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## The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

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## Credobaptism and Catholicity

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*Baptist Catholicity.* To many both inside and outside the Baptist movement, this moniker seems like a contradiction in terms. For some Baptists, catholicity is a kind of swear word, not only because of its association with the Roman Catholic Church but also because certain strands of the Baptist tradition have sought to position themselves as neither Catholic nor Protestant but as a sort of *tertium quid* of restorationist Christianity.<sup>1</sup> For many non-Baptists, the Baptist rejection of infant baptism is especially noxious for any genuine catholicity. To invalidate the baptisms of the majority of Christians across space and time is to give up any pretense to a belief in “one baptism” (Eph 4:5), let alone the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” or a “baptism for the remission of sins” (Nicene Creed). So, for many, Baptist catholicity is a non-starter, or so it would seem.

Despite these headwinds, several different Baptist groups have attempted to wade into the waters (if you can forgive the pun) of an alleged “Baptist catholicity.” A few brave souls among more “moderate” Baptists have staked a claim for a “Bapto-Catholic” vision: an attempt to pave the way for a Baptist identity that avoids the modernist danger of a purely individualistic faith and that seeks a reclamation of a more traditioned Baptist faith for a postmodern age.<sup>2</sup> Others among the British Baptists have sought the retrieval of a more sacramental and liturgical expression of the Baptist movement.<sup>3</sup> Even some conservative Baptists in North America have

1. Though its influence has waned in recent decades, the Landmarkist tradition within the Baptist movement fits this bill. On the history of Landmarkism, see James Tull, *High-Church Baptists in the South: The Origin, Nature and Influence of Landmarkism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000).

2. See the programmatic manifesto for Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity (1997) authored by Mikael Broadway, Curtis Freeman, Barry Harvey, James W. McClendon, Jr., Elizabeth Newman, and Philip Thompson. See also Steve R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27 (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006); Harmon, *The Baptist Vision and the Ecumenical Future: Radically Biblical, Radically Catholic, Relentlessly Pilgrim* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live? A Catholic-Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

3. Many of the volumes in Paternoster’s Studies in Baptist History and Thought highlight this interest among British Baptists, as well as among some North American Baptists. See, for example, Anthony R. Cross and Phillip E. Thompson, eds., *Baptist Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 2, 5 (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008, 2003); and Stanley K. Fowler, *More than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 2 (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2002).

attempted a reappraisal of the Baptist vision as a renewal movement within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.<sup>4</sup> Considering whether or not one could seek to be both Baptist and self-consciously “catholic,” we might offer the same retort a Baptist minister once gave when asked if he believed in infant baptism: “Believe in it? Why, I’ve seen it with my own eyes!”<sup>5</sup>

But the question remains as to whether or not there is any firm ground on which to fuse these two sentiments: Baptist *and* catholic. Despite their best efforts and their potentially noble goals, can those who seek Baptist catholicity actually do so in a way that is consistent with their own Baptist distinctives, let alone any traditional understanding of what it means to be catholic? Whatever other hurdles might trip up these recent gestures towards a Baptist catholicity, the elephant in the ecumenical room, so to speak, is most certainly the distinctive practice from which the Baptists derive their name: believers-only baptism. If baptism is the church’s initiating rite, through which we are made Christians and members of Christ’s body, then the Baptist dissent on infant baptism would seem to forestall any attempts at a coherent catholicity.

This essay will explore precisely this question: can credobaptism and catholicity cohere? A tentative and rather modest answer to the question can be given from the outset: Perhaps. There may be better or worse ways to anchor the Baptist tradition in the broader body of Christ, but part of the problem emerges from a lack of agreed-upon criteria for adjudicating the matter. What is the *sine qua non* of catholicity? If the answer is an unqualified acceptance of the validity of infant baptism for church membership and Table fellowship, then the debate will be quick and decisive. But this answer, compelling as it is, may, in fact, beg the question. So the first section of the essay will examine what other possible answers might be given to the question of genuine catholicity. The second section will then explore some ways in which the Baptist position is indeed consistent with broader Christian traditions on baptism. The final section will investigate some potential Baptist responses to infant baptism, asking whether and how infant baptism might be received by Baptists as anything other than an aberration to New Testament Christianity.

4. The many labors of Timothy George, the founding dean of Beeson Divinity School, are especially noteworthy in an American evangelical context. See also the forthcoming volume: Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, eds., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020). The efforts of the Center for Baptist Renewal, at which I serve as co-executive director along with Emerson, are also attempting to provide space for an evangelical Baptist Catholicity. See [www.centerforbaptistrenewal.com](http://www.centerforbaptistrenewal.com).

