

# The Biblical Case For Open Membership

## Definition of Terms

Once a particular local Church understands that church membership is a Biblical idea, the next question is simply: who should be welcomed into the Church's membership? Should membership in the local church be an open membership or a closed membership?

**Open membership** - a membership that requires one to be born again.<sup>1</sup>

**Closed membership** - a membership that requires one to be born again *and* hold to a number of secondary doctrines/practices.

These are overly simplified definitions in order to demonstrate the core difference between the two. Obviously both types of church membership should require a basic orthodox confession of faith (e.g. the Apostle's Creed); a commitment to holy living (1 Cor. 5:9-13) and submission to the elders (Hebrews 13:17). Neither type of Church should welcome into their membership the openly profane (1 Corinthians 5:9-13) or 'religious' people whose confession is contrary to "...the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). But these aside, the question is, should membership require *more* than these? Must members subscribe to the exact same doctrine as the leadership? Our answer is no. We hold that open membership - a membership that welcomes all true born-again believers *in spite of* differences over secondary doctrine - best reflects the Biblical model.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course we affirm that the children of believers also are members of the visible church. Larger Catechism Q. 62. *What is the visible church?* A. The visible church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children.

# The Argument for an Open Membership

## 1. The Argument from Romans 14:1-5

<sup>1</sup> As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. <sup>2</sup> One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

### Q. Who is the one “weak in faith”? (v.1)

The person who is ἀσθενοῦντα τῇ πίστει “weak in faith” is one who has a deficiency (weakness) in their doctrine (faith). Meaning **they believe some particular article of faith incorrectly**. Note what v.2 says: “One person *believes...*” such and such, while another does not. The ‘weak in faith’ is *not* the person who struggles with drunkenness or some other besetting sin, BUT the person who believes some wrong things. In contrast, the stronger brother (Romans 15:1) has a right understanding of those same things. Because the weaker brother believes some wrong things, his conscience will not allow him to practice certain things that the stronger brother can.

### Q. What was the consequence of these wrong beliefs?

<sup>3</sup> Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.”

The most immediate consequence was that the doctrinally deficient brother (the weak) and the doctrinally correct brother (the strong) practiced their faith differently. In v.2 we read that some ate meat (the strong) while others ate vegetables only (the weak). In v.5 some esteemed one day as better (the weak) while some esteemed all days alike (the strong). These differences gave birth to the most serious consequence: they began despising and judging each other (v.3) The unity of the Church was being threatened not so much by their differences but by

how they treated each other because of their differences. At this point the sin is coming from both sides, the weak were judging the strong for not practicing the way their narrow consciences dictated, and the strong were despising the weak for not practicing the way their broad consciences allowed. Left unchecked, this situation would have ended in disaster: Christ's Church would have split and Christ's witness in Rome would have been ruined.

### **Q. What does Paul *not* do?**

Paul is *the Apostle to the Gentiles*. He could have, with all of his Apostolic authority conferred on him by Jesus Himself, simply taught those who were in error the correct doctrine, and told them to conform to that. Then the issue could have been settled! Now it's true that He spends 1 verse (v.14) in this entire chapter bringing correction to the weaker brother. BUT the majority of his time he spends teaching how to handle disagreement in the local Church. Why does he do this? Because that is what Church life looks like. We just will interact with brothers and sisters that we do not agree with on a number of doctrines and a number of particular practices. In other words, one thing that Paul's instruction teaches us is that doctrinal and practical tension will NEVER be resolved in the Church until Jesus returns. To have any other expectation is to set ourselves up for failure.

### **The ultimate reason some are 'weak in faith'**

Now we recognize that as individual Christians we have a personal responsibility to believe "the right stuff" about God and Christ and the Bible - all of us must 'search the Scriptures' (Acts 17:11) and 'test all things' (1 Thess. 5:21). However, we further recognize that God is sovereign over which truths each one of us can cognitively grasp. Jesus is the true light who has come into the world, enlightening everyone according to His good pleasure (John 1:9). Understanding doctrine is one of the gifts of God! "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" (John 3:27) Therefore though we should always be teaching, correcting, and training in righteousness so that our brothers and sisters be competent and equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17), we must trust that God will reveal light in His perfect timing. "Let those of us who are

mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, *God will reveal that also to you*" (Phil. 3:15). The reason why some are weak in faith and some are strong in faith is because it is God's will: "...each *according to the measure of faith that God has assigned*" (Romans 12:3). Therefore to require everyone to have the same level of doctrinal understanding, is to resist God's design in the Church.

### Q. What does it mean to "welcome him"? (v.1)

**First**, to "welcome" προσλαμβάνω proslambanō is in the imperative mood, meaning "to welcome" is an apostolic command not a suggestion. To not welcome each other, whatever Paul means, *would be a sin*.<sup>2</sup> **Secondly**, προσλαμβάνω proslambanō according to Thayer's Greek Lexicon means **1)** to take as one's companion (cf. Acts 17:5); **2)** to receive into one's home (cf. Philemon 1:12, 17) or one's shelter (cf. Acts 28:2); **3)** to grant one access to one's heart; to take into friendship and contact. Putting these together, we see that προσλαμβάνω proslambanō is not simply a warm greeting of hospitality like you would tell some dinner guests "welcome to our home" at their arrival. Nor is it a *mere* giving of brotherly affection<sup>3</sup> Paul requires that in other places (Romans 12:10). Paul is telling us how to do Church together! προσλαμβάνω proslambanō is the glad receiving of a person into your number, your fellowship. **Thirdly**, this definition is confirmed in the ground Paul lays down: we are to 'welcome' the one who is weak in faith (Romans 14:1) "...for God has welcomed (προσλαμβάνω proslambanō) him" (v.7). How has God welcomed him? God has received him into His very companionship (John 14:23). Our welcoming of the weaker brother must mirror God's welcoming of him. **Fourthly**, Paul gave this imperative to welcome one another in the context of the local Church. Paul wrote this letter to "To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (Romans 1:7)—meaning to the local Church in Rome. The verb προσλαμβάνω proslambanō can only be practiced sporadically at best with other Christians who are not members at your local Church. But the underlying assumption of Romans 14:1-15:7 is that these people were regularly rubbing shoulders with each other. They were told not "...to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother" (v.13); they were warned "...if

