

Baptism: A Statement from the Elders of BICF ZGC

March, 2012

Uniqueness of an International Church

An international church is different from the situations in our home countries. In our home countries, individuals may join together with others who share similar viewpoints on most matters of faith and practice. In an international church, we function as a community for all genuine Christians to **gather** for worship, fellowship, teaching, service and ministry, to **grow** in our knowledge of and likeness to Christ, and to **go** out to serve. We focus on the most essential issues of faith and practice, allowing latitude in less essential areas. We need a vigorous faith, adopting rigorous standards of study and interpretation, and yet allowing flexible practice in non-essential matters.

The leadership of an international Christian fellowship must decide, under the Holy Spirit's direction and in an atmosphere of mutual love and respect for the body Christ, what are the essential issues of faith and practice. Beijing International Christian Fellowship has defined essential issues of faith in our statements of "What We Believe: Our Vision Statement," "Our Core Values," and "Our Doctrinal Statement" (all in *Like a Family: BICF ZGC Membership*, pages 12-15). Individual believers may decide if they can accept and commit to the church's statements. We recognize that some Christians may not accept every position of BICF ZGC, but our goal remains to be a community which is open to all genuine believers in Jesus Christ.

Water baptism and Communion (the Lord's Supper) are practiced by almost all Christians. However, our various Christian traditions have different approaches and practices of baptism. This paper will present what we at BICF ZGC consider the biblical meaning and method of baptism.

Symbolic Prefiguring of Baptism in the Old Testament

Baptism was practiced by Jewish preachers, proselytizing among the surrounding nations during the inter-testamental period. Water washing would not be expected to bring about spiritual cleansing, but would symbolize repentance, a change of heart orientation away from sin and towards God. God himself is trusted to perform spiritual cleansing (Ezekiel 36:25).

John's Baptism:

John the Baptizer was the first one to perform baptism in the New Testament. His was a baptism of preparation, not yet Trinitarian Christian baptism. John understood his whole ministry, including his practice of baptism, as an announcement and prefiguring of the Messiah's coming and ministry (Luke 3:16).

Baptism of Jesus:

Jesus, the One whose coming John anticipated, approached John asking to be baptized. John recognized that he had no right to baptize Jesus and tried to prevent Jesus from receiving baptism from him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14). Jesus replied, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (verse 15). Jesus was baptized as our representative, not for His sins (He had none), but for ours. He had no sin for which he needed to repent and receive forgiveness. Rather, he received baptism

as an example for us, his disciples, to show us a life of complete obedience. As soon as he was baptized, the Father spoke His joyful approval of His Son.

Baptism Commanded

Both in Matthew 28 and in Mark 16, Jesus is recorded commanding his disciples to baptize. In both Acts 2 and 10, Peter reiterated Jesus' command. In Paul's defense before a rioting mob in Jerusalem (Acts 21), he reported Ananias' command to him after his conversion experience on the Damascus road. Ananias said, "Now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). All of these commands agree and reinforce one another: for Christians to be fully obedient to Jesus, they must be baptized.

Other Examples of Baptism

As the disciples of Jesus began to carry out his great commission on the Day of Pentecost, they followed his command to baptize (Acts 2:41). As the gospel message was preached and the church expanded, baptism was a part of their practice.

Meaning of baptism

The BICF ZGC elders do not believe baptism can merit salvation. We do believe it is a sign that the individual is committed to the New Covenant in Christ, it is a step of obedience to Christ, and it is necessary for admission into membership in the local church.

In BICF ZGC we see two main meanings in scripture of water baptism for the believer in Jesus. It is the sign of being in the New Covenant, and it symbolizes our identification with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection.

Individuals make a public statement of their faith through water baptism. This practice is a vital part of a new believer's induction into the local church, and is required for formal membership in BICF ZGC. Baptism, then, is the sign by which Christians indicate their commitment to the New Covenant with God (Matthew 28:18).

Baptism also symbolizes the believer's identification with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. When Paul wrote: "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3, 4, see also Colossians 2:12), he was referring to the symbolism of baptism. When believers are baptized by immersion, the water closes over them, and the water covers them, just as, when a dead person is buried, the earth covers the body. Then the believer comes up out of the water just as a dead person returning to life would come up out of a grave.

Modes of baptism

The elders of BICF ZGC have agreed on a preference for baptism by immersion whenever it is practical, but we will not make this a strict requirement for membership.

Who can be baptized?

Scripture requires faith and repentance before baptism (Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, Acts 8:36, and Acts 19:4 & 5). In addition, on the Day of Pentecost, when Peter preached, "those who received

his word" were baptized (Acts 2:41), and when Philip preached the good news to the Samaritans, "they believed Philip," and "they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). Since infants can neither believe nor reject the gospel, they are considered excluded from baptism by scripture. Finally, the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19,20) links making disciples, baptizing, and teaching.

At BICF ZGC we do not practice infant baptism or the baptism of children too young to explain their faith. However, we will not require a believer who has been baptized as an infant to be re-baptized for the purpose of BICF ZGC membership.

When should baptism occur?

From the Day of Pentecost forward baptism occurs very shortly after the candidate has believed and confessed his faith (Acts 2:38 & 41; 8:12, 13, 36 & 38, 9:18; 10:47 & 48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; and 22:16). The post-resurrection biblical practice seems to have been early baptism as a public expression of faith in and commitment to Jesus. Scripture gives no support for a time lag between coming to faith in Christ and choosing to follow him whole heartedly, so there seems to be no reason to delay baptism until candidates are "mature enough" for it.

What about children?