5. Versions of this quip are attributed to various sources, even to Mark Twain!

## Criteria for Catholicity

For many involved in ecumenical conversations, the common acceptance of one another's baptisms would seem to be the price of entry to the table of catholicity.<sup>6</sup> If indeed, there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5), then a denial of the legitimacy of another tradition's baptisms would seem utterly inconsistent with any aspirations to catholicity. It would seem to make the denying party hopelessly sectarian if not schismatic. To be clear, some Baptists have shown a willingness to accept the validity (if non-normativity) of infant baptism, as we will explore more below. So not all Baptist groups would necessarily fall prey to this kind of objection to Baptist catholicity. But for those Baptist groups that do deny the validity of infant baptism and do require what would amount to a "re-baptism" in the paedobaptist perspective, the gravity of the objection should not be dismissed lightly. There are also deeply felt personal and pastoral dimensions to this debate. To say to a fellow believer that their baptism, which represents a cherished marker of their Christian identity, is invalid is a grave matter indeed. But Baptists hold their views on baptism, not for some petty or sectarian reason, but precisely because of their commitment to the absolute authority of Holy Scripture, which they believe demands the Baptist position. So, if catholicity is defined in such a way that it precludes Baptists from the outset, then many Baptists will feel compelled to choose Scripture over catholicity thus defined.

But again, this way of defining catholicity (which amounts to *defining Baptists out* of the conversation) may beg the most important question: Is the acceptance of all purported baptisms really the price of entry? It should be noted that Baptists are not the only ones who deny the validity of certain baptisms. Some Presbyterians in an American context also deny the legitimacy of certain baptisms (for example, Roman Catholic baptisms), even if they are administered in the Triune name.<sup>7</sup> Even if this is a minority report among Presbyterians worldwide, presumably, many communions would have reservations about baptisms in other contexts. For instance, is a Mormon baptism administered in the Triune name valid? Surely, most Christian churches would answer in the negative, given the radically divergent understanding of the

6. See, for example, World Council of Churches, *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition. A Study Text* (Faith and Order Paper no. 2010; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2011).

7. See, for example, "The Report of the Study Committee on Questions Relating the Validity of Certain Baptisms" (1987), commissioned by the Presbyterian Church in America. The committee's findings claimed that, while a worldwide majority of Presbyterian and Reformed churches have accepted the validity of Roman Catholic baptisms, the same was not true in an American context: "In its historical survey, the Committee found that with one exception the General Assemblies of American Presbyterian churches where making a judgment on the matter have taken the position of non-validity for Roman Catholic baptism." A majority of the committee recommended to the General Assembly a position denying the validity of Roman Catholic baptisms, with a minority report leaving the matter to pastoral discretion. The documents can be accessed here: <http://www.pcahistory.org/pca/studies/2-093.html>.

Trinity (and much else besides) between historic Christian orthodoxy and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I do not mean to suggest that Mormon baptisms are equivalent to infant baptisms practiced in Christian churches, but what these examples highlight is the fact that for many Christian traditions, not just Baptists, a water rite administered in the Triune name is not always sufficient for a valid baptism. The administering church, its theological orthodoxy, and its theology of baptism are also significant and determining factors.

Also significant are the practical implications of the Baptist denial of infant baptism's validity. What are Baptists actually denying when they deny the validity of infant baptism? Practically speaking, it amounts to one or both of the following: admittance into church membership and admittance to the Lord's Table. As we will see below, some Baptists are closed-membership but open-communion, meaning they gladly welcome all true believers to the Table but reserve church membership only for those who have been baptized as believers. But in either case, the downstream effects of the Baptist denial of infant baptism have analogs in other communions as well. For example, Protestants are not admitted to the Eucharist in Roman Catholic churches, nor are unrepentant Protestants admitted into their membership. In some Lutheran churches, those who deny the Real Presence are likewise fenced from the Lord's Table. So, despite the uniqueness of the Baptist position (in denying the validity of infant baptism), the practical effects of this denial have parallels in other traditions as well. If Baptists are defined out of catholicity, then other traditions may also be on the chopping block. Even if a common Eucharistic fellowship is a hoped-for goal of ecumenical dialogue, it is not a present reality precisely because of the ecclesiological commitments, not only of the Baptists but of other traditions as well.

