

The Book of Acts (#18); Conversion to Christ (9)

In past weeks in our study of the book of Acts, we have addressed the important subject of conversion to Jesus Christ as set forth on the day of Pentecost. We have given special attention to the role of the Holy Spirit to bring about the conversion of sinners to become true disciples of Jesus Christ. Last time, we emphasized the apostle Peter's words of command to the people who were convicted of their sin. In answering the question posed by the people, "Men and brethren what shall we do?", Peter gave the command recorded in Acts 2:38 and 39.

Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.

We then read of the response of these people in their faith, repentance, and baptism, and thereafter in their involvement in the life of the church to which they now belonged. Here are verses 41 through 47:

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴²And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

⁴⁶So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:40-47)

And so, up through verse 40 we have recorded what the Holy Spirit had taught these people through Peter's words, and we read of the influence that the Holy Spirit had wrought upon them and in them which resulted in them being converted to Jesus Christ. Then in verses 41 through 47 we read of their early Christian life after they had been converted to become true Christians.

Now in reading this account, we see that all these events happened quite abruptly. The events that happened on this one day occurred rapidly and suddenly. These Jewish people professed faith and repentance and then they were baptized with little time given, and with little scrutiny given, to examine the validity or true nature of their repentance and faith. We would certainly not want to hurry the process along in dealing with souls without inquiring and fully examining carefully the testimony of those who claim to have become converted to Christ. But let us recall the advanced knowledge that these Jewish people had leading up to this event. They had both seen and heard the Lord Jesus who had ministered among them. The event of the crucifixion of Christ itself had a remarkable affect upon all the people dwelling in that region at that time. There had been darkness over the land, a great earthquake, strange appearances of the dead that were brought back to life upon the third day, and, of course, most importantly, there was great presence of God in the witness and power of the Holy Spirit before these people. But we should also be aware that the record we have before us in Acts 2 is actually an abbreviated account of all that was said and taught to these people on this occasion. This is the nature of the recorded speeches in the book of Acts. They are set forth as concise, orderly, and complete speeches on the lips of the proclaimers. But much of this record is rhetorical in nature, condensed and conveyed to us in style and crafted by the Holy Spirit for the benefit of its readers. This can be seen quite clearly in what Luke recorded in verse 40, which reads, "And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation.'" There were many more words of instruction and exhortation given to these people by the apostle Peter that Luke did not

record for us. What is recorded for us is the result of the entire engagement of the apostles and these Jews; nevertheless, it all did occur in the passing of a single day.

But it should not surprise us if and when we encounter similar sudden transformations of life and character in people coming to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. We made mention not long ago of a sermon of **Jonathan Edwards**¹ (1703-1758) in which he encouraged Christians not to be surprised, but to welcome and even anticipate remarkable conversions of souls to Jesus Christ. Edwards' sermon was entitled, "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be Both Scriptural and Rational Doctrine." Similarly **J. C. Philpott** (1802-1869) described the sudden life-transforming light that God gives to a sinner that results in his conversion:

A sudden, peculiar conviction has rushed into the soul. One absorbing feeling has seized fast hold of it, and well nigh banished every other. "There is a God, and I am a sinner before Him", is written upon the heart by the same divine finger that traced those fatal letters on the palace wall of the king of Babylon, which made the joints of his loins to be loosed, and his knees to smite one against another (Dan. 5:5, 6). "What shall I do? Where shall I go? What will become of me? Mercy, O God! Mercy, mercy! I am lost, ruined, undone! Fool, madman, wretch, monster that I have been! I have ruined my soul. O my sins, my sins! O eternity, eternity!" Such and similar cries and groans, though differing in depth and intensity, go up out of the new-born soul well nigh day and night at the first discovery of God and of itself. These feelings have taken such complete possession of the heart that it can find no rest except in calling upon God. This is the first pushing of the young bud through the bark, the first formation of the green shoot, wrapped up as yet in its leaves, and not opened to view. These are the first pangs and throes of the new birth before the tidings are brought, "A man-child is born." "What shall I do to be saved?" cried the jailer. "God be merciful to me a sinner!" exclaimed the publican. "Woe is me, for I am undone!" burst forth from the lips of Isaiah.²

This is what had occurred on the day of Pentecost when these 3,000 Jewish souls were converted to Jesus Christ, were baptized, and added to the church.