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<sup>2</sup> Any law regarding how to treat our neighbor falls under the law of love: "...love your neighbor as yourself. [For] on these two commands depend all the Law..." (Matthew 22:39-40). Therefore, to not welcome each other would be a failure to love our neighbor as ourselves.

<sup>3</sup> Though Paul certainly includes this.

your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are not longer walking in love" (v.15); they were exhorted to "...pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding" (v.19); they were told "...it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" (v.21)—all of which only makes sense with those Christians with whom there is a mutual belonging and togetherness, i.e. members in the same local Church.

**To summarize:** *'welcome the one weak in faith'*: **1)** is a command; **2)** it means to is to receive him into your heartfelt companionship; **3)** because God has welcomed Him into His eternal companionship; **4)** means in the context of the local church, that is, we are commanded to welcome the brother of weak faith into church membership. Therefore to close our membership to those who disagree over secondary doctrines/practices is to go against apostolic teaching.

### **Objection: Romans 14 *only* applies to eating meat and Jewish holy days**

Some in the closed membership camp have said that the principle of welcoming one another only applies to eating meat and Jewish holy days, and that it doesn't apply to New Testament ordinances like baptism (or other secondary doctrines/practices).

This argument goes too far. Does the principle in v.5 "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" only apply to meat and Jewish holy days? Does the principle in v.12 "So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" only apply to meat and Jewish holy days?" Does the command in v.13 "Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother" only apply to meat and holy days? Et. al? Clearly not. Paul is applying these principles in all of life. V.7-8 "For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. <sup>8</sup>For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Secondly, this is not how we treat other Scriptures. There are several places where a circumstance arises and Jesus or an Apostle lays down a principle that doesn't merely instruct us in that specific circumstance but in circumstances that are similar to it. On the question of Sabbath keeping in Matthew 12:1-8, Jesus laid down a rule in v.7 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' and certainly this rule doesn't narrowly apply only in those cases where we would eat heads of grain on the

Sabbath day. Rather it applies whenever mercy and sacrifice come into conflict with one another. The imperatives in Romans 14 are to be broadly applied to many circumstances, not just to meats and Jewish holy days.

**Objection: Romans 14 *merely* applies to things indifferent (adiaphora)**

Henry Jessey answered this objection in John Bunyan's day when both were using Romans 14 to defend open membership (in the case of Bunyan a credo baptist arguing for paedobaptists to be members in his church). Jessey said this:

"Objection: Some say this bearing or receiving [the command in v.1], were but in things *indifferent*. Answer: That eating, or forbearing upon a civil account, are things indifferent, is true: but not when done upon the account of worship, as keeping of days, and establishing Jewish observations about meats, which by the death of Christ are taken away; and it is not fairly to be imagined the same church at Rome looked upon them as indifferent; nor that the Lord doth; that it were all alike to him to hold up Jewish observations, or to keep days or no days, right days or wrong days, as indifferent things, which is a great mistake, and no less than to make God's grace little in receiving such. ***For if it were but in things wherein they had not sinned, it were of no great matter for the Lord to receive,*** and it would have been as good an argument or motive to the church, to say the things were indifferent, as to say the Lord had received them. Whereas the text is to set out the riches of grace to the vessels of mercy, as Romans 9:15 says. That as at first he did freely choose and accept them; so when they fail and miscarry in many things, yea about his worship also, although he be most injured thereby, yet he is first in passing it by, and persuading others to do the like. As the good samaritan did in Luke 10, so our [true and better] Good Samaritan does, when priest and Levite passed by, pastor and people pass by, yet he will not, but pours in oil, and carries them to his inn, and calls for receiving, and setting it upon his account."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan Vol. 2*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2009), pg. 644-45 To read Bunyan's principle work online, see [https://info1.sermon-online.com/english/JohnBunyan/Communion\\_And\\_Fellowship\\_Of\\_Christians\\_At\\_The\\_Table\\_Of\\_The\\_Lord\\_1677.pdf](https://info1.sermon-online.com/english/JohnBunyan/Communion_And_Fellowship_Of_Christians_At_The_Table_Of_The_Lord_1677.pdf) Accessed September 16, 2021

Jessey's argument is that if the things in dispute are 'no big deal' (indifferent or adiaphora) then Paul's *reason* for the command, namely that God has welcomed him (v.3), is also 'no big deal.' It's no big deal for God to welcome this man, because what the man is doing is no big deal. But is that the force of Paul's argument? Clearly not! Paul magnifies the Lord's grace in accepting the man. In v.4 he says "And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand." But how is this a significant statement if what the man is doing is 'no big deal?' Again in v.12 he says "So then each of us will give an account of himself to God." Where is the force of this statement? What account will he have to give if what he is doing is 'no big deal?' No! Romans 14 does not apply *merely* to things indifferent, but to things that the gracious and omnipotent Lord must uphold the man for. "And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand." This is why we can accept Arminians (those who deny the Sovereignty of God in salvation) into our membership. Certainly none of us would say that "Calvinism" is adiaphora. Is Calvinism an *essential* doctrine? It depends on what you mean.