We should also observe how differing theological systems render different judgments about the relative significance of baptism for Christian faith. For many Baptists, baptism is non-sacramental in its nature. In other words, baptism is merely an outward sign, a symbol that expresses the believer's public profession of faith and the administering church's affirmation of that faith. Baptism does not necessarily "do anything" of a sacramental nature. For other Baptists, including many of the earliest Baptists in seventeenth-century England, baptism does have a sacramental character: it is the ordinary means of grace that seals the believer's union with Christ.<sup>8</sup> As the church's initiating sacrament, it functions in a similar way to the church's ongoing sacrament at the Lord's Table: it strengthens and confirms the faith of the believer, communicating the benefits of Christ's redemption through the outward sign.<sup>9</sup> But

8. For a detailed historical examination of this sacramental understanding, see Fowler, *More than a Symbol*.

9. The Baptist Catechism, a seventeenth-century Particular Baptist revision of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, followed the broader Reformed tradition in seeing the sacraments as the ordinary means of grace. Answer 93: "The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communiceth to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the word, baptism, the Lord's supper, and prayer; all which means are made effectual to the elect for salvation."

in both of these cases—both the non-sacramental and the sacramental view of baptism—the Baptist position is sufficiently dissimilar to the theologies of baptism in other Christian traditions that it produces a kind of disconnect in conversations about baptism and catholicity. In both cases, a credible profession of faith is a prerequisite to participation in baptism. But, of course, that is not the theology of baptism held by paedobaptist communions. The incredulity that non-Baptist traditions often express about the Baptist denial of infant baptism may be a function of viewing that denial through the lens of an alien theological system. In, say, a Lutheran theology of baptism, to deny the validity of someone's baptism would amount to a denial of their status as Christians, a denial of their membership in the body of Christ. But such is not necessarily the case for Baptists. Baptists can gladly accept those “baptized” as infants as fellow believers and can, given certain qualifications, accept paedobaptist churches as true churches. In short, the best context in which to understand the Baptist denial of infant baptism is the Baptist theology of baptism, not the Lutheran, Anglican, or Presbyterian theology of baptism. That may not take the potentially anticatholic sting out of the Baptist position, but it at least serves to understand the position in its own proper context.

All of these considerations leave us with the fundamental question: what constitutes the criteria for genuine catholicity? To put the matter differently, what constitutes the unity of the church across spatial, temporal, and denominational lines? While *catholicity* is distinct from *unity* in the four *notae ecclesiae* confessed in the Nicene Creed, there is a sense in which catholicity is simply unity worked “through the whole” (Greek, *katholikos*: *kata*, “through”; and *holos*, “the whole”). As we have seen, Baptists have good reasons not to see baptism as the *sine qua non* of catholicity, precisely because we wish to affirm the faith of Christians who, we believe, have not been biblically baptized. So, on Baptist terms, the criteria must lie elsewhere. The other candidates for catholic criteria should be obvious: a common faith and life in Jesus Christ as the head of the body, a commitment to Holy Scripture, a commitment to Christian orthodoxy expressed in the ecumenical creeds and councils, a principled attempt to administer the sacraments according to the Lord's command (even if there remain principled disagreements about these attempts), and the common worship of the Triune God.

Non-Baptists may complain that these criteria are insufficient because they remain only at the invisible level and do not move toward any kind of visible unity. In response, I would, first of all, take issue with the notion that a common profession of faith, common scriptural and creedal commitments, and a common worship are merely invisible. Every time a visible Baptist church gathers to “read, hear, and mark” the Sacred Scriptures, to administer baptism, to observe the Lord's Supper, to sing the praises of the Triune God, and to confess the faith once delivered—all of which practices we share in common with other Christian traditions—we are bearing witness to the world, to the church on earth, to the glorified saints in heaven, to all the



heavenly hosts, and to the principalities and powers that we stand in solidarity with all who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is true enough that denying the validity of infant baptism poses a potential roadblock to visible catholicity, but there may be other means of demonstrating visible solidarity with other communions besides open church membership and (or) open communion (which again are the practical implications of denying the validity of infant baptism). Our churches can accept what the older Baptist theologians called “alien immersion,” that is, the immersion of a believer in a non-Baptist church, thus validating the non-Baptist church as a true church (despite their disordered practice on other “baptisms”). We can engage in “pulpit swaps,” inviting non-Baptist ministers to preach on occasion in Baptist churches, thus validating their gospel ministries. We can pray publicly for other churches and their ministries in our worship services. Indeed, we can participate in joint-worship services on occasion. We can be engaged in ecumenical dialogues with other communions. We can partner with non-Baptist churches in certain evangelistic endeavors or social works. In these and other ways, we can express our unity with all true believers and all true churches. For the Baptist, these are the most meaningful criteria for genuine catholicity.

