

Open or Closed Membership?

Introduction:

This is a significant contemporary pastoral issue among us as Scottish Baptists, and one which is far too rarely discussed. It is a subject, however, which we need to address with care, not least because it is one of those issues which somehow arouse unusually strong emotions. This is perhaps not so surprising, as the debate touches on our very identity as Baptist Christians.

1. An historical perspective.

The norm among Scottish Baptists is undoubtedly closed membership, that is, believers' baptism is a condition of membership. My estimate is that only 10% of Scottish Baptist churches practice open membership¹, whereas in the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the number of open membership churches is far higher, between 50%-60%². Clearly, there are historical reasons for this.³ Let me simply sketch out one or two. For example, someone as influential in the seventeenth century English scene as John Bunyan chose to write on this theme. His *Differences in Judgement about water Baptism, no Bar to Communion* (1673) leaves little doubt as to his position on the matter! The controversy particularly featured again among nineteenth century English Baptists and by the end of that century two out of every three of the leading Particular Baptist churches practiced open membership. In the twentieth century, the number of English Baptist churches adopting open membership continued to increase.⁴

Here in Scotland, the early Scotch and Glasite Baptists of the eighteenth century practiced closed membership and, though they were relatively small in number, this seems to have set the tone for all that has followed. There have been notable exceptions, however, the most famous being the influential Haldane brothers, James

¹ This includes Hillhead, Adelaide Place, Morningside, Central, and Coat's Memorial, Paisley, St Andrews, Whyte's Causeway.

² Chris Ellis, *Baptist Worship Today*, a 1996 survey of 1,812 BUGB churches.

³ I am indebted for much of this section to the article by Ken Roxburgh 'Open and Closed Membership Among Scottish Baptists' in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church. Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R.E.O. White* ed. Stanley E Porter and Anthony R. Cross.

⁴ Anthony R. Cross *Baptism and Baptists, Theology and Practice in Twentieth Century Britain*. Paternoster, 2000 p.419

and Robert, who became Baptists (from being Independents) in 1808. From the beginning they advocated that believers' baptism must never be a bar to communion and strongly advocated forbearance towards those of a different persuasion. They wrote 'the moment anything but the knowledge of Christ is made a term of communion, or that any acknowledged disciple of Jesus is refused access to a church, that church is Anti-Christian'. These views did not go unchallenged and provoked a strong riposte from some Scotch Baptists. In the nineteenth century most Scottish Baptist churches continued to practice closed membership, but the voices of a noted minority were again to be heard. For example, the first President of the Baptist Union of Scotland, Rev Jonathan Watson of Cupar entitled his presidential address '*Ecclesiastical Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*', part of which commended open membership.

Much more recently, the issue was discussed fully by the Church Extension Committee of the Baptist Union of Scotland in November 1966 and in a positioning document on *Christian Baptism* by Andrew MacRae the following year. In both cases a policy of closed membership was vigorously upheld. There has been surprising little formal debate on the issue since.

2. Accurately Charting the Contemporary Positions

It is important, before we review the main arguments, to accurately nuance the positions being advocated by churches today. Failure to do so will significantly reduce the credibility of what follows. The following six features of present practice should be noted.

2.1 Although *BUS Declaration of Principle* states that 'Christian baptism is the immersion in water.....' some of our **closed membership** churches (and, of course, all our open membership churches) would firmly state that the actual mode of baptism (by total immersion rather than effusion) is preferable, but secondary to the truth of *believers'* baptism. That is, it is the new birth status of the baptismal candidate rather than the quantity of water employed that is the central Scriptural issue to which we wish to witness. (It is perhaps helpful to recall that our early Anabaptist cousins practiced believers' baptism by effusion.) This is an important issue, not least because the paedobaptist

Church of Scotland at present baptises more *believers* than the Scottish Baptists⁵ and so it is quite probable that baptised believers by effusion will be applying for membership within our churches. I know of one Baptist church that recently baptised by immersion a candidate already baptised *as a believer* but by effusion. Many, including me, would find this an unacceptable act of re-baptism. (Of course, most Baptist churches would themselves practice effusion when medical conditions so dictated.)