Now let us consider these several verses before us which recount the response of these new converts to the call and command to repent of their sin and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. In verses 41 through 47 we may discern six descriptive reactions and responses of these people that describe their faith and practice as new Christians. First, we read that they were baptized. Secondly, it is recorded that they were then added to the church. Thirdly, they adhered to the apostles' doctrine (teaching). Fourthly, they were all actively involved in the church's fellowship and prayer gatherings. Fifthly, they manifested Christian love and charity toward one another in the church body. Sixthly, they were all characterized as having the fear of God in their souls, yet they were a happy people who were held in high regard by the people of the larger community.

These are qualities that may be seen in all true Christians, granted, to different degrees, but they characterize what is true of true Christians, who have been converted to Jesus Christ by the grace of God. We might also say that some of these characteristics confirm convictions that have historically been held and practiced historically by Baptist churches, which we will attempt to emphasize. Let us consider each of these actions and reactions of these new Christians.

1. They were all baptized.

Verse 41 reads, "*Then those who gladly received his word were baptized.*" What is clearly set forth in this event is the practice of believer's baptism. Only those who received the Word of God proclaimed by

¹ See February 19, 2023, FBC1146.

² J. C. Philpot, "*Winter Afore the Harvest; Or, the Soul's Growth in Grace.*"

<http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=category&cid=223&page=6>

Peter were baptized. This is an important doctrine for Baptists.³ We believe that the Word of God commands that only those that have become professing Christians through faith in Jesus Christ and repentance from sin have met the biblical qualifications to be baptized by the churches of God. This understanding of believers' baptism has been historically referred to as *credobaptism*; that is, baptism (by immersion) upon the conversion and confession of the convert to Jesus Christ. *Credo* is from Latin which is translated, "I believe", hence, baptism is administered to a person upon a sincere, informed, confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Credobaptism is in contrast to many reformed Christians who practice *paedobaptism*. *Paedo* is from the Greek word, παιδός, (*paídos*), or "child." Paedobaptists baptize infants and children if a parent is a believer. Baptists do not believe this is scriptural, for there is no command or clear example in the New Testament of children before the age in which they have faith themselves and the knowledge and will to repent of their sins according to the gospel.

Although many churches practice baptism by the mode of sprinkling water upon the one being baptized, and some practice baptism by pouring water on the head of those baptized, the Bible neither commands nor illustrates baptism but by immersion only. Many paedobaptists have acknowledged this. **John Calvin** (1509-1564), himself a paedobaptist, who wrote some very hard things against those who practiced baptism by immersion, wrote these words:

Whether the person baptized is to be wholly immersed, and that whether once or thrice, or whether he is only to be sprinkled with water, is not of the least consequence: churches should be at liberty to adopt either according to the diversity of climates, although it is evident that the term baptize means to immerse, *and that this was the form used by the primitive Church*. (Calvin's Institutes, Book III, Chapter 15, Part 2, Section 19.)

We would take issue with his assertion that the mode of baptism does not matter, for the Holy Scriptures are quite clear regarding the mode and manner of believer's baptism by immersion. But it is quite telling that he made the concession regarding the practice of immersion in the early churches. Actually this is a common acknowledgement among numbers of paedobaptists. **B. B. Warfield** (1851-1921), a well-known and respected reformed, but paedobaptist theologian, wrote these words,

It is true that there is no express command to baptize infants in the New Testament, no express record of the baptism of infants and no passage so stringently implying it that we must infer from them that infants were baptized. If such warrant as this were necessary to justify the usage, we would have to leave it completely unjustified...⁴

Of course we would argue that such a warrant in the New Testament is necessary, which Warfield acknowledged is not present in the New testament.

Now we touched on this matter of baptism by immersion when we were addressing Peter's command to be baptized in Acts 2:38, but let us consider further the arguments for this mode of baptism. First, the Greek word, βαπτίζω (*baptizo*), means to dip or immerse. As one has written,

The clear and simple meaning of *baptizo* in the New Testament, when describing the physical baptism of disciples, is to dip or immerse. This understanding is based on consistent etymology⁵, historical usage in Josephus⁶, and the internal grammar of both the Old and New testaments.⁷

³ And baptistic churches, who may not be Baptist in name, but they hold and practice historic Baptist practice of baptism by immersion only of true converts to Jesus Christ.