Is it essential to *the faith* (Christianity) once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3)?  
 Yes. For Arminianism imagines a god who learns, who changes, who reacts and who is dependent upon humanity. This is not the God of the Bible.

Is it essential to *our faith* (the Church), meaning to our collective existence?  
 Yes and No. Yes, in terms of leadership. If a leadership moves away from these doctrines it will lead to a compromised view of God and the gospel. No, in terms of membership. We are called to love and embrace all Christians regardless of our disagreements.

Is it essential to *my faith* (conversion), without believing I would be damned?  
 No. The doctrines of grace do not need to be believed in order to be a truly born again, Christ-loving Christian (John 3:3).

To not welcome Arminians into our Church membership is requiring them to cross the finish line before they start the race. They are our weaker brethren. Do we keep the weak out of the Church? This is what closed membership churches do.

## 2. The Argument from Romans 15:1-7

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup> Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. <sup>3</sup> For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” <sup>4</sup> For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. <sup>5</sup> May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

### **Q. What are the ‘failings’ of the weak? (v.1)**

“Failings” ἀσθένημα *asthenēma* can also be translated *infirmities* - “We then that are strong ought to bear the *infirmities* of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (KJV). These are not those natural failings or limitations or weaknesses that every human being has. Paul is specifically referring to the *failings* of the weak--those who are deficient in doctrine, and as a result have a diversity of practice. Contextually, some of these ‘failings’ are sinful. I don’t mean presumptuous sin, but sin that David calls ‘hidden faults’ (Psalm 19:12). We know these specific failings that Paul was dealing with were sinful for three reasons: **1)** Because Paul grounds our obligation to bear with the failings of others *because Christ has bore with our failings* meaning our sins. V.3 “For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’” John Bunyan, immediately answers the objection from those who advocate a closed membership:

“You say, ‘...to have communion with such weak brethren reproaches [our] opinions, and practice.’ Grant it, your dulness and deadness, and imperfection also reproach the holiness of God; if you say ‘no, for Christ hath born our sin’; the answer is still the same: their sins also are fallen upon Christ; he then that hath taken away thy sins from before the throne of God; hath taken away their shortness in conformity to an outward circumstance in

religion. Both your infirmities are fallen upon Christ; yea, if notwithstanding thy great sins, thou standest by Christ complete before the throne of God; why may not thy brother...stand complete before thee in the Church?"<sup>5</sup>

Additionally we know these 'failings' were sinful **2)** Because these things the Roman Christians got wrong were specifically made clear in other parts of Scripture. As to the eating of meats, Jesus had already declared all foods to be clean (Mark 7:19); as to the keeping of holy days (specifically Jewish ceremonies) Paul had already said these things were but shadows, Christ is the substance (Colossians 2:16-17). Therefore these Roman Christians were objectively, unequivocally wrong in their doctrine. This is not a presumptuous sin, but certainly a hidden fault. Lastly we know these 'failings' were sinful **3)** Because the issue of both unclean food and holy days were abolished by the death of Christ. In other words, they were in effect denying some of the glorious effects and new realities that Jesus Christ accomplished in the gospel. "Yet" as one author said "...the Lord who was principally wronged could pass this by, and commandeth others to receive them also. And if it be a good argument to receive such as are weak in anything, whom the Lord hath received, then there can be no good argument to reject for anything for which the Lord will not reject them."<sup>6</sup>

### **Q. How has Christ welcomed you? (v.7)**

How has Christ welcomed you and me into his kingdom? Did He wait until you and I were doctrinally pure? Did He reject us from fellowship when our practices didn't line up with His? No, He welcomed us with all our sin, all our immaturity and pride and confusion. That is how we are commanded to welcome our weaker brother.

**To summarize:** we have an obligation to bear with the sins of other Christian brothers and sisters in our membership because that's what Christ has done with each of us. Our membership must be open to them, just as His kingdom has been open to us.

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<sup>5</sup> John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan Vol. 2*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2009), pg. 610

<sup>6</sup> Mr. Henry Jessey, a contemporary of John Bunyan quoted in Bunyan's Works, pg. 642

### 3. The Argument from Conscience (Romans 14:5b, 14, 23)

“Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (v.5b)

“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” (v.14)

“But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (v.23)

How does the conscience work? Imagine for a moment being a member of the Church in Rome when Paul wrote this letter in the middle of the 1st century. You just finished worship in the morning service on the Lord’s Day, and everyone stays afterward for a shared meal. You see two distinct groups, one group eating vegetables only, and another group who eats everything. And so you ask the vegetable eaters “*Why* do you eat vegetables only?” You discover that most of these are Jews or proselytes to Judaism. They eat vegetables only, they say, because they believe they are still bound to the OT dietary laws. The only way to ‘be safe’ and ensure their obedience to God in pagan territory is by avoiding meat altogether so as not to eat something unclean by accident. Their motive for eating vegetables only is entirely out of their desire to obey God. Now we don’t have to speculate that this was their motive, because Paul tells us it is: “...the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord...” That is they believe it is their moral duty to eat vegetables only because of the said conditions.

