

BAPTISM, THE LORD'S SUPPER, AND SOUTHERN BAPTISTS: SOME OPTIONS

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Introduction

One of the issues I am burdened about is the lack of precision—and sometimes accuracy itself—in our intramural debates as Southern Baptists. Unfortunately, when we talk about controversial topics we often resort to inflammatory or derogatory language. Southern Baptists are currently engaged in some vigorous debates about a variety of matters. One of those debates concerns the relationship between baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership.

Southern Baptists are clearly divided in their views of the ordinances. Much has been written about this topic over the last few years in monographs, essays, blog posts, state Baptist papers, and seminary periodicals. Several conferences have addressed these matters, both directly and indirectly. In some of these venues, particularly the more popular ones, some terms have been used that are either ambiguous or reflect more heat than light. Consider the examples below.

- *Baptist Identity.* In my opinion the phrase “Baptist identity” is of limited usefulness. Every Southern Baptist possesses a Baptist identity, even if we quibble over some of the details within our common convictions, like the ordinances. The argument is not really about figuring out who is a Baptist and who is not a Baptist. The argument is over who is the “best” Baptist, that is to say, the Baptist whose views and practices best match with the biblical witness.
- *Neo-Landmarkism.* I think the term “Neo-Landmarkism,” is even less helpful. First, it is often used in an effort to discredit others. This is because most Southern Baptists have been taught, for better or worse, that any type of “Landmarkism” is probably a bad thing. Second, I am not sure how someone can be a “neo-Landmarker” (literally “new Landmarker”), unless of course that individual has recently embraced Landmark views. But I suspect this is not what the term is meant to convey. Rather, it seems meant to imply that “neo-Landmarkers” are Trojan horses, if you will, filled with Landmark convictions that will be turned loose and overthrow the city as soon as we let down our guard. The bottom line is this: either one is a Landmarker or he is not Landmarker, period.
- *Ecumenical.* Folks with a differing perspective than those who use the above two terms have used the word “ecumenical” quite a bit, often in phrases like “evangelical ecumenism.” I confess that a couple of years ago I used this type of language myself. But I have come to the conclusion that these terms are also unhelpful, at least in popular discussions. First, when most people hear the word “ecumenical” they tend to think more about the mainline ecumenical movement than mere interdenominational cooperation. I do not think there are too many Southern Baptists who get excited about the National Council of Churches or even groups like Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Second, because of this association, “ecumenical” takes on the same character as “neo-Landmark”; the descriptor itself casts aspersions on the one to whom it is being applied.

In an effort to try and facilitate greater accuracy when we debate baptism and the Lord's Supper, I offer the following taxonomy. As with all taxonomies, it is admittedly general. But I still think most Southern Baptists embrace one of the following four options when it comes to their respective practices concerning baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership.

What follows is not a theological or even historical argument for any of these positions, though I will share my convictions. For those who might be interested in this topic, I do list a number of historical and polemical works in the "For Further Reading" section at the end of the paper. This paper is intended to be a tool to facilitate greater understanding among all Southern Baptists as we engage others in our Convention who may hold to a view of the ordinances and church membership that differs from our own.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper: Four Options

Option 1: Some Southern Baptists are Landmarkers who practice closed communion and closed membership.

Besides a commitment to basic Christian orthodoxy, most convictional Baptists hold to specific ecclesiological distinctives like a commitment to a regenerate church membership, believer's baptism by immersion, congregational church polity, local church autonomy, and liberty of conscience. Landmarkism is the belief that only Baptist churches are true churches and that there have always been churches that held to the above Baptist distinctives from the time of Christ to the present. While some Southern Baptists are Landmarkers, not all Landmarkers are Southern Baptist.

Landmarkers agree with the so-called "Reformation" definition of the church: a true church is where the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments (or ordinances) are rightly administered. But because Landmarkers are convinced Baptists, they believe that this definition necessitates that only Baptist churches are true churches, even if the church in question does not self-identify as a Baptist congregation. (In this case the name "Baptist" is more a description of churches that adhere to Baptist distinctives than it is a denominational label.)