### **Catholic Credobaptism?**

Despite our distinctive rejection of infant baptism, there is much in a Baptist theology of baptism that we share in common with other Christian communions. It is often noted that Baptists are not the only ones who practice believer’s baptism. All Christian churches baptize first-generation converts upon their profession of faith in Jesus Christ. The question of mode arises in this context since most Western paedobaptist churches baptize by effusion or pouring, but it is not unheard of for some paedobaptist churches to practice immersion as well if the believer requests it. And there is some debate among Baptists as to whether or not the mode is essential to a valid baptism. Still, the most common (so far as I can tell) and the most consistent Baptist position on baptism places several demands on a biblically valid baptism:

*Proper subject:* Only one who can give a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is a proper candidate for baptism. Infants and small children are the recipients of God’s love and are certainly open to God’s work in their hearts and lives in whatever ways are appropriate to their stage of development. But baptism in the Baptist tradition functions analogously (though not exactly) to confirmation in other traditions. So, the confirming rite of baptism is withheld, not because Baptists believe God only works in the rationally mature, but because baptism is seen, once again *in the Baptist tradition*, as initiation into the life of willing faith. While the infant children of believers are “sanctified” in virtue of the privilege they enjoy in being raised by at least one Christian parent, that fact alone does not qualify them



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for baptism any more than a “sanctified” unbelieving spouse of a Christian qualifies the unbeliever for baptism (1 Cor 7:14). Yes, Baptists can “talk to their babies” and teach them to pray and catechize them in the faith, but the confirming right of baptism, which signals initiation into the New Covenant community, sealed in Christ’s blood, awaits a willing faith.<sup>10</sup>

*Proper mode:* Baptism means immersion. In the Great Commission, Jesus did not say, “Do something with water to some persons.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, he commanded the apostles to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing (immersing) them” into the Triune name. Again, some Baptist churches may be willing to adjust to other modes of baptism, provided the other criteria are met, but the most biblically consistent position seems to demand immersion as the only proper mode. But even Calvin was forced to admit that immersion was the practice of the primitive church.<sup>12</sup> The early Christian document, *The Didache*, allowed for other modes in certain contingencies, but the preferred mode was immersion.<sup>13</sup>

*Proper administrator:* The church administering baptism also matters for a valid baptism. Baptism is a church ordinance. It is not merely a matter of personal, private profession. The administering church must be of sufficiently similar faith and practice. Here, the church’s theology of baptism becomes important. If baptism is seen by the baptizing church and the baptizand (the one being baptized) as regenerative (as in the Roman Catholic Church) or as absolutely necessary for justification (as in some Restorationist churches), then the purported baptism was not undertaken according to the Lord’s ordinance and is therefore invalid.

This is an admittedly “thick” description of what constitutes a biblically valid baptism. Other traditions content themselves with a relatively thinner demand for baptism: water, administered by whatever mode and by whatever Christian church in the Triune name, constitutes a valid baptism. Other criteria may be seen as improving upon the best *use* of baptism, but its essence is fixed by simpler demand. In this way, Baptists seem hopelessly out of step with the catholic tradition of baptism. But there

10. The supposed inconsistency of Baptist parents “talking to their babies” is spelled out in Peter J. Leithart, *The Baptized Body* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2007), 9-11.

11. I am borrowing this way of phrasing what Jesus did not say from a special address given by Russell D. Moore when I was a student the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

12. Still, Calvin himself found the mode of baptism to be of no real consequence and therefore variable based upon national custom. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1:4.15.19.

13. And the most preferred mode was baptism in “living,” that is, running water, following the example of Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan River.

are aspects of the Baptist position do evince a more “catholic” practice. We note three in particular.<sup>14</sup>

First, believers’ baptism by immersion has precedent in the earliest centuries. Admittedly, arguments from the baptismal practices of the first several centuries are notoriously difficult to make with certainty.<sup>15</sup> Both sides of this debate cite evidence from the early church. In the second century, Tertullian famously denied the validity of infant baptism, but his opposition to it obviously assumes that the practice was not unheard of. Still, it was a common practice for many in the earliest centuries to delay baptism until adulthood (likely owing to the belief that post-baptismal sin placed one in a graver position with regard to salvation). Infant baptism was practiced, often in emergency situations, but it was not universal. For the Baptist, this mixed historical evidence, at the very least, calls into question the assumption that infant baptism was of apostolic origin and was practiced in unbroken continuity with the New Testament from the earliest centuries. It seems that the practice of infant baptism was more developmental, arising perhaps from the contingency of children dying in infancy coupled with a growing belief in baptismal regeneration, which taken together made the baptism of infants a necessity to ensure their salvation.<sup>16</sup> If infant baptism was an apostolic demand, then why did it take the church so long to universalize it? If Baptists are to be accused of arguing for a “Constantinian Fall” of the church from its New Testament origins, then paedobaptists must own up to a similar kind of fall from the first-century practice of infant baptism. The paedobaptist argument must run something like this: the apostles practiced infant baptism as an extension of the pattern of circumcision, but many churches in the early centuries fell from this practice, and it took them several centuries to finally return the apostolic demand. Perhaps this paedobaptist story is a true one, but it is no more historically transparent than the Baptist one. In any event, and at the risk of begging the question, Baptists believe that their practice is grounded in the New Testament itself, which is the deepest root of any claims to catholicity. The Baptist argument from early Christian history is not water-tight, but it is at least a defensible one and one that would give Baptists, arguably, a better claim to the evidence closest to the New Testament era. Thus, no Protestant should dismiss out of hand the possibility that the Baptist position, like the Reformation arguments for a more biblical soteriology, is actually a return to catholic practice from the church’s infancy.