⁴ Warfield went on to justify the practice, nevertheless. The quote continued reads, "But the lack of this express warrant is something far short of forbidding the rite; and if the continuity of the church through all ages can be made good, the warrant for infant baptism is not to be sought in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament where the church was instituted and nothing short of an actual forbidding of it in the New Testament would warrant our omitting it now."

⁵ Etymology is the study of the history of words, how their form and meaning have changed over time.

⁶ Josephus was a Jewish historian who lived and wrote in the first century.

Paedobaptists resist this argument, saying that the Greek word does not mean this, but their efforts are quite futile and are commonly shown to be weak and flawed.⁸ The fact is that most Greek lexicons provide as their definition of *baptizo* as “to dip” or “to immerse.”⁹

A second argument for baptism by immersion is that the record of those who were baptized as recorded in the New Testament is consistent with setting suggesting immersion as a mode, rather than sprinkling. For example, consider John the Baptist baptizing in the Jordan River. We read in **John 3:22** and **23**,

After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, *because there was much water there*. And they came and were baptized.

Why did John baptize in Aenon? “Because there was much water there.” This setting for baptism is consistent with the need to immerse his subjects. If John were baptizing by sprinkling, much water would not be necessary; he would not have needed to baptize in the Jordan River.

Consider also the occasion when Philip baptized the Ethiopian Eunuch. We read in Acts 8 of Philip preaching the gospel to the Ethiopian Eunuch. The Ethiopian had come to Christ in faith. We then read beginning with verse 36:

Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?”³⁷ Then 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 So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And *both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water*, and he baptized him.³⁹ Now *when they came up out of the water*, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:36-39)

Now which mode of baptism is consistent with the evidence? They both *went down into the water* and Philip baptized him. Is this consistent with the mode of sprinkling, or even pouring? No, but rather immersion fits the setting.

A third argument for baptism by immersion is that immersion is consistent with the believer’s union and identification with Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection life. The apostle Paul wrote in **Romans 6:1ff**,

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? ²Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? ³Or do you not know that *as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death*? ⁴Therefore *we were buried with Him through baptism into death*, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been *united together in the likeness of His death*, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, ⁶knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. ⁷For he who has died has been freed from sin.

Paul associates the mode of baptism to the believer’s union with Jesus Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection life. Which mode of baptism portrays burial and resurrection? Does sprinkling or immersion?

⁷ Fred A. Malone, **The Baptism of Disciples Alone** (Founders Press, Cape Coral, FL, 2007), p. 209.

⁸ For example, consider Malone’s response to John Murray and Duane Spencer in the above book, pp. 211ff.

⁹ Why was the word transliterated from Greek into English as “baptize” rather than “immerse”? The translators of the English Bibles believed in the practice of sprinkling and to translate the word would conflict with their convictions, so they transliterated the word rather than translated it into English.

Of course the answer is immersion. Sprinkling as a mode of baptism may convey the idea of cleansing, but not burial and resurrection. Only immersion depicts this important aspect of the faith and life of the believer. The Bible teaches baptism by immersion and immersion only.

Paul makes the same association between the mode of baptism and Christ's death and burial in **Colossians 2:11 and 12**. There we read,

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

First, take note that Paul speaks of circumcision and baptism in the same context. This is the only place in the Bible where the two ideas are found in relation with one another in the same passage. Based on these verses paedobaptists say that New Testament baptism is the replacement and substitute for Old Testament circumcision. Because Israelites circumcised their sons when they were eight days old, Christians should baptize their children in infancy. But see what Paul argues respecting circumcision and baptism. He does not identify or associate circumcision with baptism, but rather physical circumcision is compared with an inward work of grace that Christ performs in the hearts of His people, a spiritual circumcision "made without hands." Furthermore, baptism is associated with Christ's burial, and so once again we see that the mode of immersion alone fits its identification with Christ's burial; sprinkling as a mode fails to do so.