- 2.2 Historically, some **closed membership** churches also operated a closed communion; that is only admitting baptised members to share in the Lord's Supper. As far as I am aware, I know of no present closed membership Scottish Baptist Church that also operates closed communion.
- 2.3 Some **open membership** churches admit membership on profession of faith only, and therefore technically require *no form* of baptism for membership. It is perhaps helpful, therefore, to distinguish between a 'weak' form of open membership, where no baptism is required at all, and a 'strong' form of open membership, where some form of baptism is required. *From now on open membership will refer only to the 'strong' form, unless otherwise stated.*
- 2.4 All **open membership** churches guard the witness of believers' baptism by insisting it is the only form of baptism they practice. Some guard it further by stating in their constitution that no-one can stand as an elder or deacon who is not baptised as a believer. All would insist on only calling to the pastorate someone baptised as a believer.
- 2.5 Some **open membership** churches insist that no one raised within the life of the congregation will be able to join the church without being baptised as a believer. In other words, the 'openness' is strictly an act of Christian charity towards other traditions, never carelessness in congregational discipleship.
- 2.6 Some churches practice believers' baptism without any requirement to become a church member. This seems alien to the clear New Testament witness that baptism is, theologically, incorporation into the Body of Christ. Baptism is a 'dying and rising with Christ' which involves, in part, a dying to a form of individualism that deeply characterises our contemporary culture and a rising to a new life of covenanted relationships. If separation of baptism and church

⁵ David F. Wright 'Baptism' in N.M de S. Cameron (Ed) *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1993 p 58.

membership is coupled with open membership, it can lead to the very unhelpful perception that baptism is a highly privatised act.

3. The main arguments

The essential argument for **closed membership** is that, as the New Testament way of joining the Christian church is by baptism ('baptised by one Spirit into one Body, 1 Cor 12:13) and as *believers'* baptism is the generally agreed New Testament mode of baptism, then in order for a church to be faithful to Scripture it must not compromise on this fundamental feature. To admit into full membership those who have been baptised as infants, unhelpfully legitimises to the church at large a form of baptism unknown to the New Testament. Closed membership is a statement of our obedience to Scripture and an attempt to preserve a distinct Baptist identity.

The central argument for **open membership** is that what is crucial for an understanding of the church is that it is a *believers' church*, one where every member has a personal experience of salvation. The mode of baptism must never take precedence over our confession of faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour. As John Bunyan simply put it, 'Christ, not baptism, is the way into the Sheep-fold.' This view, as stated above, is committed to *believers'* baptism as the New Testament mode of baptism, but seeks to respect the conscience of those who consider their infant baptism and subsequent confirmation of faith as a legitimate New Testament equivalent. It is very important to note that open membership *does not mean* a ready acceptance into membership of those who were baptised as infants and later confirmed their faith but who, in reality, at that point of confirmation, had no saving knowledge of Christ as Saviour and Lord.

4. Six important theological considerations.

4.1 In the New Testament, our initiation and incorporation into Jesus Christ involves a whole cluster of events: our repentance from sin and turning to Christ, the reception of the Spirit, water baptism, and admission into the local church. All these elements are vital, even if, in the New Testament accounts, they did not always occur in an exact sequence. It seems to me, therefore, that the 'weak' form of open membership, where no baptism is required at all, is unsustainable in the light of scripture; an 'unbaptised member of the church'

seems a singularly alien concept for the New Testament. We may add that it is a somewhat ironic position for Baptists of all people. George Beasley-Murray referred to it as 'a dismal feature' of our Baptist life!

