

“Ever wondered how baptism ‘works’? The book you hold in your hand answers that question. Both a humble charity toward those holding other positions and yet a crystal clarity mark this book. The book is full of cogent exegesis, simple summaries, and excellent illustrations. Clear, concise, more constructive than argumentative, Bobby Jamieson’s prose is smooth, his reasoning is simple, his reading of the contemporary scene is careful. Invest in reading this book so that you (and others you help) can better follow Christ.”

Mark Dever

Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC;
President, 9Marks

“For most of Baptist history, the idea that baptism is required for church membership and for participation in the Lord’s Supper has been the majority view, enshrined in a number of Baptist confessions and statements of faith. But in the past generation, many have dropped the requirement of baptism for participation in the Lord’s Supper (moving to open Communion), and fewer, but some, have taken the next step and dropped the requirement of baptism for church membership (a move to open membership). I think the impetus for these changes has been largely cultural, with little consideration for the theological and ecclesiological reasons that led earlier Baptists to their views. That is why I am glad to commend Bobby Jamieson’s work, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership*. I know of no other work that so thoroughly considers the ecclesiological, theological, and biblical issues that connect baptism to church membership and participation in the Lord’s Supper and does so in a clear, readable, and irenic manner. It is not that I agree with all the answers he gives; we differ on a number of points. But he is raising the right questions, and they are questions few others are raising. I hope it receives a wide readership and sparks a lot of constructive discussions.”

John Hammett

Professor of Systematic Theology and associate dean of Theological Studies,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Since the era of the Reformation, baptism has been an issue of contention among believers, and not only between credobaptists and paedobaptists. Among baptistic believers, especially in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, there has been significant disagreement about the relationship between

baptism and the Lord's Supper and between baptism and membership in the local church. It is not surprising that over the past century Baptists have often skirted these issues so as to avoid controversy. But refusing to touch the issue for fear of being controversial or even too narrow is not helpful, as this new essay rightly points out. Jamieson helpfully navigates us through the issues related to this controversy, and while not all will agree with his conclusions, he cannot be faulted for lacking thorough biblical and historical reflection."

Michael A. G. Haykin

Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality
and Director of The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"Ecclesiology is in many ways the chief contribution and distinctive of the Baptists. Sadly, you would not learn that by observing many Baptist congregations. Baptist ecclesiology has been eclipsed by pragmatism and undermined by neglect. *Going Public* is a theological antidote to that situation. Jamieson, one of the brightest young Baptist scholars today, has written a historically informed, biblically faithful, and theologically rich account of the doctrines of baptism and church membership."

Albert Mohler

President,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"Many books skim the surface of ecclesiology without diving into the depths of the doctrine of the church. With the skills of a master diver, Bobby Jamieson brings a unique perceptiveness combined with grace and courtesy while exploring practical matters every faithful pastor will face. This book will challenge and sharpen your understanding of baptism. If you take baptism and its relationship to church membership and the Lord's Supper seriously, you must read this book."

Thomas White

President and Professor of Systematic Theology,
Cedarville University

GOING PUBLIC





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Why Baptism Is Required
for Church Membership



BOBBY JAMIESON



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership

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For Mark and Jonathan,
for putting me up to it.

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Soli Deo gloria.

Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership: A Summary

In the past five chapters I've carved out the pieces of a case for why baptism is required for church membership. Now it's time to put those pieces together. To switch metaphors, we've been swimming through some deep waters, and I've asked you to hold your breath for a long time. Now we surface, catch our breath, and take a look around.

I'm writing this chapter for two reasons. First, to put all the pieces of the puzzle together in the hope that a coherent, conclusive picture will emerge. If you think such a picture has already emerged, feel free to skip this chapter. Second, plenty of people won't read a book on this issue but will read a chapter. So go ahead and photocopy this chapter to give to people who are wrestling with why they need to be baptized in order to join your church. You have my permission. Not that you need it since photocopying this chapter falls within fair use copyright laws.