A third passage which supports the idea of immersion is **1 Corinthians 10:1-4**. Paul wrote,

Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ²*all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea*, ³all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

Here Paul associated baptism with the Israelites passing through the Red Sea in the days of the Exodus. The people had the sea as walls on either side of them as the cloud was above them (cf. Exod. 14:22). This depicts the Israelites as being immersed with water along with Moses, being identified with him in this "baptism." In the same way believers are baptized into Jesus Christ through their own immersion in baptism. All of the New Testament evidence points to the mode of immersion as that practiced by the churches of the first century.

2. These baptized converts were added to the church

a. Baptism into the church

We read of these baptized Jewish converts, "that day about three thousand souls were added to them." We also read down in verse 47, "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

Baptism is not to be regarded as only between an individual Christian and the Lord. In our individualistic culture, this is sadly what has occurred and is commonly practiced. People are baptized by churches and by Christian pastors and leaders irrespective of church membership. This is not biblical nor historical. Baptism is a church ordinance, in other words, it is a command of the Lord Jesus for churches to administer to converts in order to bring them into formal and publicly recognized church membership. Baptism has always been regarded as the entry door into the church by all denominations through history.. These 3,000 souls were converted, then they were baptized, and in doing so they were added to the church. They then became involved in the life of the church, with its privileges and responsibilities, including their accountability to the Lord Jesus as administered by the authority of the local church.

But sadly, there are many who refuse and reject the local church and formal membership in the local church, claiming, "After all, I am the member of the universal, invisible church, and that is the only church that really matters." That is not only ignorant, but it is an errant, and can be quite a sinful action and reaction. As one once wrote,

Many presuppose the traditional validity of the “universal, invisible church” theory, and are therefore tempted to think slightly concerning the local assembly. Faithfulness to our Lord through the local church is central to biblical obedience.¹⁰

These 3,000 people are not being declared to have been added to the invisible church, but to the local church that was in its early stages of development in Jerusalem. It is the local church to which Christians are to desire to be aligned with, supportive of, and in fellowship with--a committed body of believers, the church of Jesus Christ.

Again, some set aside this important and biblical matter claiming that they are members of the universal church. The universal church, biblically speaking, is comprised of all the elect of the human race who have ever lived in saving faith before the Lord. The very Greek word translated in English as “church” is ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*), meaning a called out body.¹¹ The Lord is in the process of calling out of the fallen world His chosen people to become members of the invisible (universal) church, but that “church” has never gathered as a church and will not do so until the day that all the redeemed are resurrected and stand before the Lord. If you could set aside today all the true living Christians in the world, you would still not have gathered the universal church, for all of the past members who have died and all of the future members who have not yet been born and born again have yet to be called out. The universal church has no organization, not structure, no evangelists, pastors, or teachers. These are only legitimate offices held by men in local churches who have recognized their calling and conferred upon them authority to represent their witness in the world. This loose, individual Christianity, which knows no commitment, no involvement, in the local church, is not of God. The apostle Paul asked some in the church at Corinth, “Do you despise the church of God?” (1 Cor. 11:32). Perhaps that is the question that should be posed to many today in Christendom.

b. The local church is comprised of a regenerate church membership.

Now one of the teachings that has historically distinguished Baptists has to do with the nature of the local church. We have often expressed how similar our reformed Baptist confession of faith of 1689 to the historic reformed, but paedobaptist confessions of the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 and the Savoy Declaration of 1658. The Westminster Confession is held by reformed Presbyterians and the Church of Scotland. The Savoy Declaration is held by reformed Congregationalists. The Congregationalists had taken the Westminster Confession that had been drafted a decade before and reworked a few of the articles, releasing it as the Savoy Declaration. The Baptists later revised the Savoy Declaration and published the (London) Baptist Confession of 1689. The result is three confessions that are 95% identical in belief and wording. What distinguishes the confessions from one another is what defines our Baptist convictions. These have to do with the nature of the local church and the matter of baptism. It is these Baptist distinctives to which we wish now to draw your attention.

One of the major differences of the Baptist confession from the paedobaptist reformed confessions is in the realm of what constitutes a local church according to the New Testament. Here is the definition of the local church according to The Westminster Confession, which is a reformed, but non-baptistic confession:

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), ***consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children...*** (The Westminster Confession, Art. XXV, par. 2)

¹⁰ William R. Downing, **New Testament Church; Nature, Characteristics, Perpetuity** (1981), 1.

