

# SOUTHERN BAPTISTS AND RESTRICTING THE LORD'S SUPPER: A BRIEF EXAMINATION AND MODEST PROPOSAL

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, numerous incidents have caused Southern Baptists to re-examine long-standing beliefs concerning the doctrines of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These reinterpretations have come in multiple venues and from different groups of people. Neither time nor focus permits a discussion of the changing paradigms of baptism within Southern Baptist life.<sup>2</sup> However, there have been two specific incidents in the last decade in which Southern Baptists have sought to redefine their beliefs on the Lord's Supper, and specifically, who is qualified to participate in this ordinance.

First, at the June 2000 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in Orlando, FL a discussion concerning the adoption of a revised version of the *Baptist Faith and Message 1963* (*BF&M 1963*) occurred.<sup>3</sup> During the discussion, messenger Jim Goodroe requested that Article VIII "Baptism and the Lord's Supper" be revised from its previous form. In the *BF&M 1963*, the article's language on the Lord's Supper stipulates: "Being a church ordinance, [baptism] is a prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper." This meant that the SBC's confessional position on the Lord's Supper

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<sup>2</sup>For further information on how some Baptists are reinvestigating their theology of baptism, we point readers to Henderson Hills Baptist Church (SBC) in Edmond, OK and Bethlehem Baptist Church (Baptist General Conference) in Minneapolis, MN. These churches demonstrated a desire to remove the restriction of believer's baptism by immersion as a qualification for church membership. To date, however, neither church has officially changed the historical doctrine of believer's baptism by immersion as a prerequisite for church membership. Seeking to redefine baptism more restrictively, trustees of the International Mission Board of the SBC have defined proper baptism as requiring the baptizing church to affirm the doctrine of eternal security. Also, popular Baptist theologian Wayne Grudem has all but rejected his earlier hopeful view of reconciliation among paedobaptists and credobaptists concerning baptism in his *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994; reprint, 2007), 982-83.

<sup>3</sup>Afterwards, we will refer to this work with the abbreviated *BF&M*. There are three versions of the *BF&M*. Each version will be differentiated by its corresponding year of adoption by the SBC: 1925, 1963, and 2000.

was one of moderate restriction, or a position known as intercommunion.<sup>4</sup> Goodroe noted that he had been in the churches of at least four members of the Revision Committee when the Lord's Supper had been taken, and in all four cases, the churches had practiced open communion and not intercommunion. In essence, he felt that the theology, or at least the practice, of the Lord's Supper within SBC churches had shifted from what the *BF&M 1963* specified. He called for the *BF&M 2000* to reflect or at least permit the practice of open communion by taking out the phrase "and to the Lord's Supper."<sup>5</sup>

Second, messengers to the 2007 Arkansas Baptist State Convention meeting in Van Buren, AR heard discussion on a proposed amendment to its by-laws. The amendment called for the removal of the phrase "the Baptist Faith and Message shall not be interpreted as to permit open communion and/or alien immersion" from their Articles of Incorporation. Although the vote to accept open communion and alien immersion garnered a majority support (383 of 608 ballots), the proposition fell 24 votes short of the supermajority (67%) needed to enact a by-law change. The amendment failed, but their ability to sway a substantial number of votes demonstrates that many messengers from Arkansas SBC churches no longer found intercommunion to be the only acceptable position for understanding Table fellowship.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Unfortunately, Baptist theologians have often interchanged terms such as closed, transient, consistent, and close communion when discussing various forms of Table restriction. There is really no *set* definition(s) for each of these terms, as writers often provide their own definitions. For this reason, we want to make sure the reader is clear as to how specific terms will be used in this article. A working definition for open communion is that all professing believers have access to the Lord's Supper, regardless of whether they have or have not received baptism. We define intercommunion as the practice of restricting the participation in the Lord's Supper to those who have received believer's baptism by immersion. Similarly, we define intracommunion as the practice of restricting participation in the Lord's Supper to those who have received believer's baptism by immersion and whose membership is in the specific church celebrating the ordinance.

For this article, we will use the term intercommunion when discussing the position that requires believer's baptism by immersion before being allowed to participate in Table fellowship in a SBC church. To be faithful, however, to the research materials employed in this article, when other authors have used different terms to convey this position, we have left their words in tact.