This position is nothing if not logical. All theologically convinced Baptists believe that pedobaptism is not a right administration of the ordinance of baptism. According to the reformers, true churches are only found where the ordinances are rightly administered. Thus, only Baptist (or baptistic) churches are true churches. To say it another way, if a Baptist agrees with the reformers' definition of a true church, then in order to be logically consistent he must be a Landmarker because he disagrees with the reformers' view of baptism!

I tend to agree with those scholars who argue that Landmarkism is a Baptist "high church" movement, not in worship style, but in ecclesiology. Just as Catholics and many Anglicans believe that spiritual authority is passed through the apostolic succession of bishops, so Landmarkers argue that spiritual authority is passed through New Testament (baptistic) ecclesiology. There is no spiritual authority in non-Baptist churches because they are not following New Testament ecclesiology. Though such congregations may be vibrant spiritual communities that include many true believers, because of their aberrant ecclesiology non-Baptist churches are not true churches.

From the belief that only Baptist churches are true churches, Landmarkers derive many subsidiary convictions. Most relevant to this discussion, Landmarkers believe that only Baptist administration of the ordinances is valid. Non-Baptist baptismal practices, including both infant sprinkling and various types of erroneous immersions, are rejected as alien to the New Testament witness. Communing with

other types of believers at the Lord's Table is rejected because non-Baptist Christians have not been properly baptized and baptism is understood to be prerequisite to the Lord's Supper. This position, called closed communion, will be discussed in detail under the next option.

In addition, Landmark presuppositions often lead to other ecclesiological convictions. Most Landmarkers argue that non-Baptist ordination is invalid because ordination, like baptism and the Lord's Supper, is a churchly act that must be administered by a true church. Baptists should not invite non-Baptists to preach to their congregations (and vice versa) and interdenominational cooperation should be nonexistent or at least rare and heavily regulated. Landmarkers argue that "pulpit affiliation" and interdenominational events gives at least implicit approval to non-Baptist ecclesiology.

For Landmarkers, the church local is emphasized to the virtual (and sometimes outright) exclusion of the church universal. Some Landmarkers have argued that God's kingdom is more or less the aggregate of all the baptistic churches in the world. While this view appears to be uncommon, there are many Landmarkers who argue that there is no universal church, at least not as a present reality. All of the Landmarkers I know do believe there will be an eschatological universal assembly (Greek: *ekklesia*) at which time all the redeemed of all time are present together at the end of the age.

It is important to understand that almost every one of the above convictions can be found among non-Landmark Baptists. Furthermore, each of these beliefs predates Landmarkism and has been present among many Baptists in both England and North America since the inception of our movement in the early seventeenth century. Landmarkism invented no new doctrines, but rather provided a coherent system that united a number of beliefs that were already present among many Baptists.

What makes a Landmarker unique is that he ties all of the above practices to his conviction that only baptistic churches are true churches. While many Baptists argue that non-Baptist churches have departed from the New Testament pattern in terms of their ecclesiology, only Landmark Baptists argue that the presence of non-Baptist convictions "de-churches" a religious body.

For the sake of clarity, it is crucial to understand that *any Baptist who rejects the conviction that only Baptist churches are true churches is not a Landmarker, regardless of what his particular convictions are regarding the above practices*. To say it another way, the "high church" ecclesiology described above is the *sine qua non* of Landmarkism, not any particular practice. Again, the practices predate the system, and most who embrace the practices do not adhere to the system.

While there are some Landmarkers in the SBC, it seems apparent that there are not nearly as many as there were even a couple of generations ago. While I suspect there are Landmarkers in every state, the movement remains strong only in a few pockets, including parts of the Southwest, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Kentucky. There are very few well-known Southern Baptist pastors who are Landmarkers and even fewer Southern Baptist scholars who are Landmarkers. I can count the ones of whom I am aware on two hands. While Landmarkism is present among us, it is a relatively insignificant movement in the broader SBC and has minimal influence outside of the specific regions where it is strong.