¹¹ The Greek word, ἐκκλησία, is comprised of two parts: ἐκ, meaning “out of”, κλησί, meaning “called.” The church is a “called out” body of disciples of Jesus Christ. The Greek word, ἐκκλησία, is used 115 times in the Greek New Testament. It is used in three aspects: (1) the local church (its primary usage), (2) the church as an institution (e.g. as one would refer to the “jury”), and (3) eschatological, as it will one day be gathered before the Lord. It is never used as a building, a denomination, or of a collective body of Christians within a nation (“the church in America).

But here is the definition of the local church in The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.

All persons throughout the world, *professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it*, not destroying their own profession by any errors perverting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation (i.e. way of living), are and may be called visible saints; and *of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted*. (The Baptist Confession of 1689, Art. 26, par. 2.)

Here we have two different understandings of the nature of a local church. Baptists believe that the New Testament teaches that the membership of a local church should be comprised of regenerate people only. In other words, only those born again by the Holy Spirit, those who have repented of sin and turned to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith and obedience, should be added to the church. Baptists have historically believed and practiced that only disciples of Jesus Christ, those who have experienced new life in Jesus Christ, should be admitted to church membership. In contrast to Baptists, paedobaptists, that is churches that practice infant baptism, do not believe the membership of a local church should be restricted to those who are born again. Rather, they believe that believers *and their children* are to be regarded as members of a new covenant church.

And so there is a fundamental difference in what we believe constitutes a local church. Paedobaptist churches believe that both those who are born again and those who are not born again may have a legitimate place and standing in local church membership. Yes, paedobaptist churches believe that communicant members, that is, members who are in good standing and partake of communion should be professing believers, and they do claim to look for a “credible profession of faith” in their communicant members. But as long as one been born in the church, raised and taught the doctrine of the church, and upon professing to agree to the doctrine and purpose to be involved in the life of the church and not live in a scandalous manner, he or she is to be admitted and regarded as a legitimate church member. Baptists (historically speaking) on the other hand, although requiring an affirmation to the essential truths of the gospel, look for more than mental acknowledgment of truth. Baptists (should) look for evidence of true spiritual life in Christ as a condition of church membership.

What does the Bible teach **respecting the composition of a local church?**

A. First, there are those passages that describe local churches in terms of regenerate membership only.

1. 1 Corinthians 1:1-3. “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, *²to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord*, both theirs and ours: *³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Take note first that Paul described these people in his greeting as members of a local church, “who are sanctified in Christ Jesus.” This describes Christians, true Christians, who have had a work of God’s saving grace in their souls which set them apart from the world of unbelievers. Second, Paul describes them as “called (to be) saints.” “Saints” in the Bible are a reference to true Christians. These Christians had been the object of God’s effectual call to salvation, which we described several weeks ago. Third, they are described as callers upon the Lord Jesus. They live before Jesus and for Jesus, submitted to Him as their Lord. As far as Paul was concerned, this church was comprised of regenerate people only—true Christians.

2. Acts 11:26. “And when he (Barnabus) had found him (Paul), he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And *the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*”

Barnabus and Paul came to serve Christ in the local church at Antioch. The context shows that the church was comprised of disciples of Jesus Christ only. Disciples are committed followers of Jesus Christ. They have repented of sin, turned to live unto God, believing and submitting to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The church at Antioch was comprised of disciples—true believers—only.

3. Romans 1:7. “To all who are in Rome, *beloved of God, called (to be) saints*: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Here Paul identifies and describes the local church at Rome. First, he described them as “beloved of God.” This is a description of God’s elect only. They only are beloved of God in a covenantal sense. Although God is loving to all, even His enemies, He only loves His elect with an everlasting love, for He sees them and regards them as in union with His beloved Son. Colossians 1:12, “Therefore, *as the elect of God, holy and beloved*, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering...” And here again, Paul refers to these church members as “called (to be) saints.” Paul is writing to this church assuming that they are born again, true Christians. He pronounced a blessing upon them from God involving God imparting to them :grace and peace. Only true Christians have access and privilege to receive these covenantal blessings from their God.

4. Matthew 28:18-20. “Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹Go therefore and *make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen.”