Keeping with the "two" theme, I'm going to do two things in this chapter. First, I'm going to fit together, one by one, all the pieces of the case we've carved out in the past five chapters. Second, I'm going to underscore one important implication of this case: Jesus has told the church how we are to recognize Christians. He hasn't left it up to us.

Seven Reasons Baptism Is Required for Church Membership

Here, then, are seven reasons why baptism is required for church membership. Five of these are basically summaries of the previous five chapters. The other two, numbers four and five, draw out conclusions from these chapters which we've already touched on. If these reasons raise questions, I trust the previous five chapters answer many of them. If you disagree with these reasons, hang in there until the next chapter, which is devoted to answering arguments against the case I summarize here.

1. Baptism Is Where Faith Goes Public

First, baptism is where faith goes public. The Christian life is a life of public witness to Christ (Matt 10:32–33), and that witness begins at baptism. At Pentecost those converted by Peter's preaching stepped out from the crowd, declaring allegiance to Christ as Lord and Savior by submitting to baptism (Acts 2:38–41). In baptism we put ourselves as Christians. We publicly identify with the crucified and resurrected Christ and with his people.

Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples by preaching the gospel to them, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey everything he commanded (Matt 28:19). So it's no surprise that at Pentecost Peter commanded his hearers, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). If you claim to follow Christ, this is the first of his commands you must obey. After trusting Christ, baptism is the first thing faith does. If you haven't done it, you've not yet crossed off the first item on Jesus' discipleship to-do list.

Why is baptism required for church membership? Because baptism is where faith goes public. It's where invisible faith first becomes visible. It's how a new Christian shows up on the church and the world's radar. This is the seed from which the other reasons grow.

2. Baptism Is the Initiating Oath-Sign of the New Covenant

Baptism is also the initiating oath-sign of the new covenant. Through his death Jesus inaugurated the promised new covenant (Jer 31:31–34; Luke 22:19–20; Heb 8:1–13). All covenants are ratified by an oath—a solemn, self-obligating

promise. Yet an oath can take nonverbal forms as well. When God made a covenant with Abraham, he passed between the halves of slaughtered animals (Gen 15:1–21). This oath-sign ratified his promise to Abraham and signified that if God proved unfaithful to his own covenant, he himself would bear judgment.

In the death of Jesus, God the Son did bear judgment—not for his unfaithfulness but for ours. The new covenant, therefore, was ratified when Jesus himself paid the ultimate price for our sins (Heb 9:15). The old covenant had circumcision, an oath-sign which marked an individual's entrance into the covenant. So also the new covenant comes with an oath-sign—actually two of them. The first, baptism, is its initiating oath-sign. It is a solemn, symbolic vow which ratifies one's entrance into the new covenant. In baptism we appeal to God to accept us on the terms of his new covenant (1 Pet 3:21), and we pledge ourselves to fulfill all that his new covenant requires of us (Matt 28:19). In baptism we own God as our God, and he owns us as his people.

So when the church asks, “Who belongs to the new covenant?” one part of the answer is, “Who has sworn the oath?” That is, who has been baptized? Just as a soldier can't take up arms until he has sworn allegiance to his country, you cannot enter the covenant community until you have sworn the covenant oath.

3. Baptism Is the Passport of the Kingdom and the Kingdom Citizen's Swearing-in Ceremony

Third, baptism is the passport of the kingdom and the kingdom citizen's swearing-in ceremony. When Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of heaven on earth, he established the church as an embassy of that kingdom. He gave the church the “keys of the kingdom” in order to identify its citizens before the world by affirming the professions of those who credibly confess faith in him (Matt 16:19; 18:18–19). And the initial and initiating means by which the church identifies individuals as kingdom citizens is baptism (Matt 28:19).

Baptism is the passport of the kingdom. We become kingdom citizens by faith in the king, but in baptism the church recognizes and affirms our citizenship. And baptism enables other embassies of the kingdom—that is, other local churches—to recognize us as kingdom citizens. From another angle baptism is a kingdom citizen's swearing-in ceremony. It's when we formally take up our new office of representing Christ and his kingdom on earth. Therefore, in order for a church to recognize someone as a kingdom citizen, that citizen

needs to produce his or her passport. Baptism is necessary for church membership because it's the passport of the kingdom and the kingdom citizen's swearing-in ceremony.