Option 2: Some non-Landmark Southern Baptists practice both closed membership and closed communion.

It would surprise some to know that the *overwhelming* majority of Southern Baptists who practice both closed membership and closed communion are non-Landmark. To go back a bit further, the vast majority of English Baptists before the mid-1800s, American (Northern) Baptists before the late-1800s, and Southern Baptists before the 1960s or so were non-Landmark Baptists that held to closed

membership and closed communion. The history alone does not make this position correct—we should make our ecclesiological arguments from Scripture, not history—but this is the historically dominant paradigm among English-speaking Baptists.

Closed membership is the conviction that believer's baptism by immersion is a prerequisite to membership in a local Baptist church. There is admittedly some diversity within this conviction. For example, not every church agrees as to where to draw the line on "alien immersions," or those baptisms that are administered with the proper mode (immersion) but not the proper meaning or administrator. But all closed membership churches agree that no infant-sprinkled believer should be admitted to church membership without first being immersed. Most closed membership churches agree that at least some immersions are not biblical baptisms (e.g. Church of Christ immersions, self-immersions, etc.). Closed membership is practiced by the overwhelming majority of Southern Baptist churches.

Closed communion, which was mentioned above, is the practice of restricting participation in communion to individuals who have been immersed. Other terms for this practice include "close communion," "restricted communion," and "strict communion." There is also some diversity within this camp. For example, some advocates of closed communion restrict communion to members of their local church alone, often for church disciplinary reasons. Others extend communion to visiting members of church of "like faith and order"—other baptistic churches. Still others extend table privileges to any Christian who has been immersed, even if they are currently a member of a pedobaptist church. But all closed communion churches agree that only those who have been immersed are eligible to participate in the Lord's Supper.

A closed membership coupled with a closed communion that is disconnected from Landmark presuppositions has historically been the mainstream practice among Southern Baptists, though I am not convinced that remains the case today. This position on the ordinances is advocated in both the Abstract of Principles and all three editions of the Baptist Faith and Message:

Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord Jesus, obligatory upon every believer, wherein he is immersed in water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, as a sign of his fellowship with the death and resurrection of Christ, of remission of sins, and of his giving himself up to God, to live and walk in newness of life. *It is prerequisite to church fellowship, and to participation in the Lord's Supper* (Abstract of Principles, Article XV: Baptism, emphasis added).

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. *Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper* (Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article VII: The Church, emphasis added).

In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that these statements reflect my personal convictions about the relationship between the two ordinances and church membership. I reject Landmarkism, but I strongly affirm closed membership and closed communion for various exegetical and theological reasons, which I have enunciated elsewhere. (You may consult the "For Further Reading" list at the end of this paper to see where I have addressed my views in greater detail.)

Option 3: There are some Southern Baptists who affirm closed membership, but practice open communion.

There are some Southern Baptists who agree with both of the above positions that church membership should be restricted to those who have been immersed. But some advocates of a closed membership believe that communion privileges should be extended to any Christian, regardless of his baptismal status. This view is normally called open communion. It should be noted that because this approach to communion is restricted to believers alone and not all people, it is not “open” in the fullest sense of the term. Advocates of this practice really affirm a “modified open communion” or a “semi-open communion,” but I will call the practice open communion for the sake of sticking with the most common terminology.

This position was not dominant among the earliest Baptists. In England, though some advocated a closed membership with an open communion off and on from the mid-1600s until the mid-1800s, it was not until the time of Charles Spurgeon that this view became dominant, in part because many of the leading advocates of closed communion at the time were also hyper-Calvinist. But there was enough of an open communion minority that the Second London Confession of 1677/1689 takes a neutral stance on the terms of communion. The Particular Baptists of the era did not want to exclude open communion churches, even though a majority of the congregations practiced closed communion.