14. For a fuller historical defense of some of these affinities, see Matthew Y. Emerson, “Baptists, Baptism, and the Christian Tradition,” in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, ed. Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, eds. (Nashville: B&H Academic, forthcoming 2020).

15. On the history, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptist in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

16. Ferguson cites the conclusion of Mark Searle approvingly: “The fact is that ‘we cannot give the name of anyone before the fourth century not in an emergency situation who was baptized as an infant.’” Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 379.

Second, it should be noted that the seventeenth-century Particular Baptist position on baptism grew organically out of a Reformed understanding of the sacraments. The question of Baptist origins is a disputed one, but the best historical evidence suggests that there were actually two origin stories, not one: the rise of the so-called General Baptists in the early seventeenth century under the leadership of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, with possible ties to the continental Anabaptists, and the rise of the so-called Particular Baptist, emerging from mid-seventeenth-century Congregationalism.<sup>17</sup> The recent work of historian Matthew Bingham is among the best to-date on the emergence of this second category of Baptists.<sup>18</sup> Bingham's central thesis is this group has been anachronistically mislabeled "Baptist," as if there were an already existing pan-Baptist movement at the time (including the so-called General Baptists which had emerged earlier in the century) to which Separatists could naturally join themselves, and that this mislabeling in the historiography of Baptist origins has obscured the theological logic that led many Congregationalists to a rejection of infant baptism. Instead, Bingham argues that the groups we normally identify as "Particular Baptist" at mid-century are better termed "baptistic congregationalists."<sup>19</sup>

This reconceptualizing of the identity of the baptistic Separatists in question helps to illuminate how the logic of congregationalism—a non-national understanding of the church as comprised of local congregations of visible saints—led some congregationalists to the conclusion that baptism was to be reserved only for those who could attest to saving faith in Christ. The Reformed arguments for infant baptism made the church *de jure* (not merely *de facto*, as all would have admitted) a mixed community, made up of both the elect and some who may in time prove themselves not to be regenerate.

Bingham's discussion of the theological genealogy of the baptistic position is particularly insightful.<sup>20</sup> The story runs roughly as follows: The Reformers' rejection of the *ex opere operato* understanding of baptism as guaranteeing regeneration, coupled with their retention of infant baptism, necessitated an understanding of the church as, in principle, a mixed community. Some may be Christians merely externally and federally but not internally and savingly. The Congregationalists eventually came to reject this mixed understanding of the church, and the national church they believed it underwrote. According to the Congregationalists, the visible church is not to be identified with any national church but only with local congregations of visible, that is, internal, Christians. But, importantly, they did not reject the practice

17. On Baptist origins, see Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 11-35.

18. Matthew C. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

19. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals*, 84.

20. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals*, 62-89.

of infant baptism. But this position proved to be unstable, as the Half-Way Covenant controversy demonstrated (in this dispute, the question was whether or not infant-baptized nonchurch members could present their children for baptism). The Baptists, or baptistic congregationalists, simply carried the logic of congregationalism to its necessary conclusion: if the church is made up of visible saints and if baptism is the entryway into the church, then baptism is only rightly administered to those who give credible evidence of conversion. It was not some kind of radical biblicism that led to this conclusion, but instead the logic of congregationalism and, arguably, of Reformed theology itself—at least in terms of its rejection of the late medieval understanding of baptismal regeneration.

It is worth noting how these seventeenth-century developments might map onto or inform contemporary debates about the subjects of baptism. Defenses of infant baptism both among members of the established church and among the Presbyterian churches in the seventeenth century assumed the rectitude of some kind of national church. It was not just the Erastians who conceived of English Christendom in these terms (note, for example, the original statement on the civil magistrate in the Westminster Confession of Faith that was revised in an American context). So, one question a contemporary Baptist might pose to, say, Presbyterians in a modern, pluralistic society is this: what becomes of the defense of infant baptism when the notion of a national church is no longer a reality? Some might be tempted to repristinate a sort of “Christian nation” ideal, especially given recent conversations about the so-called end of liberalism. But others might balk at this suggestion and argue instead that a national church was never a necessary component of infant baptism. Paedobaptists might simply argue their covenantal case for infant baptism based on the continuity of the Abrahamic covenant with the New Covenant, admitting that the church is a society separate and distinct from any nation-state. They might further acknowledge the legitimacy of at least part of the “visible saints” ideal of Congregationalism (in either its paedobaptistic or baptistic forms) by means of church discipline. The children of believers are admitted into the membership of the church, but excommunication might still await some of those members, if they prove in their mature years to have denied the faith in doctrine or practice. Whatever we make of the coherence of such a defense of infant baptism, it still must be acknowledged that this precise argument—a denial of the national church and pursuit of a pure church, at least among adults—does not map neatly onto the seventeenth-century defenses of infant baptism in an English context. In other words, we’re all Baptists now.

