

Who can be a member?

We have suggested changing our constitution from requiring triune immersion for membership to requiring immersion in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The following is a discussion giving the logic behind such a change.

(NOTE: In this paper "single immersion" refers to a true Christian who is immersed once [baptized] in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "Triune immersion" is our practice of immersing people three times: once in the name of the Father, once in the Son, and once in the Holy Spirit.)

1. What is the difference between triune and single immersion?

In our baptism class I teach that the *meaning* of baptism is as follows:

a. Baptism is identification

1. with Christ: Baptism is a declaration concerning your attitude toward Christ. Though it shows others that you have believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior it is primarily identification with Christ Himself.

2. with the triune God: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all involved in your salvation. When Jesus sent His followers into the world He said to baptize people "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

3. with the church: Since baptism signifies the inward reality of our relationship with Christ, it was the normal initiatory rite into the visible church. New converts were identified outwardly with the fellowship of believers through baptism (Acts 2:42).

b. Baptism is a Symbol

1. Baptism symbolizes death to yourself and new life toward God

When you receive Christ your life starts over (II Cor 5:17). You die to yourself and are born again (John 3:3). Your old life is crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20). Being immersed in water represents the burial of your old life (Rom. 6:3-4) and coming up out of the water represents resurrection to new life in Christ (Rom. 6:4). Baptism reminds you and tells others that you started a new life.

2. Baptism symbolizes cleansing.

When you trusted in Christ, God cleansed you from your sins and forgave you (Titus 3:5-6). Baptism does not make you a Christian but water does create a visual picture of the cleansing that God accomplished in your heart.

We believe that triune immersion pictures all of the above. Does single immersion portray these as well?

I think that we would have to agree that it does. Single immersion adequately pictures new life and cleansing. There is also a clear identification with Christ and the church. The words "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" connect the one who is baptized with the triune God.

In other words, the reason for rejecting single immersion has nothing to do with inadequate symbolism. Immersion is immersion. Both types of baptism link the believer to Christ and the church. Both triune immersion and single immersion are done in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the difference between single and triune immersion is not over *what* is symbolized, but *how* it is symbolized.

2. Why practice triune immersion if single immersion in the name of the triune God symbolizes the same thing? If triune immersion is not important then why would Jesus teach it?

We practice triune immersion because that is what we believe is required of the grammar in Matthew 28:19. We also believe that *the way* we baptize is more accurate in making an identification with the triune God: immersing someone three times in the water clearly marks out the three members of the trinity. And we believe that this was what was practiced by the early church. However, we don't believe that Jesus is teaching a *method* as much as He is teaching *identification*.

Being baptized in the name of someone signifies identification with that person. In Jesus' day some had identified with John the Baptist's baptism for repentance (see Acts 19:3-5). Baptism among the Jews was a rite of initiation identifying oneself with a particular leader. When Paul heard that certain people in Corinth were claiming to be his followers, he protested that he had not baptized any in his name (I Cor. 1:10-17). Jesus was stressing that our identification should be with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christ made baptism a symbol of personal commitment to Himself. "In effect, the initiate, by his submission to baptism, declared himself to be a disciple of Christ and committed himself to the kind of lifestyle pertinent to that declaration" (GTJ Vol. 2/2; 1981, p. 288).

Historically, Jesus' command to baptize in Matthew 28:19 stands at the juncture between the Old and New Testament eras. Jesus had predicted the formation of His church in Matthew 16, and was now giving instructions to the men who would eventually lead it. These men would be facing Jewish "prospects" who tenaciously held to the belief that God is One. In fact, the Jews had just crucified their Messiah for making Himself equal to God. With this in mind Jesus introduced His baptism "into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The Trinitarian significance of baptism was a major factor in its original formulation for it distinguished the Christian from the Jew as one who believed in the triune God, the God Christ Himself revealed.

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Of course, we think that everything Jesus said is important. We practice triune immersion because we want to follow what He has said as precisely as possible. But we don't want our precision to overshadow the fact that outward identification with Christ and the triune God is at the heart of His words. We want to stay focused on the focus.

By accepting people who have been single immersed we are simply recognizing that they have identified with Christ and the triune God through baptism just as we have, though they have done it differently. We believe they have followed the intent of Jesus' command though perhaps they expressed it with less precision.

3. Isn't this a compromise in what we believe? Aren't we saying that we believe one thing but will accept another?

We believe that *the visible identification of the believer with the triune God* is what is important in the symbolism in baptism. The symbolism of single immersion *agrees* with what we believe. We aren't talking about accepting people as members who haven't been baptized at all, or have been sprinkled instead of immersed, or baptized as an infant. Nor are we accepting anything but baptism that identifies the believer with the triune God.

It seems misguided to admit that someone is a believer and their baptism symbolizes the same things as ours but not accept them unless they submit to a *different expression of the same symbolism*. In other words, what more do we want to see expressed in triune immersion that hasn't already been expressed in single immersion? Doesn't it miss the point to place more stress on the form than the meaning? To insist on re-baptism simply because we want to see the exact same truths of their baptism *expressed* differently verges on absurdity.

This is not compromise. We are accepting *people* whose baptism pictures the same realities that we also believe in. We are not accepting single immersion as our *practice*.

It is mistaken to re-baptize people when the only reason they are doing so is to accommodate our church policy. This gives baptism a totally new meaning not found anywhere in Scripture. Instead of being a picture of our salvation in the triune God, we have changed it into a petty demand that gives people the "privilege" of voting in our business meetings. In our zeal to "protect" triune immersion I wonder if we actually cheapen baptism altogether by our current practice.