Among Baptists in America, Freewill Baptists have almost uniformly practiced closed membership with an open communion. Among non-Arminian Baptists, open communion became popular first among the Baptists in the North, who were considerably more interested in interdenominational cooperation and even denominational mergers than Southern Baptists. By the early 20th century the Northern Baptist Convention had conducted merger talks with both Freewill Baptists and the Disciples of Christ; the latter group was also committed to open communion.

Most Southern Baptists continued to prefer closed communion well into the 20th century, though by the 1960s several associations and state conventions were experiencing controversy over open communion. Some open communion churches were actually disfellowshipped (especially in the Midwest and Southwest), while other open communion congregations were just criticized by their sister churches (especially on the Eastern Seaboard and in the Deep South). Many of the theologically progressive churches that embraced this position later identified with moderate Baptist groups like Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or The Alliance of Baptists. Many open communion churches that were more theologically conservative became Independent Baptists, a group that has often been more inclined to open communion than Southern Baptists.

Over the course of the last generation a closed membership coupled with an open communion has become increasingly popular in the SBC. I suspect it is even the majority practice in many areas. There are probably many reasons for this, some better than others.

Some Baptists just do not think about this issue at all, which becomes an open communion in practice if not conviction. Other Baptists are honestly convinced that open communion is more consistent with Scripture than closed communion. Some Baptist churches, especially among non-Calvinists, desire to be as inclusive as possible in the hope of appealing to spiritual seekers and others who visit the church. Other Baptist churches, especially among Calvinists, wish to commune with other Calvinistic Christians who are not Baptist but who may be visiting a Baptist church. I suspect this is just scratching the surface of why open communion has become so popular.

Anecdotally, I have spent most of my life in Georgia and North Carolina, with a two year sojourn in Kentucky in between. I was raised in a very conservative Southern Baptist church that practiced open communion. My church was not alone; there were no churches in South Georgia with which I was familiar that practiced closed communion. Not one. In fact, I did not think *any* SBC churches practiced closed communion anymore until I began my studies at Southern Seminary. It was there that I became convinced of closed communion.

Though my current local church practices closed communion, since moving to North Carolina it has been my observation that roughly two-thirds of this state's Southern Baptist churches (at least the ones of which I am aware) practice open communion. This includes churches that are theologically conservative and have no ties to moderate groups. It seems at least possible that communion is one doctrine where the Baptist Faith and Message takes a position that is not affirmed by many—maybe even most—of our churches. What this means for the Convention's future remains to be seen.

Option 4: A few Southern Baptists affirm both an open membership and an open communion.

There have always been some Baptist churches that affirm both open membership and open communion. Churches that affirm open membership will allow someone who was sprinkled, but never immersed as a believer, to join the church without undergoing believer's baptism. Open membership churches are still Baptist because they only practice believer's baptism by immersion; they do not sprinkle babies. But open membership churches do not mandate immersion because of their hesitancy to bind the conscience of a sincere believer who is honestly convinced his pedobaptism is valid. As a general rule, churches that practice open membership also practice open communion.

As early as the 1640s there were some "independent" churches that practiced both open membership and open communion. The most famous early proponent of this view was John Bunyan, which is perhaps one reason why both Baptists and Reformed pedobaptists want to claim Bunyan as their own. The Broadmead Church, along with the Bristol Baptist Academy (the first Baptist college in the world), were also characterized by this approach. Despite these examples, open membership remained a very uncommon position among British Baptists until the early 20th century. Today, a majority of British Baptists, particularly those who are part of the Baptist Union, hold to an open membership and open communion.

While I cannot speak to Baptists in the North (I confess I have not studied it), I can say with confidence that this view was virtually unheard of among Southern Baptists until the last third of the 20th century. In North Carolina, for example, at least a dozen of the most theologically progressive churches in the state embraced open membership in the early 1970s. Conservatives attempted to oust these churches from the state convention for this conviction (among other reasons), but the efforts failed because such a move was interpreted as an infringement of local church autonomy. To this day, many moderate Baptist churches practice both open membership and open communion. A number of moderate scholars have advocated this view in print.