4. Baptism Is a Necessary Criterion by Which a Church Recognizes Who Is a Christian

A fourth reason baptism is necessary for church membership is an inference from our first three points. Because baptism is how a church publicly identifies someone as a Christian, it's also a necessary criterion by which a church recognizes who is a Christian. Identification is for recognition. The Louisville Cardinals wear red so they can recognize one another on the court when they're trouncing the blue-jerseyed Kentucky Wildcats. And baptism is the team jersey of Christianity.

Baptism is therefore a necessary though not sufficient criterion by which the church is to recognize Christians. It's not enough for someone to claim to be a Christian or for everyone in the church to think someone is a Christian; Jesus has bound the church's judgment to baptism. Jesus gave us baptism, in part, so we can tell one another apart from the world. By publicly identifying people as Christians, baptism draws a line between the church and the world. Which means baptism is necessary for church membership.

5. Baptism Is an Effective Sign of Church Membership

Fifth, baptism is an effective sign of church membership. This is also an inference from our first three points. If baptism is where faith goes public, the initiating oath-sign of the new covenant, the passport of the kingdom, and a kingdom citizen's swearing in ceremony, then baptism is an effective sign of church membership. It creates the churchly reality to which it points: a Christian belonging to a local church, and that local church affirming a Christian's profession and uniting him or her to itself.

If membership is a house, baptism is the front door. By stepping through the front door you enter the house. Normally, therefore, baptism isn't just a precursor to church membership; it confers church membership. For a new convert baptism is the New Testament way to join a church. You cannot be affirmed as a citizen without thereby entering the body politic. You don't get

the jersey without joining the team. And the flip side is, you can't play for the team without wearing the jersey. Because baptism is an effective sign of church membership, baptism is necessary for church membership.

6. The Lord's Supper Is the Other Effective Sign of Church Membership

In point two we saw that the new covenant comes with two signs. The first is baptism, its initiating oath-sign. The second is the Lord's Supper, which is the renewing oath-sign of the new covenant. When we partake of the bread and the cup, we commit ourselves anew to Christ and his covenant.

Yet this isn't something we do as individuals but as a church (1 Cor 11:17–18, 20, 33–34). And partaking of the Lord's Supper entails responsibility for the church. To eat and drink in a way that despises the body negates the Lord's Supper and incurs God's judgment (1 Cor 11:27, 29). Therefore, just as we pledge ourselves to Christ in the Lord's Supper, so we also pledge ourselves to one another. In the same act in which we again own him as our Savior, we own one another as brothers and sisters.

This means the Lord's Supper is the other effective sign of church membership. As Paul says, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). The Lord's Supper doesn't just represent our unity; it ratifies and seals it. Because it enacts our fellowship with one another, the Lord's Supper makes many one. This is why church membership is first and foremost inclusion at the Table, and church discipline is first and foremost exclusion from the Table.

Baptism is required for church membership because you can't participate in the renewing oath-sign of the covenant until you've performed its initiating oath-sign. You can't participate in the family meal of the Lord's Supper until you've entered the house through the front door of baptism.

7. Without Baptism, Membership Doesn't Exist

What does all this add up to? Simply this: we can't remove baptism from what's required for church membership because without baptism membership doesn't actually exist.

"Membership" is a theological term for the relation between a Christian and a church which the ordinances imply and normally create. Baptism and

the Lord's Supper ratify the covenant relation which is church membership. Therefore, there is no such thing as membership without baptism. To speak of membership without baptism is like speaking of a marriage without vows. Marriage is a covenant relation constituted by vows; membership is a covenant relation constituted by the oath-signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper. You can't have the relation without the oath that constitutes it. Therefore, you can't have membership without baptism.

