENTIALS, WHEN A PERSON HAS BEEN SHEPHERDED AND STILL IS NOT PERSUADED, IS TO BETRAY AN INABILITY TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN SECONDARY AND PRIMARY. WE "COMPROMISE" ON MANY ISSUES AT THIS POINT IN THE HOPE OF DISCIPLING PEOPLE IN THE TRUTH FOR YEARS TO COME.

WHEN YOU SAY "THIS IS NOT THE TIME TO COMPROMISE," DO YOU MEAN THAT ALL THE OTHER ISSUES THAT WE DO COMPROMISE ON WE SHOULD NOT: ALL THE CALVINISTIC DISTINCTIVES THAT WE DO NOT INSIST ON, AND THE ESCHATALOGICAL DISTINCTIVES, AND THE CHARISMATIC DISTINCTIVES. THE CALL NOT TO COMPROMISE HAS A NOBLE RING. BUT THERE IS ALSO SOMETHING BIBLICAL AND NOBLE IN NOT INSISTING ON MORE AGREEMENT THAN IS ESSENTIAL FOR MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH. DON'T MINIMIZE THIS ISSUE: TO EXCLUDE SOMEONE FROM THE LOCAL BODY OF CHRIST IS A HUGE ISSUE. AND WE SHOULD KEEP IN MIND THAT THE APOSTLE PAUL LIVED WITH PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH WHO WERE NOT DOCTRINALLY OR ETHICALLY WHERE HE WANTED THEM TO BE. PHILIPPIANS 3:15, "LET THOSE OF US WHO ARE MATURE THINK THIS WAY, AND IF IN ANYTHING YOU THINK OTHERWISE, GOD WILL REVEAL THAT ALSO TO YOU."

B. On a related note, if we move this direction are we allowing (or helping) people to back away from what has been historically and still is often a point of departure from the old ways of the world and its entangling allegiances as one walks with "the cross before them and the world behind them..." to the waters of baptism? Historically, we

know that many in the Anabaptist movement paid with *blood* for the honor to be immersed in the waters of baptism as believers.

AND THAT IS WHAT WE WILL TEACH AND PRACTICE. THAT IS THE SUFFERING AND ABUSE WE ARE WILLING TO TAKE. THAT IS WHERE WE STAND.

This is still true today I 'm sure in parts of the world where any outward/public sign of following Jesus is met with persecution. In fact this is the way it was for some people whom we saw come out of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines. Is this not the outworking of the reality that Jesus pointed to when he said: " Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace, but a sword....a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matt.10.16-23; 33-36;).

I DON'T AGREE WITH THIS ARGUMENT THAT WE WOULD BE BACKING AWAY FROM A RADICAL BREAK WITH THE OLD WAYS OF WORLDLINESS. THERE IS NO CORRELATION IN MY MIND OR EXPERIENCE OR HISTORY THAT SUGGESTS THAT BAPTISTS WHO AFFIRM THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD ARE LESS WORLDLY THAN PRESBYTERIANS WHO AFFIRM THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD.

AS A BAPTIST, JOHN BUNYAN SPENT 12 YEARS IN PRISON FOR THE RIGHT TO PREACH THE GOSPEL, BUT WOULD NOT DEMAND THAT A PERSON BE REBAPTIZED TO JOIN HIS CHURCH IF HE HAD BEEN BAPTIZED AS AN INFANT. IF WE ARE TO CHOOSE OUR SUFFERING HEROES, HE IS A GOOD CANDIDATE TOO.

C. If we follow this "but so/so is/was such a wonderful and doctrinally sound Christian....certainly they must be able to be a part of us....." line of reasoning/ concern then we must ultimately ask, "where does it end or lead us?" I have been in situations where this way of thinking carried the day, but often at the expense of truth or wise thinking/decision making.

In other words does this reasoning bring about a way of thinking that allows emotion to lead our understanding of truth instead of vice-versa as it should be?