Now let’s ask a few questions: **First**, what does Paul *not do* in this situation? Paul does *not tell* the vegetable eaters to go to another Church whose members only eat vegetables. He does not say “...You ought not to be a member of this Church because you don’t agree with our secondary doctrines.” In other words, Paul has a much better solution than a closed membership. **Second**, were these Jewish believers wrong? Yes, Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19), He is the fulfillment of what the entire ceremonial law pointed to, therefore the shadow has given way to the substance. **Third**, why didn’t Paul just correct them? He actually does. In v.14 he says “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is

unclean in itself” and again in v.20 “Everything is indeed clean.”<sup>7</sup> So Paul certainly brings correction to the misinformed brother. However, correction is not the predominant drum that Paul beats here. Why? Because Paul is showing us what to do when the correction “doesn’t take.” He’s showing us what to do when the Lord doesn’t give them the spiritual light to see that all foods are clean. You see, at some point you just do have to eat. That brings us to our **fourth** question: what should these believers eat if the apostle was telling them that all foods are clean, but their consciences were telling them to obey Christ and eat vegetables only? Someone may say, ‘they should have trusted the inspired Apostle over their conscience.’ But Paul *doesn’t* say that. And that would be entirely wrong. The Apostle understood two vital things **1) How difficult it is to persuade the conscience.** Historically, the ceremonial dietary laws were a massive part of Jewish life for 2,000 years. It was one of the chief ways the Jews were set apart from the Gentiles. Orthodox Jews considered this part of their religion to be absolutely vital to their piety. Case and point is Peter. In Acts 10:10-16 we read of his vision:

“...he fell into a trance <sup>11</sup> and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. <sup>12</sup> In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup> And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” <sup>14</sup> But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” <sup>15</sup> And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” <sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Peter would hardly be convinced even by *Jesus Himself*. The vision had to be repeated three times in order for Peter to get it. Paul understood that the conscience is an incredibly difficult thing to persuade. The fact is, it can only be persuaded by the Lord Himself. He must give the light necessary.

Paul also understood **2) How vital it is to obey the conscience.** In Paul’s treatment on this subject (Romans 14:1-15:7), he spends two verses correcting the misinformed brother, but the other 28 verses telling him to obey his conscience

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<sup>7</sup> Likewise in 1 Corinthians 8-10, he’s dealing with a very similar issue of what to do when Christians have differently informed consciences. He tells the Church there in 1 Corinthians 8:8 “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”

even though it is wrongly informed. If they are not fully convinced (v.5) then the meat they eat is unclean to them (v.14). To eat the meat in this manner is sin, because they lack the faith to do so (v.23). In other words, even though by eating meat they are not disobeying God, if they believe eating is disobedience to Him, and they eat anyway, then they are disobeying God.

### **The supremacy of the conscience**

Here we come to a vital principle of conscience stated (1) positively and (2) negatively:

- (1) Obeying your misinformed conscience is obedience to the Lord.
- (2) Disobeying your misinformed conscience is sin.

Though (1) may be a hidden fault, (2) is a presumptuous sin (Psalm 19:12). The conscience is a more important doctrine than foods, or days, or many other things in the Christian life. So vital is the conscience, that Paul says, it helps keep us from shipwrecking our faith. "...Wage the good warfare, holding faith and a *good conscience*. *By rejecting this*, some have made shipwreck of their faith" (1 Timothy 1:18-19).<sup>8</sup> Now please **NOTE** that if someone tries to use their conscience as a cover for sin, e.g. 'my conscience is telling me that God wants me to be happy, so I'm going to get a divorce even though the Scripture doesn't allow it' - their foolishness is manifest to all. No one can claim, 'my conscience is telling me to obey Christ (as I imagine him) by disobeying Christ (as He reveals Himself in His Word).' The WCF 20.3 puts it this way: "They who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty, which is, that being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life."

**To summarize:** We must seek to protect the consciences of our fellow members. Yes, we can seek and ought to correct wrong doctrines/practices they might have, just as Paul did, but if they are not finally convinced (and if they are not using their conscience as a cover for sin) we do not disfellowship from them, but encourage them to obey their conscience thereby honoring the Lord. To require

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<sup>8</sup> Thus we see how important it is for the Church and especially elders to protect the conscience of our Church members. Requiring from them an implicit faith (contra Romans 14:5) or for them to violate their conscience (contra Romans 14:23) violates God's Word and could lead to their undoing.

them to go against conscience is to wound them and offend Jesus. "Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ" (1 Corinthians 8:12). A person could get baptism wrong or the doctrines of grace wrong or covenant theology wrong and not violate the moral law, but whenever one violates their conscience they always violate the moral law.

#### 4. The Argument from Jesus' Practice

The Lord Jesus Christ knew well the limitations of His disciples. He told them in John 16:12 "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." While on earth, He regularly adapted His speech to their weaknesses. After His resurrection and ascension, He continued to bear patiently with all their failings. In Acts 1:8, He laid out the one mission they must fulfill: "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Clearly we understand that this meant the gospel was to go to all people--Jews and Gentiles--without regard to adherence to the ceremonial law, since Christ put that away (Hebrews 10:9). However the disciples for years and years continued to hold that distinction and only preached the gospel to those who were either born Jewish or who had converted to Judaism. It wasn't until nearly a decade later when Peter had his vision, that Peter finally understood that the gospel was to be preached to all men irrespective of the ceremonial law (cf. Acts 10:34ff). Jonathan Edwards speaks of the tenderness of Christ in bearing with the weaknesses the Church during this time:

the Spirit of "...Christ dealt very tenderly with them in this point...[He] had many things to say [but] they could not yet bear them...[He] was gradual in revealing [these things]. He gave here a little and there a little as they could bear...Thus tender was [the Spirit of] Christ [with] the Church while [she] was an infant."<sup>9</sup>

When the disciples didn't 'get' it, Jesus bore with them. Likewise when we don't 'get' it, Jesus bears with us. As John Stoughton has said "Though we have sinned against

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), pg. 100

Thee, Thou lovest us still.” Where do we see anywhere in Jesus’ example or teaching that we ought to disfellowship from saints (the consequence of a closed membership) who disagree with us on non-essential doctrines? Again John Bunyan states: “What precept, precedent, or example have you in God’s Word to exclude your holy brethren from Church communion for [the sake] of water baptism?”<sup>10</sup>

