

ELDER PROPOSAL REGARDING BAPTISM & MEMBERSHIP

To the members of College Heights Baptist Church:

As your elected elders, we have prepared this document to walk you through a motion we will be bringing forward at our upcoming Congregational Meeting on May 31, 2022. Our intent is to provide some context for a change we are recommending in the area of baptism and membership. We hope that the info provided here will prepare you for prayerful conversation at the AGM and also provide you with the opportunity to reach out to us in advance with any comments, concerns, or questions you may have.

What do our current by-laws say about the relationship between baptism and membership?

College Heights Baptist Church by-laws require believer's baptism by immersion for membership. They state, "This church practices baptism by immersion." In our policies we state: "The teaching and practice of this church is baptism by immersion. Those who have been baptized by immersion previously in a church of like faith and practice shall share their testimony with elders of the church."

Believer's baptism is the personal act of a person (older child to adult) who has put his/her trust in Jesus Christ, and wishes to make a public confession of faith through baptism. This implies that the person needs to be old enough to understand clearly their commitment to Christ.

Why are the elders of CHBC recommending change in this area?

Periodically we have been approached by people seeking membership who have received believer's baptism as a young person or adult, but by a different mode, usually by pouring or sprinkling water. These people, like us, have publicly proclaimed their commitment to Christ. The only difference is the mode. In some cases this is the normal practice of their previous church; in other cases there may not be a baptistry or proper place for baptism, or physical disabilities or circumstances may make immersion impossible. For example, several years ago we baptized an elderly man by pouring because it was too difficult for him to get into our baptistry. Yet by our own by-laws, he would not be eligible to become a member at CHBC unless he was re-baptized by immersion. Others in our church family are also currently excluded from membership, not because of disagreement regarding believer's baptism, but simply because the mode that was used is not recognized by CHBC.

Have we put the outward mode above the real significance of baptism? We can say our view is right, but are we withholding membership from genuine believers who have publicly declared their faith through believer's baptism? After considerable prayer and discussion the elders wish to present the following resolution concerning baptism and membership:

College Heights Baptist Church will continue to teach and practice believer's baptism by immersion and to link believer's baptism with membership. However, upon their testimony we may accept as members those who have received a believer's baptism by a different mode without requiring their re-baptism. Where physical or medical conditions raise serious obstacles to baptism by immersion, the elders may also allow for another mode of baptism.

Other considerations that have led us to this proposal:

- The practice of baptism is clearly commanded in Scripture. From Pentecost through the accounts in Acts this is clearly the practice of the New Testament church. (See Matthew 28:18 – 20; Acts 2:38 – 41; 8:12, 13, 36; 10:47, 48; 16:33, 34; 18:8; 22:16). The practice here is clearly believer's baptism, though nowhere is the mode of baptism mandated.
- The meaning of the Greek word "baptizo" is most commonly to immerse in water, as in dyeing of cloth, but not exclusively. It was used of drawing wine by dipping a cup into the bowl; or of washing hands before a meal by a Pharisee (Luke 18:38); or of Jesus dipping bread in the dish at the Passover (John 13:26). It does not always mean to completely immerse.

- The examples of the Ethiopian eunuch and Jesus are often used to prove immersion. “Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him” (Acts 8:38). Matthew 3:16 says, “After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him.” In both cases, though the baptism took place in the water, the actual mode of baptism is not described.
- In Romans 6:3-6, baptism is compared to our being united with Jesus in his death and resurrection. We die and are buried with Christ and raised to new life because of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Immersion fits this picture perfectly. But Galatians 3:27 tells us that “all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.” This uses the picture of putting on new clothing. And Peter thinks of baptism with the picture of Noah’s Ark of rescuing us from destruction by floating above the water (1 Peter 3:18 – 21).
- Baptism is also a picture of our cleansing from sin and consecration to God. In the Old Testament things were set apart, purified and sanctified by sprinkling, either by blood or water. Hebrews 10:22 urges us to draw near to God, “having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience.” Pouring is also a symbol of being anointed by the Holy Spirit, set apart and washed clean.
- The spirit of the law versus the letter. The primary purpose of baptism is to publicly declare our faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. The practice of baptism by immersion expresses this beautifully and will continue to be our practice. However, Jesus frequently criticized the spiritual leaders of his day for rigidity on symbols and rituals and neglecting the deeper meaning. Their focus was on a particular way of washing hands, not true cleanliness; on exact reckoning of the tithe while neglecting more important matters such as justice, mercy and faithfulness. They emphasized outward ritual rather than inner integrity and devotion and a true living out of God’s law. Our unwillingness to recognize other modes of baptism may be falling into that trap.
- There is an emerging trend among NAB churches to accept members who have experienced baptism by a different mode. This includes churches in Washington, Oregon, California and Ohio, as well as two in Alberta, two in Manitoba and Bethany Baptist in Richmond, BC.

How would this proposal affect our current by-laws?

This would require a change to our Policies and Procedures, but not to our by-laws. We recommend that article I. A. 2. be replaced with the following:

2. Believer’s baptism:

- The teaching and practice of this church is baptism by immersion. Those who desire membership will share their testimony with elders of the church prior to baptism.*
- Those who have been baptized by immersion previously in a church of like faith and practice shall share their testimony with elders of the church. Letters of transfer shall be evaluated, but the elders will still interview prospective members to hear their testimonies and respond to questions about the church.*
- Those who have received believer’s baptism by a different mode, may be received as members upon their testimony without requiring re-baptism.*
- Where physical and medical conditions raise serious obstacles to baptism by immersion, the elders may allow another mode of baptism.*

With these considerations in mind, we recommend that CHBC continue to teach and practice believer’s baptism by immersion, while allowing the elders to accept into membership those who have been baptized as believers by a different mode, or who for physical or medical reasons are unable to undergo baptism by immersion.

We thank you for prayerfully and thoughtfully considering this proposal and preparing yourself for discussion at our upcoming Congregational Meeting on May 31, 2022. We also invite you to reach out to one of our elders if you would like to ask questions or provide feedback in advance.

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