THE POINT OF REFERRING TO EDWARDS AND OTHERS IS NOT *EMOTION* BUT *PROPORTION*. DO WE HAVE OUR PRIORITIES RIGHT WHEN A SECONDARY MATTER PROHIBITS US FROM BEING ONE LOCAL CHURCH BODY WITH THOSE WHO SHARE WITH US THE MOST GLORIOUS THINGS IN THE WORLD, MANY OF WHICH NOT EVEN OUR MEMBERS HOLD? THE ISSUE IS NOT EMOTION; IT IS THE CENTRALITY OF TRUTH A AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN TRUTHS THAT ARE SECONDARY AND THOSE THAT ARE PRIMARY.

This is not the mode of thinking I have grown accustomed to at BBC. If we make exceptions to stated doctrinal agreement and practice here then where else?

THAT IS A LEGITIMATE QUESTION! WHICH IS PRECISELY WHY THE "STATED DOCTRINAL AGREEMENT" MUST EVENTUALLY BE CHANGED IF WE ARE TO ADMIT NON-EMMERSED MEMBERS TO THE CHURCH. THAT IS WHY THE PROPOSAL BEING PRESENTED NOW NOT ONLY RECOMMENDS THAT THE ELDER AFFIRMATION OF FAITH BUT ALSO A MEMBER AFFIRMATION OF FAITH BE A PART OF THE CONSTITUTION. WE ARE NOT LEAVING UP FOR GRABS WHAT WE BELIEVE TO BE ESSENTIAL FOR MEMBERSHIP AND FOR THE ELDEERSHIP.

And if enough people become members this way then, under congregational polity a group of like-minded people could “vote in” substantial change along these lines.

THIS TOO IS LEGITIMATE. IT IMPLIES THE NEED TO RETHINK THE NATURE OF OUR SYSTEM IN THE LIGHT OF A MISSIONARY CONTEXT IN WHICH NEW MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH ARE NOT YET FIT TO LEAD THE CHURCH IN DOCTRINE. BUT THE LIKELIHOOD OF THIS HAPPENING IS VERY REMOTE AND THE TEACHING OF THE ELDERS WILL BE OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OVER THE YEARS. THE PROPOSAL BEFORE OUR PEOPLE NOW HAS IN IT SAFEGUARDS WHICH REQUIRE THAT AMMENDMENTS TO CERTAIN DOCTRINAL AND MEMBERSHIP PARTS OF THE CONSTITUTION AND BY-LAWS MUST COME FROM THE ELDERS AND THEN BE AFFIRMED BY THE PEOPLE.

LET’S BE AWARE THAT THIS HOLE IN THE DIKE ARGUMENT (ALL WILL FALL A PART IF WE MAKE THIS EXCEPTION) CAN BE USED TO IMPEDE VIRTUALLY ALL CHANGE AND ALL GROWTH IN UNDERSTANDING. THE REASONING BEHIND THE PROPOSED EXCEPTION IS NOT EMOTIONAL. IT IS BASED ON REASONING ABOUT THE RELATIVE CENTRALITY OF CERTAIN DOCTRINES. I HAVE WRITTEN 8 PAGES TO GIVE FOUNDATION FOR THE MOVE [APPENDIX B IN THE 85 PAGE DOCUMENT “BAPTISM AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.”]. THESE PAGES ARE NOT BASEDON EMOTION.

WHERE DOES IT END? IT ENDS WHERE THE ELDERS AND THE CHURCH JUDGE A CENTRAL TRUTH TO BE TRANSGRESSED OR JEOPARDIZED. WHETHER THAT IS HAPPENING HERE, IS WHAT THE DEBATE IS ABOUT.

D. Is it fair or accurate to say, “we would be rejecting people such as these great saints of the past or present.” I don’t think so yet this is what the quote of Bunyan seems to indicate. Yet in the quote and following footnote there seems to be confusion regarding the “visible body of Christ” and local church membership. They are two different (though inter-connected) things.