Further, this development of the Baptist position from within Reformed orthodoxy demonstrates that these sacramental maneuvers are not entirely out of step with a kind of Reformed catholicity. Despite our dissent on the practice of infant baptism, the Baptist position is noticeably Protestant and even Reformed, in a sense. While the magisterial Reformers retained the practice of infant baptism, their theologies of baptism were not entirely consistent with those that came before them.

In short, Baptists have as much of a claim to catholicity on this front as any other Protestant demurring from medieval notions of baptismal regeneration.

A third and final aspect of the Baptist position that stands in continuity with the catholic tradition involves the close connection between baptism and conversion. While contemporary Baptist theology often treats baptism as a mere symbol or sign of the believer's profession of faith, from the beginning, it was not so. Many of the earliest Baptists held to a much stronger sacramental understanding of baptism, seeing it as a seal (not merely a sign) of regeneration and union with Christ.<sup>21</sup> At the very least, baptism is, for all Baptists, a part of the complex of events involved in one's conversion to Christ.<sup>22</sup> So the close connection between baptism and initiation into the life of faith, into the converted life, is preserved. Baptists, with the broader tradition, can readily admit that baptism is closely connected to the remission of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38); the washing away of sins (Acts 22:16); identification with Christ's death, burial and resurrection (Rom 6:3-4); incorporation into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13); and, indeed, salvation itself (1 Pet 3:21). If anything, it is those contemporary paedobaptist traditions that tend to sever baptism from conversion—that treat baptism as merely promissory in lieu of future faith—that seem out of step with catholic practice. In a sense, those paedobaptist traditions that explicitly teach the baptismal regeneration of infants—be they Lutheran, Anglican, or whatever—are more in line with the teaching of the New Testament than those who treat baptism as something more like a “wet dedication” of the infant into the covenantal promises given to the church.

Relatedly, Baptists also stand in continuity with the broader catholic tradition on the relationship between baptism and the Lord's Supper. The most consistent Baptist position maintains, with the broader tradition, that baptism is a prerequisite to church membership and participation at the Lord's Table. The only debated question is when baptism is to be administered (not a small debate, admittedly). But on the order of things, Baptists are in full agreement with the Christian tradition: baptism into church membership and then participation at the Table.

### **Credobaptist Reception of Infant Baptism**

But an important question remains for the prospects of a credobaptist catholicity: How are Baptist churches to assess the practice of infant baptism on the ground,

21. Again, see Fowler, *More than a Symbol*. Also see the essays on the sacraments in the two volumes from Cross and Thompson, *Baptist Sacramentalism*.

22. Commenting on baptism in Luke-Acts, Bob Stein writes, “When [Luke] refers to Christian baptism in Acts (and in his Gospel as well), he describes the experience of baptism as it is related to the process of becoming a Christian.” Baptism, along with faith, repentance, confession, and so on, was one of the “integral parts of the experience of becoming a Christian.” Robert H. Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” in *Believers' Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 36.

as it were, at the level of the local church? Is infant baptism merely a man-made aberration that possesses no validity or meaning? Is it a disordered but somehow still valid practice? Or is it something in between? There is a diversity of practice on these questions among Baptists. The possible positions can be summarized in tabular format.

<b>Position on Infant Baptism</b>	<b>Church Membership?</b>	<b>Communion?</b>
Invalid	Closed	Close
Irregular but Valid	Open	Open
Irregular but Acceptable	Open, under certain conditions	Open, under certain conditions
Invalid but Meaningful	Closed	Open, under certain conditions

According to the first position, infant baptism is invalid in that it cannot be accepted as a condition for membership into a Baptist church or for participation in the Lord's Supper. The person seeking membership into the church would need to be rebaptized (technically a misnomer, since on the terms of this position, it would be the first biblically administered baptism) in order to become a member of the church and participate in the Lord's Supper. Likewise, a visitor to a Baptist church that holds this position would be instructed in the fencing of the Table that only those who have been baptized as believers are welcome to the Table. Communion, in this scenario, is not necessarily closed to nonchurch members, but it is practiced in a close manner, welcoming only those visitors who have been baptized as believers in churches of similar faith and practice. This is the position of the Baptist Faith and Message (BFM) of the Southern Baptist Convention: "Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper."<sup>23</sup> The strength of this view is its consistency, both within the Baptist system of beliefs and with the catholic practice of requiring baptism for church membership and communion. A potential weakness is its exclusion of true believers from the Lord's Table and its possible sectarian implications.