Re-baptizing people doesn't make them believers in triune immersion. Or, are we saying that **ONLY** triune immersion is Christian baptism and we are the only ones who are really baptized? If so, the word "re-baptize" should not be in our vocabulary, for people are either triune immersed or not baptized at all.

If we are the only ones who have really been baptized, we had better change some things. Our goal should be to get every Christian we meet baptized our way, for until they are, they are disobeying Christ's command to be His disciples in the most fundamental sense (Matt. 28:19-20). Furthermore, we should revoke membership to all who have been triune immersed

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but did so without really believing it was their first real baptism. Perhaps we should require people who have been single immersed to publicly renounce their original baptism as meaningless before we will baptize them. We should also cancel the membership of those who are triune immersed but believe that single immersed Christians are also baptized, since that would mean that they don't REALLY "believe" as we do either . . . and we don't want people to be members who don't REALLY believe like us. Is this the consistency of belief we are looking for? I don't think so. If it is, we have a lot of house cleaning to do.

If we *don't* think that triune immersion is the ONLY baptism that pleases God, then why are we refusing baptized believers from being members? Why would we insist on being re-baptized just so we have unity in outward "form"? Isn't unity of belief more important? Re-baptism changes no one's beliefs. But don't both single and triune immersed believers already have unity of belief in the meaning of baptism - which is the essence of baptism anyway?

By allowing single immersed believers to be members we will align what we REALLY believe with what we require.

4. Why would we want to accept believers who don't agree with our Statement of Faith? If triune baptism is important enough to be in the Statement of Faith, why would we not insist that people practice it? If it is not that important why put it in the Statement of Faith?

The reason our practices (baptism, communion, anointing with oil) are in our Statement of Faith is not to separate or isolate ourselves from other Christians. Nor are they to get people out of the church who don't see things as we do. It is to inform people of our beliefs - some of which we see as essential to being a Christian, others which define what we practice.

Our practice of baptism, communion, and anointing people with oil are uncommon. They are not more important than our beliefs in a literal seven day week of creation, election and predestination, or the priesthood of every believer (things which are not even in our Statement of Faith), but they are less known. People need to know that we are "different" in these areas. The Statement of Faith tells others that we do not teach single immersion, nor will we baptize anyone by single immersion even if they request it. Triune immersion is a practice that we believe in and will continue to practice and defend. Nothing in our practice or beliefs will change.

New denominations come into existence because people fight over issues of doctrine. People who come to our church will know what we believe and know that these are non-debatable issues. If they decide to make our church theirs, they will do so with their "eyes open."

If we were not unique in these practices there would be no need for them in the Statement of Faith at all. We could simply mention that we believe in baptism by immersion and communion. But we are unique in these areas. These are some of the beliefs that distinguish

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us as Grace Brethren. We want these in the Statement of Faith so that these practices cannot easily be removed or modified.

5. What will we lose? What will we gain? (in accepting single immersed members)

I don't see us losing anything. We are not changing our practices or beliefs at all. We are not compromising. We practice what we preach. We are not changing our Statement of Faith. We are not offering single immersion as an option. We are still challenging those who we lead to Christ to be baptized by triune immersion.

By accepting people who are single immersed as members, we are not asking them to compromise their beliefs by being baptized again just to be a part of our church. They will not think that we are insinuating that their identification with Christ is somehow second rate. We will not cheapen the meaning of baptism by changing it from a picture of their salvation in the triune God to a requirement for membership.

What do we gain? We gain people who want to join us in making disciples and reaching our world for Christ. They are people who are our friends, people who will bring their friends to our church who may come to Christ and be baptized by us. Their children and grand children may also become members of our church and be baptized as well.

We gain people who enjoy and follow our practices. We lose nothing.

6. Does this mean we will stop being Grace Brethren?

Of course not. The *majority* of Grace Brethren churches accept single-immersed people as members already. The churches that don't allow non-triune immersed people as members, don't have problems with the churches that do. This does not make us less Grace Brethren, for Grace Brethren believes that each church should decide the requirements of membership.

7. An illustration.

If you asked me, "Ted, what do you believe about baptism?" I would answer, "I believe in triune immersion." Then, if you were to say, "Should all believers be baptized?" I would answer, "Yes." Therefore, you could say, "Ted believes that all believers should be baptized by triune immersion." This is also what our Statement of Faith says (Article 9).

If I were to ever pastor a non-Grace Brethren church I could not baptize people by single immersion when I believe that Christ is telling me to immerse them three times. However, I would not require them to be re-baptized before I could be their pastor either. Furthermore, I could rejoice over people getting baptized by single immersion knowing that they are identifying with Christ and the triune God. Their baptism pictures what mine does.

My belief in triune immersion does not isolate me from other believers. My conviction does not in some way negate their baptism. It does not mean that I believe that triune immersion

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symbolizes something that single immersion does not. My belief would, however, limit me as to what I will practice. I don't see that as compromise, weak belief, or inconsistency. I see it as keeping the meaning and the expression of baptism in proper perspective. Doing what I believe the Bible says to do to the letter, but recognizing that the identification with Christ is at the heart of it all.

Our goal at Grace Fellowship is not to get as many people from other churches as we can. It is to see people come to Christ and make disciples of them. Yet I am glad to work with other baptized Christians who hold our values, want to see our church grow, support our beliefs, and love us enough to want to be members.