All denominations have recognized baptism to be the entry door into church membership. Here Jesus gave His command that only disciples should be baptized. It is obvious that a church should do all it can do to ensure that only true disciples are baptized. They and they only are to be baptized. It follows that only true disciples should be admitted to local church membership.

B. There are those passages that speak of only true believers to be in the new covenant, therefore they, and only they, should be admitted to church membership in a new covenant church.

Paedobaptist reformed churches believe and teach that not only are true believers within the new covenant that God has established in Jesus Christ, but that also the unregenerate children of believing parents are also in the covenant. These children of believers are often referred to as “covenant children.” The reason that this belief is asserted is because of a (faulty) parallel they draw between the New Testament local church and the Old Testament covenant community of Israel; specifically, as physical descendants of Abraham were viewed to be in covenant relationship with God due to their physical lineage to Abraham. They argue that just as physical circumcision assured that a physical descendant of Abraham was in covenant relationship with God, so the New Testament parallel is infant baptism, which brings the child into a covenantal relationship with God.

The problem with this position is that the Bible teaches that all members of the new covenant are truly born of the Spirit--true Christians--not merely professing believers. Now do not misunderstand. There are many professing Christians who believe themselves and others believe them to be in the new covenant, but in reality they are strangers to the grace of God; they have no participation in the true life that is in Jesus Christ. If we could see the condition of their hearts, which we cannot do, we could say to them as Peter said of Simon Magus, “You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God” (Acts 8:21). But until we do see evidence of having entered the new covenant relationship in Jesus Christ, we should not admit one to church membership.

1. Ezekiel 37:21-28.

“Then say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; ²²and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again. ²³They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God.

²⁴“David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd; they shall also walk in My judgments and observe My statutes, and do them. ²⁵Then they shall dwell in the land that I have given to Jacob My servant, where your fathers dwelt; and they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children’s children, forever; and My servant David shall be their prince forever. ²⁶Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. ²⁷My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ²⁸The nations also will know that I, the Lord, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.””

God was promising to make a new covenant with a remnant of Israel. Everyone in this redeemed Israel is under the submission of the King, Jesus Christ (vs. 22, 24). They have repented of their sins, turning away from their former idolatry; they now live according to God’s law (v. 23, 24). God is their God and dwells among them (v. 26). This describes true Christians and them only. Unregenerate, unconverted children have no place promised to them by virtue of being children of those in the covenant.

2. Hebrews 8:7-13 (Jeremiah 31:31ff).

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. ⁸Because finding fault with them, He says: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— ⁹not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. ¹⁰For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ¹¹None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. ¹²For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”

¹³In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

The writer to the Hebrews quoted at length the prophecy in Jeremiah 31 of the new covenant that God would establish with His people. He declared that this new covenant has been enacted with respect to new testament believers. Now take note of the description of all those who are in this new covenant relationship with God. First, God has put His laws in their minds and has written them on their hearts (v. 10); in other words, those in a new covenant relationship with God have been regenerated, given a new heart that loves God and desires to obey His law. Second, God promises that He will be their God and they would be His people; everyone in the new covenant is in a covenant relationship with God. Third, each and everyone in the covenant have a personal relationship with the Lord; they know the Lord. Fourth, God promises to be merciful, forgiving forever the sins of all those in this new covenant.

Now paedobaptists claim that unregenerate children of believing parents are in the covenant. But not until, or if, they become truly converted, can it be said that any of these new covenant promises be said to describe them. The biblical conclusion is that no one except those who have been born again by the Spirit are in this new covenant; therefore, only those who have given evidence of being in this new covenant should be admitted to the membership of a local church.

C. There are those passages that paedobaptists wrongly interpret to support their position that children of believing parents are in a covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

1. Acts 2:38, 39.

“Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is to you *and to your children*, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”

[We spoke of this earlier, so we will not do so now, but we did want to address this in our notes that are available to you.] Here Peter promises the gift of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness of sins, that is, salvation, to those who repent and are baptized. He is not attempting to give a doctrine of how God justifies a sinner through faith alone; rather, he is stating what God commands of every sinner who would be saved.