Conservative Southern Baptists have only recently shown some interest in this position, though it remains a very small number. A few non-Calvinist SBC churches, particularly those that embraced Willow Creek-style seeker strategies in the 1980s and 1990s, are at least informally open in their membership and communion practices. At least one well-known megachurch with which I am familiar is "openly" open membership.

A few Calvinistic churches have at least made overtures in this direction, most famously the Henderson Hills Church in Oklahoma. John Piper, who is not a Southern Baptist but is popular among many

Calvinistic Southern Baptists, flirted with this position in 2005, though he has not yet led his church to embrace open membership. I know of one Piper-influenced SBC church that has contemplated moving toward an open membership, though to date it has not taken that step.

While this view may continue to attract some proponents, I suspect it will not become too popular among Southern Baptists. It is clearly outside mainstream Southern Baptist practice and is incompatible with our confession of faith. I suspect that most churches that embrace an open membership will eventually do one of two things. Some of them will reject that view in favor of a closed membership, thus aligning with the majority. Others will become frustrated that the majority of Convention churches remain committed to closed membership and will align with other groups that do not take as firm a stance on a closed membership, like the Evangelical Free churches or the Bible Church movement.

Conclusion

This paper has not been written with the intent of persuading anyone to embrace a particular position, though I have made my personal convictions clear. Nor have I attempted very much by way of exegesis or theological argumentation; I leave that for more polemical works. The sole purpose of this paper is informational. It is my desire to help all Southern Baptists, regardless of which of the above options we prefer, to better understand those with whom we differ. This issue will likely continue to be a point of debate in the SBC. It is my hope it does not also become a point of division.

It is my fervent prayer that in these matters—and all of our intradenominational debates—Southern Baptists will model Christ-like courtesy, a vigorous commitment to truth-telling, and an obsession for accuracy. And as we do so, I pray the Lord will allow us to experience the Great Commission Resurgence that is so desperately needed by our churches, our boards, and all of our other ministries.

Wake Forest
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FOR FURTHER READING

John Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment about Water-Baptism, No Bar to Communion; OR, To Communicate with Saints, as Saints, Proved Lawful*, in G. Offer, ed. *The Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 2 (1854; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), pp. 593–616. Argument for open communion and open membership.

John L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), pp. 214–225. Defends closed communion.

Nathan A. Finn, “Baptism as a Prerequisite to the Lord’s Supper,” White Paper published for the Center for Theological Research, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006. Defends closed communion.

Andrew Fuller, “Thoughts on Open Communion, in a Letter to Rev. W. Ward, Missionary at Serampore, dated September 21, 1800,” in Joseph Belcher, ed. *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, vol. 3 (1845; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1988), pp. 503–506. Defends closed communion in response to learning about open communion on the mission field.

Timothy George, “Controversy and Communion: The Limits of Baptist Fellowship from Bunyan to Spurgeon,” in *The Gospel in the World: International Baptist Studies*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, ed. D. W. Bebbington (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK and Waynesville, GA: Paternoster, 2002), pp. 38–58. History of the debate in England; advocates open communion.

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Robert Hall, Jr. *On Terms of Communion; with a Particular View to the Case of the Baptists and Pedobaptists* (Leicester, UK: Thomas Combe, 1816). Defends open communion.

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James E. Tull, *High Church Baptists in the South: The Origin, Nature, and Influence of Landmarkism*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000). History of Landmarkism.

John R. Tyler, *Baptism: We’ve Got it Right and Wrong: What Baptists Must Keep, What We Must Change, and Why* (Macon, GA: Smyth And Helwys, 2003). Defends open communion and open membership.

Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, eds. *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008). Several essays defend closed communion and/or closed membership.

Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, UK; and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005). Defends open communion and open membership.