## 5. The Argument from Paul’s Practice

Paul was so zealous to welcome those weak in the faith, that he even put himself under the abrogated ceremonial law to win them over. In Acts 21, Paul returns to Jerusalem from his missionary journey, and the elders meet him. They immediately inform him of what’s going on in the Jerusalem Church. Halfway through v.20 “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done?” So take in what’s happening here. There was a sect within the Jerusalem Church of Jewish believers who, although not Judaizers, believed adherence to at least parts of the ceremonial law were still required by God. This clearly contradicted Paul’s teaching elsewhere. But what do the Jerusalem elders do in order to keep this group of people in the Church? They instruct Paul to take a Nazirite vow—part of the ceremonial law—in order to demonstrate to these weaker brothers that Paul was not an apostate. Paul shockingly agrees to do this. This passage has caused much debate with some concluding that Paul *was wrong* to do this. Paul was wrong, they claim, because as a Christian, he put himself under the obligation of the ceremonial law.<sup>11</sup> But this wasn’t a problem. Paul would later

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<sup>10</sup> Bunyan, pg. 655.

<sup>11</sup> Additionally some claim that Paul was wrong because he was in fact nourishing in these Jewish believers a false confidence in the ceremonial law (Paul was no more guilty of nourishing a false confidence in the ceremonial law than the Jerusalem Council, who in Acts 15 told the Gentiles to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols). In other words, they were wrong, but instead of correcting them, Paul joined them in their error. But this is to fail to understand the context. These were weak brothers, not Judaizers. They were falling short of the full freedom of the gospel, not the gospel *itself*. Paul never gave into the Judaizers who believed the ceremonial law was necessary for salvation (cf. Galatians), but he always accommodated his practice to erring brothers (even those who thought the ceremonial law was still important to follow) in hopes to win them to a bigger view of the gospel (For a wonderful exposition of this text, see John Calvin, Calvin’s Commentaries Vol. XIX, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks 2009), pg. 277-282).

state the ceremonial law was *adiaphora*—a matter of indifference (1 Corinthians 7:19; cf. 8:8). In other words, as long as one doesn't treat the ceremonial law as something that commends oneself to God, one is no better or worse if they follow some<sup>12</sup> of its regulations. F.F. Bruce said of Paul's practice: "A truly emancipated spirit such as Paul's [was] not in bondage to its own emancipation."<sup>13</sup> Or as Charles Hodge says: "No one was more yielding in matters of indifference, no one was more unyielding in matters of principle than this apostle. So long as things indifferent were regarded as such, he was ready to accommodate himself to the most unreasonable prejudices; but when they were insisted upon as matters of necessity, he would not give place, no not for an hour (cf. Galatians 2:5)."<sup>14</sup>

## 6. The Argument from the Sacraments

At this point, someone may say "But baptism is a sacrament, and it is vital that we practice it correctly." I totally agree that we ought to practice all of God's Sacraments with the utmost care. I hope all the elders can affirm that whenever we have baptized infants here at the Church, I have made arguments for our practice to the best of my ability. We also teach paedobaptism in our membership class, and have even spent a whole sermon on this topic (1 Cor. 7:14). I am fully persuaded of the truth of this doctrine. But remember, the question here is, how do we do Church together when there is not agreement about how to practice the sacraments, specifically baptism? Is there an Apostolic example to teach us? Yes. The Apostle Paul in Acts 16. Now the juxtaposition of Acts 15 and Acts 16 is perhaps the most interesting part of the whole story. The Jerusalem Council met in Acts 15 specifically to answer the question: does one need circumcision to be saved. They answered with an emphatic no. But immediately in Acts 16, Paul, who was a part of that council, circumcised Timothy. Acts 16:1-4

"Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I say 'some' because obviously to continue the sacrificial system in light of the once for all sacrifice for Christ would be a practical denial of Christ's atonement, cf the book of Hebrews.

<sup>13</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), pg.432

<sup>14</sup> Charles Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2018), pg. 163-164

He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. <sup>3</sup> Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him *because of the Jews who were in those places*, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. <sup>4</sup> As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance *the decisions* that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

Notice three things about this passage. **1) Paul's practice.** Paul circumcised Timothy before their missionary journey precisely because v.3 *"...of the Jews who were in those places."* Meaning, there were Jews that Paul wanted to win to the gospel--Jews that He wanted to come into the membership of the Church (universal and local), so he performed a sacrament that was no longer a sacrament! 1 Corinthians 7:19 "For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God." **2) Paul's preaching.** This didn't stop Paul from teaching the truth about circumcision as v.4 says *"they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem."* In other words, Paul gaining an audience by circumcising Timothy didn't stop him from telling all the truth that circumcision doesn't save. **3) Paul's prize.** The result of Paul's 'compromise' is v.5 *"So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily."* This is the same thing we saw from Acts 6 after the Church successfully installed deacons. Acts 6:19 "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." Fascinating! God blessed the Church when deacons were installed (6:19) and God blessed the Church when Paul accommodated his practice to their wrong view of the sacraments in order to win them to a better view of the gospel (16:5).