IT IS THE WAY THEY ARE INTER-CONNECTED THAT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE. THE LOCAL CHURCH IS AN EXPRESSION OF THE UNIVERSAL BODY OF CHRIST. IF SO, WE WILL BE HARD PUT TO ARGUE THAT IT SHOULD HAVE CRITERIA OF MEMBERSHIP THAT ARE SUBSTANTIALLY DIFFERENT FROM THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH. OUR PROPOSAL SPEAKS OF A FRONT DOOR TO THE LOCAL CHURCH AND A FRONT DOOR TO THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH THAT ARE “ROUGHLY” THE SAME SIZE. WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE NOT CRAFTED A PERFECT SET OF CRITERIA FOR JUDGING WHO IS TRULY REGENERATE. ONLY GOD CAN DO THAT. BUT WE HAVE TRIED TO COME CLOSE BECAUSE THE LOCAL CHURCH IS SUPPOSED TO BE A REGENERATE BODY.

To which I would respond, I am rejecting no one from the visible body of Christ (that decision is totally the Lord’s.

NO IT IS NOT TOTALLY THE LORD’S. THAT IS PRECISELY WHAT DIFFERENTIATES THE VISIBLE FROM THE INVISIBLE BODY. MAN, WITH THE SPIRIT’S GUIDANCE, DETERMINES THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE VISIBLE BODY AS HE ADMITS AND DISMISSES MEMBERS.

Regarding the local church, they are welcome to be part of us, but if they want to be members, they in fact are rejecting themselves based upon their failure to submit to a

doctrinal practice clearly taught and to which we have determined is necessary and foundational to membership.³

I THINK THIS IS PLAYING WITH WORDS. WE HAVE DECIDED TO KEEP THEM OUT BECAUSE OF THEIR VIEWS. WE HAVE CHOSEN NOT TO MAKE MANY THINGS, THAT ARE CLEARLY TAUGHT IN SCRIPTURE, NECESSARY FOR MEMBERSHIP. SO IT IS WE WHO ARE DECIDING THE CRITERIA OF MEMBERSHIP AND WHO IS IN AND WHO IS OUT. THIS IS NOT WRONG IF THE ISSUE IS IMPORTANT ENOUGH. WHETHER THE DISAGREEMENT OVER BAPTISM IS IMPORTANT ENOUGH, IS THE QUESTION.

AGAIN, AS I SAID ABOVE, I THINK PAUL IS WRONG ABOUT THE VISIBLE BODY OF CHRIST. IT IS NOT MERELY THE LORD WHO DECIDES MEMBERSHIP IN THE VISIBLE BODY OF CHRIST. IT IS THE CHURCH BY MEANS OF ADMISSION AND EXCOMMUNICAITON. THAT'S WHAT VISIBLE MEANS. THE LORD DECIDES WHO IS PART OF THE INVISIBLE, TRUE CHURCH. BUT CHURCHES DECIDE WHO IS PART OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH. IF WE TURN A PERSON AWAY, WE EITHER REJECT THEM FROM THE VISIBLE CHURCH WITH SADNESS OR WE REJOICE THAT OTHER CHURHCES HAVE DIFFERENT STANDARDS THAN WE DO FOR MEMBERSHIP.

5. **Whose conscience is at stake?** We discussed people whose conscience forbids them from proceeding in the New Testament pattern of baptism. We discussed whether it is right to ask them to do this. But what about the hundreds (thousands?) at BBC whose consciences are so inclined in the current stance on this topic, what will we do to their conscience if we begin to make exceptions?

IF THAT IS WHERE THE PEOPLE ARE, THEN WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO MOVE FORWARD. MY PRAYER WOULD BE THAT, BY PRAYER AND TEACHING, THE CONSCIENCES WOULD ENDORSE THE ACTION. THIS IS NOT DIFFERENT THAN ANY CONGREGATIONAL ISSUE WHERE AN ACTION IS TAKEN IN WHICH SOME ARE DEFEATED IN THEIR VIEW.

Specifically what might we do to their concept of biblical authority? Furthermore regarding the question of conscience we must ask, is it really a matter of "conscience"? I would suggest that in fact it may be (for more than a few) more a question of obedience, of coming under the authority of scripture (and the Elder's teaching) in their belief and practice.