According to the second position, infant baptism is irregular in that it fails in some important ways to match the pattern of the New Testament (as infant baptism would), but it may nonetheless be viewed as a *valid* baptism for the purposes of church membership and communion. This view would accept any Trinitarian baptism as valid, even if the church itself would only practice believers' baptism. This view

23. Baptist Faith and Message (2000). <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>

also practices *open* communion, extending the invitation to the Table to all believers present. This is the position of Baptist theologians such as Curtis Freeman and Steven Harmon. Freeman describes the position as follows: “Other Baptists are prepared to see infant baptism as a form of baptism derived from the norm of believer’s baptism, while only practicing the normative form in their own communities.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Harmon argues that the church’s “pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future must involve mutual recognition of one another’s baptisms, for not to recognize a person’s baptism ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (Matt 28:19) is to deny Christ as that person’s identity.”<sup>25</sup> The strength of this position is that it completely removes the potential barrier to catholicity that rejecting infant baptism constructs, and it does so without diminishing the significance of the sacrament. But its weakness is that it may give away too much; if infant baptism is perfectly valid, then what remains of the Baptist opposition to it?

On the third position, baptism is be seen as irregular but still acceptable as a prerequisite for church membership if the infant baptized person has a deeply held conviction that the baptism is valid. Some kind of water baptism is still required: a nonbaptized Quaker or member of the Salvation Army, for example, might still be excluded. But since baptism, in this view, is not a primary doctrinal issue, convictional differences about the subjects and mode of baptism should be permitted within the local church. The church itself may only practice believers’ baptism, but it may accept other baptisms as the congregation and pastor(s) permit. Such churches would also naturally practice open communion, fencing the Table in such a way that all believers who have been baptized according to their own personal convictions are welcome. This view is only distinguished from the previous view by its hesitancy to accept as fully valid the practice of infant baptism and in that it qualifies its acceptance within narrower limits. This appears to be the position of the John Bunyan and the one proposed by John Piper.<sup>26</sup> The strength of this position, like the second position, is that it removes the barrier to church membership that a stricter Baptist position retains. Its weakness is that it tends to diminish the significance of the sacraments for the sake of unity. It seems to communicate, against the grain of the Christian tradition, that baptism is not all that important.

In the final position, a baptism may be seen as invalid and, therefore, unacceptable as a prerequisite for church membership, but it may still be granted a certain kind of meaningful status by some Baptist churches. At first glance, this view may seem indistinguishable from the first, since it denies the validity of infant baptism and

24. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 373.

25. Harmon, *Baptist Identity*, 238-39.

26. John Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment about Water-Baptism No Bar to Communion* (n.p., 1672). The proposal of Piper and his fellow elders in defense of this position was eventually voted down by his church, but the proposal can be accessed here: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/baptism-and-church-membership-the-recommendation-from-the-elders-for-amending-bethlehems-constitution>



would make believers' baptism prerequisite to membership. But there are two crucial differences. The first difference is more pastoral in nature. Suppose an infant baptized Christian seeks membership in such a Baptist church. What will be communicated to the potential member concerning his or her infant baptism? Perhaps the pastor would say something like this: "I appreciate that your baptism holds great significance for you. Our church understands the reasons your parents brought you forward for baptism as an infant. A similar (though not identical) impulse is what leads many of our churches to solemnly dedicate our children to the Lord after their birth. We respect the biblical and theological reasons why your church extended the covenant sign to you. But we have our own biblical and theological reasons for viewing baptism, not only as a sign and seal of God's covenantal promises (which we gladly affirm!) but also as a profession of faith on the part of the recipient of baptism. That is why we only practice believers' baptism here, and it is why we require all members to be biblically baptized. We understand that this position may be a bar to your joining our church, and we will gladly recommend some biblically faithful paedobaptist churches in the area and send you with our blessings if your conscience does not permit you to submit to our church's practice. We respect the many Christians across space and time who have been baptized as infants too much simply to dismiss infant baptism as something utterly meaningless, but we hold with conviction that baptism means the immersion of a believer upon profession of his or her faith."

To be sure, there is nothing keeping a pastor who holds the first position from offering counsel such as this, but this final position more deliberately wishes to affirm that infant baptism expresses something meaningful for the individual Christian, their parents, and their churches. How else is the Baptist to grapple with the reality that, on our own position, most of the Christians throughout space and time have not been baptized? All Baptists who deny the validity of infant baptism must bite this bullet, so to speak. But we do so acknowledging the potential difficulty that it creates for Baptist catholicity, and we seek to mitigate that difficulty by expressing respect for the position. Now, for many, this may seem like a hollow gesture since infant baptism is still rejected. But all ecumenical dialogue must proceed along similar lines: catholicity does not erase important theological differences, but it provides the field for discussing them in a context of mutual love and respect.