<sup>5</sup>Credit for this story is given to Stephen E. Farish, "The Open Versus Close Communion Controversy in English and American Baptist Life: An Overview of the History and Evaluation of the Issues" (M.A. Thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2002), 3-4.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Marus, "Arkansas Baptists Narrowly Reject Opening on Communion, Baptism," *Associated Baptist Press*, November 9, 2007. The article can be found online at: [http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2961&Itemid=120](http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2961&Itemid=120).

These two instances support the claim that some Southern Baptists are reconsidering longstanding beliefs on the doctrine of intercommunion. For this reason, we will conduct a critical investigation of Baptist confessions and modern Baptist writings as they pertain to the restriction of the Lord's Supper. Our purpose is to determine from these writings if restricting Table fellowship from non-baptized believers is a necessary component of Baptist ecclesiology. Baptist confessions will be examined to determine the prominence of the doctrine of intercommunion from an historical perspective. We will also investigate current Baptist writings on the question of restriction. Finally, we will address the question of whether intercommunion is a necessary element for a distinctive Baptist ecclesiology.<sup>7</sup>

### BAPTIST CONFESSIONS AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

Since their beginning, Baptists have been unashamed to record their cherished doctrines in the form of confessions. From John Smyth's *Short Confession* in 1609 to the SBC's *BF&M 2000*, Baptists have provided numerous documents that help inform and educate both Baptists and non-Baptists of core doctrines.<sup>8</sup> A quick perusal of Baptist confessions will note that the overwhelming majority of confessions have at least something to say concerning the doctrine of the Lord's Supper; unmistakably, this ordinance has been a vital component of Baptist ecclesiology. Not all confessions, however, reflect the same amount of consideration for the ordinance. For instance, while the *Second London Confession of Faith 1677/1689* (henceforth SLC) devotes eight paragraphs to the Lord's Supper, the *BF&M 2000* appropriates only one sentence. Even more minute is the *Standard Confession's* four-word affirmation that churches should continue in "the breaking of bread."<sup>9</sup> While Baptist confessions have not always demonstrated equality in the length of their treatments of the Lord's Supper, they most always discuss the issue of restricting the Table.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>The method we employ in this article does not purport to be a comprehensive examination of the issue of open communion versus intercommunion within Baptist ecclesiology. Space restrictions limit the scope of research and we have chosen confessional documents and modern SBC writers to comprise the source materials for this investigation. To answer the question more comprehensively, further research must be done on nineteenth and twentieth century Baptist theologians. This article is a result of the reading completed so far in the research for a dissertation to be presented to the faculty of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>8</sup>For a more fully orbbed discussion of the purpose(s) of Baptist confessions, see H. Leon McBeth, *Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1986), 68-9.

<sup>9</sup>Unless otherwise noted, quotations from confessions are taken from William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1959; revised, 1969).

<sup>10</sup>When discussing Table restrictions, the discussion inevitably drifts towards the issue of believer's baptism. However, there are other prerequisites (or restrictions) to the Lord's Table that Baptists have agreed upon which are often overlooked in this discussion. First, Baptists have advocated that the Lord's Supper is for believers only. Second, in keeping with Paul's instructions in First Corinthians 5:1-13 and 11:27-29, believers walking in gross disobedience are also disqualified from Table fellowship.

### Confessions and Intercommunion

Examining Baptist confessions, one finds the majority of these documents place a particular restriction on persons eligible to participate in the Lord's Supper, specifically a restriction that relates to the issue of believer's baptism. Overwhelmingly, almost all Baptist confessions affirm the doctrine of intercommunion.

Confessions that require intercommunion argue for this position both directly and indirectly. While the original form of the 1644 *First London Confession of Faith* (henceforth FLC) states nothing about the issue of communion, the 1646 revision provides an emendation to Article XXXIX. The 1644 FLC reads: "That Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed only upon persons professing faith, or that are disciples, or taught, who upon a profession of faith, ought to be baptized." The 1646 edition expanded the end of the article by adding: "and after to partake of the Lord's Supper." Therefore, these early British Baptists felt it necessary to provide a greater distinction concerning who was welcomed to the Lord's Table within their congregations, that is, those having been baptized as believers.