## 7. The Argument from Doctrinal Inequality

All Biblical doctrines are important *but* not all doctrines are *equally* important. There is a pervasive doctrinal inequality that runs through the pages of Scripture. The doctrine of showing mercy is greater than that of sacrifice: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous,

but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). The doctrine of tongues is *not* as important as prophecy: "Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Corinthians 14:9). The doctrine of Christian liberty is *not* as important as Christian charity: "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble" (1 Corinthians 8:13; cf. Romans 14:17). Baptism is not as important as the gospel: "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 8:17). We could go on and on, the Trinity is more important than one's eschatology, the Incarnation more important than the question of polity etc. Now what about the doctrine of paedobaptism and the doctrine of open membership? Which is more vital? Or perhaps the better way to pose the question is this: which doctrine is to get the priority if these two things come into conflict?<sup>15</sup> The Scripture is full of places where God's commands come into conflict with one another. For example, we are commanded to obey God (John 14:15) and we are commanded to obey the magistrate (1 Peter 2:13-14). What happens when the magistrate's command comes into conflict with God's command? Obedience to God requires that we disobey the magistrate (Acts 4:19). Now we believe that baptism and open membership are both commands from God.

Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Romans 14:1 "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions."

But what happens when these two commands come into conflict? Which one takes the priority? Open membership takes priority. How do we know? Because this was the Apostle Paul's repeated practice. **First**, he welcomed the Corinthian Church as a true Church though they got both sacraments wrong, baptism (1 Corinthians 1:13-17), indeed some of them were even getting baptized for the dead! (1 Corinthians 15:29); and Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). He didn't remove any of them from the membership because of their errant views and practices

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<sup>15</sup> For example, we are commanded to obey God and obey the magistrate, but when these things come into conflict, obeying God gets the priority (Acts 4:19).

regarding the sacraments. The only one who is reported to be removed is the one caught in the sin of incest and adultery (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). To all the rest, he openly welcomed as part of the one local Church in Corinth: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together” (1 Corinthians 1:2). **Second**, as we have already seen, Paul welcomed those to the Church who had a wrong view of the defunct sacrament of circumcision (Acts 16:1-5). **Third**, by what Paul taught in Romans 14:1-Romans 15:7. It’s true that someone in the Credo/Paedo debate is wrong. But this ‘wrongness’ is a hidden fault (Psalm 19:12) because each side sincerely believes what they hold to is Scriptural. However, if someone is not fully convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5), if anyone thinks some practice is ‘unclean’ (Romans 14:14), if anything is not done by faith (Romans 14:23) then these things are sinful.<sup>16</sup> That is why Paul tells us to welcome those who are weak in faith, because otherwise we are encouraging them to sin. So then which takes priority? Open membership or baptism? How can we not conclude that open membership must take priority over the doctrinal differences of baptism?

## 8. The Argument from the New Creation

Why ought we to open our membership to every true visible Christian<sup>17</sup> regardless of their view of water baptism? Five reasons.

- 1) Because all true saints have been given something better, namely the righteousness of Jesus Christ through faith in His name (2 Cor. 5:21). All saints stand just before God. One’s correct view of baptism does not make one more justified, nor does one’s incorrect view make them less justified.
- 2) Because all true saints are already united by one baptism, into one body, by one Spirit. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13; cf. Ephesians 4:4-5)
- 3) Because God has communion with all true saints regardless of their view of baptism - “God has welcomed him” (Romans 14:3). Will we

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<sup>16</sup> Meaning they are presumptuously sinful (Psalm 19:13).

<sup>17</sup> See 7 descriptions of a Christian: Bunyan, pg. 603

refuse someone from our fellowship whom God has welcomed into His fellowship?

- 4) Because inward spiritual things are greater and more weightier than outward circumstantial things. For the former things always work for edification and upbuilding while the latter do not.<sup>18</sup>
  
- 5) Because the Apostle forbids that true saints divide up into different parties and he calls all such behavior as carnal. 1 Corinthians 1:11-12 "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 "But I, brothers,<sup>[a]</sup> could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, <sup>3</sup> for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? <sup>4</sup> For

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<sup>18</sup> Bunyan says here: "Joshua was so zealous against Elad and Medad, for prophesying in the camp, without first going to the Lord to the door of the tabernacle, as they were commanded, that he desired Moses to forbid them (Numbers 11:27-28). But Moses calls his zeal envy, and prays to God for more such prophets; knowing that although they failed in a circumstance, they were right in that which was better. The edification of the people in the camp was that which pleased Moses. In Hezekiah's time, though the people came to the passover in an undue manner, and 'did eat it otherwise than it was written'; yet the wise king would not forbid them, but rather admitted it, knowing that their edification was of greater concern, than to hold them to a circumstance or two (2 Chron 30:13-27). Yea, God himself did like the wisdom of the king, and healed, that is, forgave, the people at the prayer of Hezekiah. And observe it, notwithstanding this disorder, as to circumstances, the feast was kept with great gladness; and the Levites and the priests praised the Lord day by day, singing with loud instruments unto the Lord; yea, there was not the like joy in Jerusalem from the time of Solomon unto that same time. What shall we say, all things must give place to the profit of the people of God. Yea, sometimes laws themselves, for their outward preservation, much more for godly edifying. When Christ's disciples plucked the ears of corn on the sabbath, no doubt for very hunger, and were rebuked by the Pharisees for it, as for that which was unlawful; how did their Lord succour them? By excusing them, and rebuking their adversaries. 'Have ye not read,' said he, 'what David did when he was an hungered, and they that were with him; how he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shew bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profaned the sabbath, and are blameless?' (Matt 12:1-5). Why blameless? because they did it in order to the edification of the people. If laws and ordinances of old have been broken, and the breach of them borne with, when yet the observance of outward things was more strictly commanded than now, when the profit and edification of the people came in competition, how much more may not we have communion, church communion, where no law is transgressed thereby." Bunyan, pg. 611-612

when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?"