A Public Statement

I want to underscore one more point, which is implicit in my whole case: church membership is a public statement. I don't mean this in the sense of something widely disseminated as opposed to kept under wraps, though there is an element of that. Instead, I mean "public" in a more theological sense, closer to "representative." Older theologians spoke of Adam as a "public person" because his actions represented all his progeny. In a similar vein it's important to distinguish a church's public decisions from the private judgments of individual Christians.

Why? Because the church represents Jesus. Jesus has delegated authority to the local church as a body that he hasn't given to you or me as individual Christians. In its membership and discipline, a church speaks for heaven on earth. This is what Jesus meant when he granted the church "the keys of the kingdom" (Matt 16:19; 18:18–19; see chap. 5). After commanding the church to exclude a professing believer who refuses to repent of sin, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18). When the church admits a member, it makes a heaven-sanctioned statement that the person is a Christian. When a church excludes a member, it revokes that heaven-backed affirmation.

When a church admits a member, they're not saying, "The pastor thinks this person is a Christian," or "Steve Smith thinks this person is a Christian," or "This person claims to be a Christian, which is good enough for us." Instead, they're saying, "We as a church, on behalf of Jesus and according to the criteria he's given us, solemnly affirm this person's claim to be a Christian." They're making a public statement that's bound to a public standard. Because church membership is a public affirmation of someone's profession, that affirmation is bound to Jesus' own criteria, and baptism is on that list. Jesus appointed

baptism, in part, to be the church's formal, public means of marking someone off as a Christian. Which means baptism is among the criteria he's given the church for formally recognizing Christians.

Two points are tied together in this idea of membership as a public statement. The first is that membership is a statement by *the church*, not by an individual Christian. No individual Christian has the right to extend church membership to someone. That's a prerogative of the church as a church. Second, because membership is a prerogative of the church, and the church speaks for Jesus, the church may only extend membership to those to whom Jesus has authorized to be members. Because Jesus has delegated authority to the church, the church must exercise that authority on the terms he sets. And Jesus has set baptism as the front door of the church.

Of course baptism isn't a sufficient criterion for recognizing someone as a Christian. Peter told Simon the magician that despite his baptism, he was on his way to hell (Acts 8:20–23). A church needs to consider the content of a person's confession and whether anything in his life calls the credibility of his confession into question. But that's not all they need to do. They also need to ask: "Have you gone public as a follower of Christ in baptism?" If not, a church has no authority to extend the public affirmation which is church membership.

This does *not* mean a church should consider everyone who isn't baptized to be a non-Christian. Many Christians simply haven't been taught that baptism is a biblical mandate. Or if they have, they may just need a loving, pointed challenge to obey. Other Christians consider themselves to have been "baptized" as infants. Many such brothers and sisters can provide a sophisticated, time-honored rationale for this based on their understanding of the biblical covenants. In no case is a refusal to admit such persons to membership equivalent to saying, "We think you're not a Christian." Instead, it's simply withholding a public affirmation because a criterion for that affirmation has not been met. It's not that the embassy thinks the person isn't a citizen; it's just that they have no authority to issue a visa to someone without a passport. We'll think about this in much more detail in the next chapter.

From Offense to Defense

Throughout these six chapters I've built a positive case for why baptism is required for church membership. I've deliberately steered clear of opposing arguments simply because you can't say everything at once. Before answering

objections, I’ve first built a case from the ground up, synthesizing the Bible’s teaching on baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and church membership.

Now it’s time to switch from offense to defense. Many serious objections have been raised against the position this book argues. The next chapter is devoted to answering them.

Headlines
Because baptism is how a church publicly identifies someone as a Christian, it’s also a necessary criterion by which a church recognizes who is a Christian.
Baptism is like the team jersey of Christianity: it identifies Christians so the church can recognize them.
It’s not enough for someone to claim to be a Christian, or for everyone in the church to think someone is a Christian; Jesus has bound the church’s judgment to baptism. Jesus gave us baptism, in part, so we can tell one another apart from the world.
Church membership is a statement by the church, not by an individual Christian.
Because membership is a prerogative of the church, and the church speaks for Jesus, the church may extend membership only to those whom Jesus has authorized to be members. And baptism is among the criteria Jesus has given the church for recognizing and affirming Christians.