- 4.2 There can be no doubt that believers' baptism has a theological richness about it which **closed membership** particularly keeps in focus. As the church becomes increasingly an 'alternative' and 'contrast' community in our secular and pagan post-Christian Scotland, believers' baptism as a political and subversive act, renouncing the old gods and declaring union with Christ as Lord, becomes more and more significant. Today's missionary congregations need to be inclusive, but also *distinctive*, and believers' baptism linked to membership is 'the watch at the door'. Open membership churches must guard diligently against losing the trust of this.
- 4.3 As Baptists, we have always sought to respect and offer liberty to others who, with integrity, interpret Scripture in different ways. The reality is that a significant proportion of reformed and biblical Christians in Scotland argue for the legitimacy of infant baptism. (Luther liked to challenge the Anabaptists to say whether they accepted that there had been no Christian baptisms for 1500 years.) What is more, although nearly all scholars would now see New Testament baptism as being *believers baptism*, the practice within the first four centuries was much more diverse than many imagine. Infant baptisms, family baptisms, baptism of believing young children, the dedication of children, believers' baptisms were all features of the post-apostolic times.⁶ The early church seems to have accommodated significant variety. Perhaps we have become too intense about this issue.
- 4.4 It is important to note that what closed and open membership stances are seeking to do is preserve certain truths. However, *in each case the area of concern is different*. In other words it is vital to realise that the closed and open membership positions, though mutually exclusive, *are not actually direct opposites*. The two positions are looking out of slightly different windows. **Closed membership** is primarily seeking to stress that baptism and church membership must always be held together. Membership without believers' baptism is an impoverished way into the church, and believers' baptism

⁶ See David F. Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism? An Enquiry at the End of Christendom*, Paternoster, 2003

without membership is a denial of a vital ecclesial dimension to the ordinance. **Open membership**, on the other hand, is primarily a witness to the need for a *Christ-centred hospitality*; for a gracious openness to a different understanding of baptism among those also found in Jesus Christ. In other words, open membership (in its strong form) is not denying what closed membership is primarily asserting.

- 4.5 The missionary setting of today's church is a crucial perspective in this debate. This has at least two dimensions to it. As more and more folk drift away from the institutional church in Scotland, the number of folk we encounter insisting on the validity of their infant baptism will grow smaller. Increasingly, most folk we will be bringing into membership will be un-churched rather than de-churched, for whom believers' baptism by immersion will be entirely appropriate. On the other hand, with increasing mobility and a decrease in the number of evangelical churches in some areas, it will be true that evangelicals will want to worship with other evangelicals. An open policy allows the Gospel and not the ordinances to be our critical ground for fellowship, without necessarily losing our Baptist identity.
- 4.6 The whole issue of what we mean by church membership is a matter of growing importance. There are many who are in an active committed relationship with the church who see formal membership both unnecessary and unbiblical, whilst many churches suffer from members who are not at all in touch with the life of the Spirit in the church. There are immense issues here for us to re-think, but we must not do this re-imagining without the importance of baptism firmly in view.

5. Some tentative conclusions.

- 5.1 I hope it is very clear from the above that the actual practice of **open membership** varies hugely from a 'weak' form to a very sturdy expression. Not only is this gradation important to note but also the 'strongest' form can, I believe, alleviate many of the fears of those espousing closed membership. When open membership precludes those brought up within the congregation becoming members without believers' baptism; and when it insists that all paedobaptist candidates for church membership have to, at least, be willing to undergo baptismal classes and promise to support the church's believers'

baptism policy, Baptist identity is preserved. This robust form of open membership can, I believe, capture something of ‘the best of both worlds’, guarding our convictions, whilst extending appropriate Christian charity to sister traditions.

- 5.2 Equally, it is important to recognise that closed and open membership are attempting to be guardians of slightly different truths. We could say that both are right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny. *For the three congregations of East Kilbride to adopt different membership policies is not, therefore, to say that they are fundamentally in disagreement.* This surely is a liberating perspective.
- 5.3 I suspect that the issue before us will actually not be the prominent one in the coming years. Who and when we baptise, and how we go about the process of contemporary catechetical instruction, will give us much more immediate concern than whether we admit fellow believers of a different tradition into full membership.

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