Now paedobaptists point to the promise of verse 39, “For the promise is to you and to your children.” They assume the parallel with this is the promise God made with Abraham that his physical descendants would also be blessed of God. But he neglects the qualifier that Peter includes in verse 39, “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, *as many as the Lord our God will call.*” The promise is only to those children who are effectually called to salvation in the same way that their parents were called of God. There is no promise of salvation to children simply because they are children of believing parents.

2. 1 Corinthians 7: 12-14.

“But to the rest I, not the Lord, says: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. ¹³And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.”

Paul was giving instruction respecting marriage of a believer to an unbeliever. A believer is not to divorce his/her unbelieving spouse. It may be that God will so work grace in the unbelieving spouse, that he/she will come to salvation. Paul declares that the unbelieving spouse is “sanctified” by the believing spouse. Moreover the children of parents of which one of them is a Christian, are regarded as “holy” by the Lord.

Paedobaptists focus on the end of verse 14 in which Paul declares the children of a believing parent is “holy.” They declare that the Lord regards these children as in covenant relationship with Himself. They argue therefore, that these children of a believing parent are in the covenant and should be baptized, receiving the sign and seal of the covenant. There are at least two problems with this position. First, although God does regard a child of a believing parent “holy”, the passage says nothing of that child being in a covenant relationship with God. Indeed, every child who has at least one parent who is a believer is a child of privilege. God treats that child in a favorable manner and regard because of his/her relationship with the believing parent. But this is not a promise or guarantee of salvation. Nor does the passage teach that it is a basis for baptism. The second problem with viewing the child as in a covenant relationship with God because of the unbelieving parent, is that you would need to extend the same privilege and blessing upon the unbelieving spouse because of his/her relationship to his/her believing spouse. Verse 14 declares that “the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband.” The Greek word for the verb “sanctified” is the same Greek word in the form of the noun, “holy.” In other words, in manner in which the child is “holy”, the unbelieving spouse is also “holy.” If the paedobaptist were to be consistent with the passage, they should also be baptizing unbelieving spouses of Christians, which of course reveals the absurdity of their position.

Here are a few concluding **explanations and qualifications of this important matter of baptism by immersion only of converts to Jesus Christ.**

Certainly, a church’s membership comprised of only regenerate souls is a goal that is difficult to attain or maintain, but it should be attempted to the degree that we are able by the grace of God.

When churches exist in a free society in which separation of church and state exists and church attendance is wholly “voluntary,” even paedobaptist reformed churches, in which the truth is proclaimed, will tend to be comprised of more regenerate members than fewer. This is not true in a land in which a state church exists. Many people assume they are Christian, but few show biblical evidence that is so.

The majority of existing Baptist (and baptistic) churches have so diluted their understanding of what a true Christian is, that many churches are filled with unregenerate members, whom the churches wrongly presume are true Christians.

But in conclusion to this matter, we affirm that it is very important that a church maintains its membership of believers who show evidence of their new birth. A church that is true in this important matter will tend to have fewer and less serious church problems than a church that is weak in this matter. Paul questioned the legitimacy of the claim that the church at Corinth was comprised of true Christians, because the church had so many serious spiritual and moral problems.

Children, if you have a Christian parent, you are very blessed of the Lord. God has a special concern and regard for you, because He loves your Christian parents. You have been born into a home in which the love for God is present. There is high regard is given to the Word of God. The love for righteousness is present and the desire to see you to live in faith and righteousness immerses your life. But you must not presume upon His favor. The devil may seek to use your privilege to lull you in a false sense of well-being between you and God. Your privilege does not guarantee your salvation. You will not be saved from your sin because of your mother’s faith. You must repent of sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. We would pray and urge you to do so.

Perhaps at a future time we may be able to address the other four descriptive reactions and responses of these new converts of the day of Pentecost as they joined with the other disciples of Jesus Christ in church commitment and fellowship.

3. They were characterized as ones who adhered to the apostles’ doctrine.

Verse 42 reads, “*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine...*”

4. They were all actively involved in the church’s fellowship and prayer gatherings.

Again, we read in verse 42, “*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.*”

5. They manifested Christian love and charity toward one another in the church body.

Verses 44 and 45 record their attitude and behavior toward one another, “*Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.*”

6. They lived in peace and joy and in harmony with even those outside the faith.

Verse 46 and 47 record, “*So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people.*”