## 9. The Argument from the Church's Witness to the World

What becomes of our witness to the world, if true saints are not allowed into our membership because of different views on secondary doctrines (like baptism)? What does the world see? *"That Christian cannot attend that Church because they disagree on **that**?"* Would they not rather conclude that there must be something more? As Bunyan puts it "Think you not that the world may [have ground to say], 'Some great iniquity lies hid in the skirts of your brethren.'"<sup>19</sup> Scripture reserves disfellowship only for those who refuse to repent for the open and flagrant sin that they have rushed into. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:11 "But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one." If we disfellowship from a saint over a secondary doctrine, do we not risk their reputation in the eyes of the world? If the truth be revealed that they were disfellowed over such and such a secondary doctrine, will that not harm our reputation for putting them out for such a petty reason?<sup>20</sup> Jesus said in John 13:35 "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The world will know whether we belong to Jesus not because we agree on baptism or any other secondary doctrine, but because we love each other, even in spite of our differences.

## 10. The Argument from Christian Love

John Bunyan argued for an open membership most forcefully on the grounds of Christian love. He said this:

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<sup>19</sup> Bunyan, pg. 614

<sup>20</sup> Where does God say in His Word that we have a duty to reject from membership those who have different opinions on secondary doctrines?

"Therefore I am for [open membership<sup>21</sup>], because love, which above all things we are commanded to put on, is of much more worth than to break about baptism.

Colossians 3:11-14 "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. <sup>12</sup> Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

[This] *forgiving* respecteth not only private and personal injuries, but also errors in judgment about inclinations and distinctions tending to divisions, and separating upon the grounds laid down in verse 11, which, however little they now seem to us, who are beyond them, were strong, and of weight to them who in that day were entangled with them. Some saints then were not free to preach to any but the Jews: denying the word of life to the Gentiles, and contending with them who preferred it to them: which was a greater error than this of baptism (Acts 11:1-19). But what should we do with such kind of saints? Why love them still, forgive them, bear with them, and maintain church communion with them. Why? because they are new creatures, because they are Christ's: for this swallows up all distinctions..."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> original--"holding communion thus"

<sup>22</sup> When we attempt to force our brother beyond his light, or to break his heart with grief; to thrust him beyond his faith, or to bar him from his privilege: how can we say, I love? What shall I say? To have fellowship one with another for the sake of an outward circumstance, or to make that the door to fellowship which God hath not; yea to make that the including, excluding charter; the bounds, bar, and rule of communion; when by the word of the everlasting testament there is no warrant for it; to speak charitably, if it be not for want of love, it is for want of knowledge in the mysteries of the kingdom of Christ."Bunyan, pg. 612-613. Also see his ninth argument on pg. 614

## Frequently Asked Questions<sup>23</sup>

**1st Question:** “Does the command to *welcome him* (Romans 14:1) mean that we have to welcome every practice?”

**Answer:** No. It is impossible to welcome every practice for many practices are mutually exclusive (e.g. egalitarianism and complementarianism). We can't welcome every practice but we are to welcome every Christian. Reformed Churches that require full subscription (closed membership) do not do this. They will not welcome Christians who dissent from their confessions. Charles Spurgeon, John Bunyan, R.C. Sproul and many of the other spiritual giants could not be members of these churches because of their disagreements on secondary doctrine.

**2nd Question:** “If a family decides not to baptize their infants, isn't this a lack of submission to the elders? (cf. Hebrews 13:17)

**Answer:** Where does Scripture say that we have to agree with the elders on every jot and tittle of Biblical doctrine in order to be in submission? Is a wife not submitting to her husband if she understands a doctrine differently than he?

**3rd Question:** “Are we really a ‘Reformed Church’ if we don't require infant baptism of all our members?”

**Answer:** Are we really a ‘Reformed Church’ if we don't require from our members that they would worship morning and evening on the Lord's Day?. Our confession requires that the whole day be taken up with public and private worship (cf. WCF 21.8; LCQ. 117) and the Puritans and their predecessors understood this as morning and evening worship.

**4th Question:** “Are we not drifting towards liberalism if we don't adhere to the confession on all points? “

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<sup>23</sup> Some Additional Problems that Follow From a Closed Membership

1. How do we accept new converts into the Church? How much must they understand before we accept them? Must they accept Calvinism, Confessionalism, and Covenant Theology before they become a member?
2. What do we do with children who grow up and reject some other article our confession says, e.g. calvinism, covenant theology, et.al. Do we disfellowship with them if this occurs?
3. How would closed membership work in the persecuted Church? Would we tell baptists and Arminians and charismatics to go find another underground church to worship in?

**Answer:** The WCF's chapter on conscience "Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience" (XX) is part of our confession. Are we not drifting towards liberalism (or legalism) if we ignore that part of the confession?

**5th Question:** "What about where the Confession says neglecting this ordinance is a 'great sin?'"

**Answer:** WCF 28.5 says *"Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated."* The first verse the confession uses to justify that first clause is Luke 7:30 "...but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him." What is the primary sin here? They rejected the purpose of God, the message of the coming king, the need for repentance. Baptism wasn't what was primarily in view. The second verse the confession uses to justify this first clause is Exodus 4:24-26 "At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. <sup>25</sup> Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" <sup>26</sup> So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision." Was it primarily because of circumcision that God was going to put him to death? No, only secondarily. Moses' sin was a sin of presumption, he knew he should have circumcised his children but he disobeyed. That's why it was a "great sin."

Regarding paedobaptism for those who are convinced of credo baptism, it cannot *by definition* be a great sin. A great sin can only be a presumptuous sin (cf. Psalm 19:13). At best, assuming the paedobaptism position is right, the father and mother who decide not to baptize their children are guilty of a hidden fault (cf. Psalm 19:12). How can a hidden fault be grounds to prevent someone from joining the Church.