THAT IS WHAT ELDERS MUST DISCERN, AS ON NUMEROUS ISSUES OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY.

IF WE MOVE AHEAD WITH THE PROPOSAL PERSONS WHO FEEL THEIR CONSCIENCES COMPROMISED BY BELONGING TO A CHURCH WHICH MAKES THIS EXCEPTION WOULD PROBABLY MOVE TO ANOTHER CHURCH. MY PRAYER WOULD BE THAT IN THE PROCESS THIS WOULD NOT HAPPEN BECAUSE PEOPLE WOULD COME TO SEE THAT THIS IS A GOOD THING TO DO SO THAT IT WOULD NOT COMPROMISE THEIR CONSCIENCES.

³ In my mind maybe the real question this is pushing us to struggle with is, "**is membership a biblical concept?**" Could it be that we need to back up one more step in this whole discussion? However, if we are convinced that membership is biblical then certainly while there may be *more to it* than obedience to immersion baptism *it does not seem like there would be less to it given the above mentioned NT passages.*

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY WOULD NOT BE CALLED INTO QUESTION BECAUSE THE WHOLE CHANGE WOULD BE EXPLAINED FROM WITHIN A BIBLICAL CONTEXT THAT HELPS PEOPLE MAKE DISTINCITONS BETWEEN TRUTHS THAT ARE MORE ESSENTIAL AND TRUTHS THAT ARE LESS ESSENTIAL. IF WE ARE A CHURCH THAT CANNOT MAKE THESE DISTINCITONS, OUR FAILURE IN THIS WILL DO MORE HARM TO OUR COMMITMENT TO BIBLICAL AUTHORITY THAN ANY EXCEPTION ON BAPTISM. DEMANDING AGREEMENT ON ALL ISSUES, EVEN THE LESS ESSENTIAL ONES LOSES CREDIBILITY BECAUSE IT FAILS TO DEAL WITH THE REALITY OF OUR FINITENESS AND FALLENNESS AS TAUGHT IN SCRIPTURE.

The Creation of confusion and disunity within the body of Christ. We have an atmosphere of being “truth- driven” and a default mode of raising the standard higher, not lower (such as with a predominately “no remarriage” approach to divorce remarriage even though the evangelical community is far from consensus on this).

THE REMARRIAGE ISSUE IS A GOOD ILLUSTRATION OF HOW WE HAVE MADE THE DECISION TO LIVE WITH DIVERSITY OF VIEWS. MANY PASTORS ON THE STAFF HOLD THE VIEW THAT ALL REMARRIAGE WHILE A DIVORCED SPOUSE IS ALIVE IS WRONG. BUT WE HAVE NOT MADE THAT THE OFFICIAL POSITION OF THE CHURCH WHICH GOVERNS HOW WE DO CHURCH DISCIPLINE. SO HERE IS AN INSTANT WHERE FOR OVER 15 YEARS STRONG CONVICTIONS HAVE NOT BEEN WATERED DOWN WHILE LIVING WITH A COMPROMISE IN VIEW OF SIGNIFICANT DISAGREEMENT OVER WHAT CERTAIN BIBLICAL TEXTS MEAN.

If this is in fact our default mode (which seems appropriate in a culture that runs from any standard of “absolute”) then why are we going the opposite direction in this proposal (as in defaulting to a lower standard)?

BECAUSE THE ISSUE IS SECONDARY AND NOT PRIMARY.

Most certainly this fact, combined with the fact that we have both a history and *current doctrinal commitment* (which we are being asked to sign off on with the TBI statement WHICH HAS NOT BECOME REALITY IN THE ELDER AFFIRMATION OF FAITH) to teaching and practicing baptism by immersion as a requirement for membership could lead to a great deal of misunderstanding, confusion⁴

MANY GOOD IDEAS AND GOOD DOCTRINES CAUSE CONFUSION, AS PAUL (THE APOSTLE) DISCOVERED IN HIS PREACHING. OUR AIM AS ELDERS IS NOT TO AVOID GOOD THINGS BECAUSE OF RISKS, BUT TO SHEPHERD THE PEOPLE THROUGH THE TROUBLE.

and problematic precedent setting and potentially great disunity where before there has been agreement and single-mindedness of purpose and doctrine (1 Cor. 1:10). Our current constitution-statement of faith says, “We believe that Christian baptism is the immersion of the believer in water into the name of the triune God” (Art. 2, # IX). Also under “The Church” it reads, “We believe in the local church consisting of a company of believers in Jesus Christ, baptized(see prior statement) on a credible profession of faith.” How can we, at this point, short of a change of the doctrinal statement state or imply anything different?