Thomas Helwys' *A Short Confession of 1610* says: "The Holy Supper, according to the institution of Christ, is to be administered to the baptized; as the Lord Jesus hath commanded that whatsoever he hath appointed should be taught to be observed." The most succinctly articulated direct argument for intercommunion is found in *The Principles of Faith of the Sandy Creek Association, 1816*: "That the church has no right to admit any but regular baptized church members to communion at the Lord's Table." Other confessions that directly call for intercommunion include *Propositions and Conclusions, 1612*, and the *BF&M 1925, 1963, and 2000*.

In addition, some confessions teach intercommunion indirectly, presenting their case as a logical progression of thought. This is the case in such confessions as Smyth's *Short Confession, 1609*, when he equates persons worthy of participating in the Supper with those who are members of the church. For Smyth, church membership is dependent upon believer's baptism. It stands to reason that the only persons qualified to take the Supper are those having already received believer's baptism. This is also the message proclaimed by Helwys' *Declaration of Faith of English People, 1611*, the *Somerset Confession*, the *Elkhorn and South Kentucky Confession 1801*, and the *New Hampshire Confession 1833*. For these confessions, church membership is prerequisite to participation in the Lord's Supper and none but those baptized by immersion as believers qualify to be members. Historically, most Baptist confessions have vigorously guarded the Table from allowing anyone but believers baptized by immersion to their fellowship.

### Confessions and Open Communion

There are primarily two Baptist confessions that do not restrict the Table to "rightly" baptized persons.<sup>11</sup> The first is the *Second London Confession of Faith* of 1677/1689 (henceforth

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<sup>11</sup>Technically there are three, as the *Philadelphia Confession, 1744* is an exact replica of the *SLC*, except with added articles advocating hymn singing and the laying on of hands.

*SLC*). The second is the *Kebukey Baptist Confession*, which William Lumpkin describes as most likely the first Baptist associational confession to be composed on American soil, written in 1777.<sup>12</sup>

Lumpkin notes that the *SLC* is “one of the most important of all Baptist confessions” because of its apologetic and educational influence throughout much of Britain and America.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned previously, it contains the longest treatment of the Lord’s Supper within Baptist confessions.<sup>14</sup> Missing, however, is any statement of the relationship between believer’s baptism and the qualifications for receiving the Lord’s Supper. Instead of following the precedent set by the revised *FLC* of 1646, these British Baptists were insistent on not making intercommunion a test (or mark) of associational fellowship. Although some have argued that the absence of a clear position for intercommunion in the *SLC* does not entail an acceptance of open communion, such is not the case.<sup>15</sup> In an appendix attached to *SLC*, the signers affirmed that there were many items of doctrine that were not settled among these Baptist churches. While they did not specify each of these doctrinal differences, the writers were clear to take the time to express their thoughts on one important doctrinal difference—whether or not believer’s baptism is a prerequisite for participation in the Lord’s Supper:

We are not insensible that as to the order of God’s house and entire communion therein there are some things wherein we (as well as others) are not at a full accord among our selves, as for instance the known principle and state of the consciences of diverse of us that have agreed in this Confession is such, that we cannot hold church-communion with any other then baptized believers, and churches constituted of such. Yet some others of us have a greater liberty and freedom in our spirits that way; and therefore we have purposely omitted the mention of things of that nature that we might concur in giving this evidence of our agreement, both among ourselves and with other good Christians in those important articles of the Christian Religion, mainly insisted on by us.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 354.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 239. This is true not only for its impact in England, as the document underwent multiple editions into the next century, but also because it formed the basis of the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith, 1744*, which was the most dominant Baptist confession in America until the composition of the *New Hampshire Confession of Faith, 1833*.

<sup>14</sup>Six of the eight paragraphs contain their repudiation of the doctrine of transubstantiation.

<sup>15</sup>Nathan Finn, “Baptism as a Prerequisite to the Lord’s Supper,” Center for Theological Research, September, 2006, <http://baptisttheology.org/documents/BaptismasPrerequisiteforSupper.pdf>, 8-9. In a discussion with Finn, he admitted he had no knowledge of the Appendix to the *SLC* at the time he wrote his paper.