Baptists who hold a position like this might even consider infant baptism as a kind of "baptism of desire." Admittedly, the analogy is not perfect. In Roman Catholic teaching, this category describes those who stand outside of the Christian faith but who may still be included in Christ's saving work by responding with faith to the revelation they have.<sup>27</sup> Most biblically faithful Baptists will not wish to espouse such

27. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it: "Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity."

an inclusivist view for those outside the faith, but we might still speak of a kind of Trinitarian inclusivism within the various Christian denominations. Believers who have not been baptized as believers because they hold their infant baptisms to be valid are not deliberately disobeying the Lord's command to be baptized. They are not, again, like the Quakers or the Salvation Army, refusing water baptism altogether. They just have a conscientious difference of biblical interpretation on what constitutes a valid baptism. But if they continue steadfast in the faith, owning their own faith when they are of age (perhaps solemnized through some kind of confirmation and first communion), then they too will be the recipients of the benefits of baptism without having been baptized in reality. But the faith and order of the Baptist church would not allow it to extend church membership to such persons unless they were willing to supplement their previous confirmation with believers' baptism.

A second crucial difference between the first and fourth positions concerns Communion. I take it that any Baptist churches who would go out of their way to affirm the meaningfulness of infant baptism would also be willing to extend the Lord's Table to all believers who have been "baptized" according to their own convictions. This admittedly involves a kind cost-benefit analysis on the part of Baptist churches. Do we preserve the catholic practice of requiring baptism as a prerequisite to the Lord's Table? Or do we seek to express more faithfully the meaning of the Lord's Supper, which is, in part, the unity of the Body of Christ, that is, of all true believers? The first position leans more on the first question, fencing the Table from all who have not been biblically baptized. The fourth position leans more on the second, acknowledging that the requirements for membership in a Baptist church are somewhat stricter than those for welcoming visitors to the Lord's Table. Well-meaning Baptists can disagree on this issue.<sup>28</sup> But the open communion view does seem to mitigate against the stricter lines drawn by the first view. In any event, even the first view need not surrender all claims to catholicity. As we have already pointed out, other traditions fence the Table from certain believers, and this need not undermine other expressions of the church's catholicity.

## Conclusion

Can Baptists be catholic? This question is very close to the question: can Baptists be Christians? Can we be members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church? In one sense, the sheer existence of the Baptist movement, its persistence across the last four centuries, and its contemporary vibrancy all point to an affirmative response to these questions. At the risk of sounding rude, we might reply, "We're here, and we

28. While the BFM maintains the "close communion" view, it is interesting to note that most SBC pastors espouse a more open communion position. Carol Pipes, "Lord's Supper: Lifeway Surveys Churches' Practices, Frequency," Baptist Press, September 17, 2012. <http://www.bpnews.net/38730>

are not going away.” A reply like that need not be said in defiance. It is more of a plea. We are Christians. We seek to follow the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Son of God. We believe in the inspiration and infallibility of Holy Scripture. We affirm the cardinal doctrines of the faith expressed in the ecumenical creeds and councils. We seek, however fallibly, to organize our churches and regulate our worship according to the Lord’s ordinance. We seek by the power of the Holy Spirit to live holy lives, to love and serve our neighbors, and to evangelize the nations with the good news of Jesus Christ. And, importantly, many of us wish to be in solidarity with other Christian traditions, to find a way to retain our deeply held Baptist convictions but also to be united to the broader body of Christ and to draw on its rich resources. The real question, then, is simply this: will you have us?

The retort will likely be, “Well, you don’t accept *us*, because you deny the validity of our baptisms!” But this article has attempted to lay out what counts as the criteria for catholicity within the Baptist vision, the important resonances between the Baptist position on baptism and the broader tradition, and the possible paths forward for Baptists who wish to be united with other Christian traditions. No doubt, many Baptists and non-Baptists alike will not be content with many of these proposals. The denial of infant baptism may remain a thorn in the side of Baptist catholicity until the Lord returns. We believe that our position on baptism is a great strength of our movement, sensitive as it is to the shape of the biblical covenants and the pattern of baptism in the New Testament. Obviously, our paedobaptist brothers and sisters will see it as a great weakness and as a potential impediment to unity. But the weak and the strong have certain mutual obligations to one another, as the apostle teaches. And all of us on this side of that great day, when the whole church will be one even as the Divine Persons are one, can hope in God’s promise, despite our ecumenical weaknesses: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).