**6th Question:** If we welcome both credo and paedobaptists in the Church, isn't this confusing to the congregation?

**Answer: 1)** Closed membership churches are also confusing to their respective congregations. It is confusing to members in the URC why Credo baptists are not welcome at their churches, since they are believers just like them. **2)** Paul was

willing to be 'confusing' in his practice at times to win more people to a bigger view of the gospel. (cf. Acts 21)

## Appendix: Witnesses from Church History Regarding Sectarian Spirits, Open Membership, and the Controversy over Baptism

Rev. James Alexander Haldane, Scottish Baptist Pastor (1807)

"Let us, for instance, take the question of infant baptism. It is one which is highly important; but why may not those who differ on this point hold fellowship with one another? I baptize my children—I do it to the Lord—I believe it to be his will—If I am wrong, I should be very happy to be convinced that I am so. Another does not baptize his children—To the Lord he does it not. I am also bound to believe that he wishes to walk in the path of duty; that he wishes to be convinced if he is wrong. In other things we agree. We feel the same corruptions. We love and obey the same Savior. We are equally begotten to a lively hope by the resurrection of Christ; but it seems we must not be members of the same church on earth. Surely this is the spirit of error. This wisdom cometh not from above. Indeed, if a Paedobaptist and an Antipaedobaptist cannot be members of the same church, or sit down together at the Lord's table, they ought not to pray together."<sup>24</sup>

The Puritan John Owen (1668)

Iain Murray writes "By the last quarter of the seventeenth century in England the Puritan tradition was less attractive than it had been in earlier years. Puritan witness had been overtaken by internal controversies over doctrine, by an over-scrupulous regard for points of church government, by fragmentation into parties, and by too much engagement in politics. Speaking of 'miscarriages' among Puritan congregations, John Owen wrote in 1668: "Some have been ready to condemn all that go not along with them in every principle, yea, opinion or practice.

<sup>24</sup> Source: <https://www.reformedhollytrinity.org/who-we-are.html> Accessed July 28, 2021

And every day slight occasions and provocations are made the ground and reason for severe censures; but nothing is more contrary to the meek and Holy Spirit of Christ."<sup>25</sup>

### Archibald Alexander (1850)

"[I], in a long life, have found that real Christians agree much more perfectly in experimental religion than they do in speculative points; and it is [my] belief that a more intimate acquaintance among Christians of different denominations would have a happy tendency to unite them more closely in the bounds of brotherly love. May the time soon come when all the disciples of Christ shall form one great brotherhood under the name of Christians!"<sup>26</sup>

### The Calvinistic Methodist Fathers of Wales Vol. 1:

"In the period between the beginning of the eighteenth century and the rise of Methodism, the strength of Dissent in Wales had declined sharply because of the bitter controversies in the churches. In the original Dissenting Churches, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists and Paedobaptists were found side by side. For some time, no great weight was attached to these differences; the great issue was the securing of the preaching of the essential truths of the gospel in their purity, and the cruel persecutions suffered tended to unite every congregation, notwithstanding the differences of opinion existing between individuals. But after the passing of the Toleration Act in 1689 with the consequent ending of the persecution, more attention was given to their differing opinions and churches experienced much agitation as a result."

After the authors address the Dissenter's controversy over polity, he touches on baptism...

"Another controversy, proceeded with in a very unchristian spirit, was on baptism. It began about the end of the seventeenth century, soon after the

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<sup>25</sup> Iain Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), pg. 140. Also see <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-refreshment-of-unlikely-friendship> Accessed August 4, 2021

<sup>26</sup> Murray, pg. 165

passing of the Toleration Act. There is an account of a public debate on the matter occurring in 1692 in a place called Penylan, on the slopes of the Frenni Fawr in Pembrokeshire. The Rev. John Thomas of Llwyn-ygrawys argued for Paedobaptism, and the Rev. Jenkin Jones, Rhydwylym, for believers' baptism. Instead of ending strife, this debate only served to stir it up. It continued to press in a very bitter spirit. The Rev. Samuel Jones, Brynllwarch, came out in support of the Independents, while the Baptists had to send for help from London. The result was a complete separation; the two parties divided, forming churches of their own views. But we may be certain that this did not occur without painful disturbances in the various congregations, which weakened them and was the cause of a considerable decline in their religion."<sup>27</sup>

#### Howell Harris (1714 - 1773)

Commenting on those who would divide over baptism: "I saw that they were blind, and imagined it a duty from God to defend one truth, without considering that in doing this there were harming other truths. I told him he did right in obeying his light honestly, and so did I in mine." (pg.168)

#### The Puritan John Bunyan (1628-1688)

The sacraments are "...representations of the death and resurrection of Christ; and are, as God shall make them, helps to our faith therein. But I count them not the fundamentals of our Christianity, nor the ground or rule to communion with the saints: servants they are, and our mystical ministers, to teach and instruct us in the most weighty matters of the kingdom of God: I therefore here declare my reverent esteem tof them; yet dare not remove them, as some do, from the place and end, where by God they are set and appointed; nor ascribe unto them more than they were ordered to have in their first and primitive institution. It is possible to commit idolatry even with God's own appointments."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John Morgan Jones & William Morgan, *The Calvinistic Methodist Fathers of Wales Vol. 1*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2016), pg. 20-21

<sup>28</sup> Bunyan, pg. 604

“Strange...take two Christians equal on all points but this; nay, let one go far beyond the other for grace and holiness; yet this circumstance of water shall drown and sweep away all his excellencies; not counting him worthy of that reception that with hand and heart shall be given to a novice in religion, because he consents to water.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pg. 592