With the consent and encouragement of Christian parents we will carefully consider requests for baptism of a child. The age at which a believer is to be baptized is not directly addressed in Scripture. At what point, then, is a child capable of understanding the gospel, repenting from sin, and savingly trusting in Christ? Again, Scripture gives no specific age limit. The Bible does not provide us with a one-size-fits-all method for handling childhood conversions. We must exercise restraint in making dogmatic assertions regarding the "proper age" for baptism. It's wisdom we are after, not uniformity. Faithful parents will have differing opinions in this important area.

A deacon once said, "If your child still believes in Santa, he's probably too young for you to know just what he believes about Jesus." God intends children to be pliable as they live as dependents in the home, being trained in all the basics of life and faith. This is a gift from God to help bring them to maturity. This gives us caution in evaluating the permanence of desires, dreams, affections and decisions of children. Nevertheless, should the young person desire to pursue baptism and membership in the normal course set out by the church, we will examine them case-by-case.

The consideration of an appropriate age for a believer to be baptized is not a matter of simple obedience on an issue clearly settled by Scripture, but rather is a matter of Christian wisdom and prudence. Baptism in the New Testament occurred soon after the initial conversion. All of the individuals we can read of are adults who come from a non-Christian context. The credibility of their conversion is the prime consideration, with the effect upon the individual candidate and the church community being legitimate secondary concerns.

The difficulty for both elders and parents is identifying what is true belief and what is excitement or a desire to please parents. But if a child is expressing faith in the gospel, our first impulse should not be to doubt it. We have every reason to believe that God has used the ordinary means of prayer, discipleship, and teaching to bring to life faith in our young children. One thing to consider about the readiness for baptism should be when the credibility of one's

conversion becomes naturally evident to the church community. Real, living, faith will look different in a young child and a mature adult. But both can be seen.

If parents spend time discipling their children in the knowledge of God's Word and his gospel, evidences of faith will begin to be exposed, such as remorse over sin, a love for Jesus Christ, and a hunger to learn more about God. Intentional discussions and questions can reveal motivations and desires that can either affirm or call into question the child's faith. Bringing elders and church leaders into these discussions may help parents recognize these evidences. But if our children express an interest in being a Christian with none of these evidences of faith, we then have good grounds to guard them from being baptized; all the while praying for them, teaching them, and, with great expectation, looking for evidences of faith. Let us be very careful in how we handle the precious little ones that the Lord has entrusted to our care – neither discouraging them from believing in Christ nor giving them false assurance of their decision by hastily baptizing them.

On what can we agree?

While these differences of interpretation are important, they should not divide the body of Christ. If we believe in Jesus, we can agree on the major points of our faith (see "What We Believe" in *Like a Family: BICF ZGC Membership*, pages 12-15), including many points regarding baptism (see below). Although we admit our differences in the other areas are important, we can still recognize each other as genuine believers in Jesus. Therefore, differences of opinion about baptism, while important, are not valid reasons for us to dis-integrate the church.

Baptism is a vital part of our church life in BICF ZGC. And we trust that as Christians from many traditions and nations we can agree on these truths:

- a) Jesus was baptized as a model for us to follow (Matthew 3:15, Mark 1:9, Luke 3:21),
- b) Christ commanded that we practice baptism (Matthew 28: 19, Mark 16:16),
- c) We should practice Trinitarian baptism, that is, baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19),
- d) The New Testament evangelists practiced baptism after individuals came to faith and articulated their faith (Acts 2:38 & 41; 8:12, 13; 8:36-38; 9:18; 10:47, 48; 16:15, 33; 18:8),
- e) Baptism symbolizes our identification with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3,4, Colossians 2:12), and
- f) Baptism is a sign of our acceptance into and commitment to the New Covenant in Jesus, our belonging to his body, the church (1Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:27, Ephesians 4:5).

Our practice at BICF ZGC

Christian baptism is a requirement for membership in the Beijing International Christian Fellowship. However, we also recognize that many genuine Christians differ regarding the mode and timing of proper Christian baptism. For the purpose of admitting believers into full membership in the fellowship and recognizing their qualification to participate in all aspects of the fellowship, including assuming leadership responsibilities, we accept any Trinitarian baptism that has been meaningful to the individual. To state it plainly, a believer who has been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in a Christian fellowship, whether

as an infant or later, is qualified for full membership in BICF ZGC, and as a member, may participate in all service or leadership activities as specified in the BICF ZGC constitution and bylaws. He or she does not need to be re-baptized to qualify to join, to serve in ministries, or to be a leader in BICF ZGC.

Still, we believe the New Testament teaches baptism after coming to faith, and it provides no examples of infant baptism. Therefore, we will not practice infant baptism or baptism of children too young to explain their faith. We believe candidates for baptism must have genuine, personal faith in Jesus Christ and must be able to articulate that faith to a church leader. We encourage all individuals who have placed their trust in Jesus and who have committed themselves to following him to be baptized as a public testimony of their faith to the community.

In addition, because immersion seems to be the mode of baptism practiced in the New Testament and the mode that best expresses the symbolism of identification with Christ in death, burial and resurrection, we will practice immersion to the extent that is practical. Without making immersion a legalistic requirement for proper baptism, immersion will be our practice as much as possible.

It is the elders heartfelt hope that within the Christian fellowship of BICF ZGC, baptism will be a sign of our inclusion in the New Covenant with Jesus, and that it will symbolize our unity as we identify ourselves with Christ in spite of our differences. Perhaps BICF ZGC can be a Christian community that participates in healing some of the scars we have inflicted on each other. Therefore, if you find any part of this paper offensive, please accept our apologies for offending you, and in the spirit of Matthew 18:15 – 20, let's talk to each other (not about each other). Let's talk about how we can best understand the Bible's teachings on these subjects and about how we can live as brothers and sisters in community, in spite of our differences, in ways that will demonstrate the glory of Jesus and will build one another up.

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