1) WE CAN ADMIT THAT THIS STATEMENT TAKEN AS STRICTLY AS POSSIBLE MEANS THAT THERE ARE NO CHURCHES BUT BAPTIST CHURCHES. IF THAT IS *NOT* TRUE,

⁴ For instance how would the elders actually shepherd someone through the process of discerning whether there is a “humble, teachable openness to more light under the teaching and leadership of the elders” p.3. Pastorally, this sounds very cumbersome and confusing at best.

THEN THE FRAMERS OF THE AFFIRMATION HAD A CATEGORY FOR CHURCHES THAT WERE MADE UP OF PEOPLE WHO DID NOT FULFILL THE IDEAL. THAT IS WHAT I THINK WE SHOULD BE – SINCE THAT IS WHAT WE ARE ON OTHER ISSUES, SOME MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE MODE AND TIMING OF BAPTISM. 2) WE SHOULD MOVE TO CHANGE THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH, OR, AS I SUGGESTED, ADD A NOTE TO IT THAT WE PROVIDE FOR SOME EXCEPTIONS ON THE MODE AND TIMING OF BAPTISM. THIS LATTER SUGGESTION IS IN FACT WHAT THE PROPOSAL DOES. WE INCLUDE IN THE PROPOSAL APPENDIX H WHICH IS THE BGC AFFIRMATION OF FAITH WITH ALL OF OUR QUALIFICATIONS. THIS WOULD BE SUBMITTED TO THE MINNESOTA BAPTIST CONFERENCE AND THE BAPTIST GENERAL CONFERENCE IN THE EXPECTATION THAT THEY WOULD AFFIRM US AS MEMBERS OF THE CONFERENCE. CONVERSATIONS WITH THE LEADERS CAUSE US TO BELIEVE THIS IS A WARRANTED EXPECTATION.

THE POTENTIAL CONFUSION IS NOT GREATER THAN THE POTENTIAL CONFUSION THAT EXISTS ON MANY ISSUES THAT WE DO NOT REQUIRE FOR MEMBERSHIP, AND EVEN SOME THAT WE DO. WE DO NOT MAKE CHOICES ON THESE MATTERS TO AVOID POSSIBLE CONFUSION. WE MAKE OUR CHOICES TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT AND THEN CARRY THEM THROUGH IN A WAY THAT WILL WORK TOWARD LESS AND LESS CONFUSION. THIS IS WHAT WE DO IN REGARD TO ALL THE CONFUSION THERE IS ON THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD, PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS, SANCTIFICATION BY FAITH, ROLES OF PROPHECY AND TONGUES AND WORDS OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE, MILLENIALISM, ETC. IF OUR GOAL WERE TO AVOID ALL POSSIBLE CONFUSION WE WOULD BE THE MOST IMPOSSIBLY TIGHT (AND SMALL) CHURHC AROUND.

THE EXPECTATION IS THAT ELDERS WILL HELP A PERSON BE SINCERE IN THEIR STUDY OF BAPTISM AND WILL JUDGE THEIR EARNESTNESS. THIS IS NOT AN UNUSUAL TASK FOR ELDERS, AND SHOULD NOT SCARE US AWAY. WE ARE CALLED TO MAKE THESE KINDS OF JUDGMENTS ALL THE TIME.

May God help, and direct us in this important issue. Thank you for allowing me to express this convoluted and for any feedback there might be.

Gratefully,
Paul

COMMENTS IN ALL CAPS BY PASTOR JOHN