<sup>16</sup>Fred Malone, “Appendix D: Appendix to the 1689 London Baptist Confession” in *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus*

For these Baptists, baptism for believers only was a doctrine worth splitting from paedobaptist congregations for the establishment of credobaptist fellowships. However, they still considered paedobaptists worthy of sharing in communion to the extent that they would be welcomed to Table fellowship at their credobaptist churches. Not all churches that subscribed to the *SLC* practiced open communion. However, they did not make it a test of fellowship within their association. Believer's baptism by immersion was an ecclesiastical distinctive, but these British Baptists did not believe that intercommunion was an ecclesiological necessity in order to keep their "believer's-only" churches pure.

A second example of open communion confessions comes from early Baptists in North Carolina. The Kehukee area churches stated the following concerning the ordinances: "12. We believe baptism and the Lord's Supper are gospel ordinances both belonging to the converted or true believers; and that persons who are sprinkled or dipped while in unbelief are not regularly baptized according to God's word, and that such ought to be baptized after they are savingly converted into the faith of Christ."

There are many things in this statement worth noting that are pertinent to their understanding of communion. First, it describes the ordinances as 'gospel ordinances' instead of 'church ordinances'. This is unfamiliar language to modern Southern Baptists, who have denoted baptism as a church ordinance. For these early American Baptists, the ordinances were not confined to local congregations, but they belonged to those who professed faith in Jesus. Second, and similarly, the ordinances belong to 'true believers'. This indicates that all true believers were welcomed to participate in both ordinances. The only restriction to participating in the ordinances was faith in Christ. Third, while they are unwavering in their insistence that anything other than believer's baptism by immersion is not true baptism, they never make the claim that believer's baptism by immersion is a prerequisite to the Lord's Table. It was thus possible for them to keep the doctrine of believer's baptism as a requirement for church membership and open the Table to non-immersed believers without the fear of compromising the purity of the congregation. These two examples comprise clear confessional testimony that at least some Baptists, both British and American, believed open communion could be consistently practiced without compromising the ecclesiastical distinctives of a credobaptist church.

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*Paedobaptism*, 263-64. In a footnote providing a brief description of the appendix, Malone notes that he updated the spelling of certain words, but "retained the awkward grammar of the original document, for historical interest" and that the appendix was "included in the original 1677 publication of the confession, although its authorship remains unknown" (253, n257). For an online version that retains more Elizabethan grammar and syntax, see "The Appendix to the Second London Confession (1689 Confession)," <http://www.reformedbaptistinstitute.org/?p=46>.

### MODERN THEOLOGIANs AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

In recent years, there has been a reinvigoration of the concept of what Baptist identity means.<sup>17</sup> With that has come the explosion of writings on various doctrines from a Baptist perspective, especially Baptist ecclesiology. Recent years has produced many articles argue for intercommunion.<sup>18</sup> There also are those, equally conservative, advocating less restrictions and more unity among the body as it pertains to the Lord's Supper.

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<sup>17</sup>For instance, see R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001). For a more popular treatment of the movement, see Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore, eds., *Why I Am a Baptist?* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001).

<sup>18</sup>For example: Emir Caner, "Fencing the Table: The Lord's Supper, Its Participants, and Its Relationship to Church Discipline," and Thomas White, "A Baptist's Theology of the Lord's Supper," both chapters in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, eds. Thomas White, Jason G. Deusing, and Malcolm Yarnell III, 163-78 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008); Mark E. Dever, "The Doctrine of the Church," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, 766-856 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007); Finn, "Baptism as a Prerequisite to the Lord's Supper," and John S. Hammett, "Article VII Baptism and the Lord's Supper," in *Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*, eds. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell, 71-81 (Lanham, MY: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); idem, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005); Russell D. Moore, "Baptist View: Christ's Presence as Memorial," in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, ed. John H. Armstrong, 29-44 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); and R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005).

Hammett (*Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*) provides the most convincing and well-reasoned argument while Moore and Norman give only a passing defense of the doctrine of intercommunion in their works. Disappointingly, Dever devotes only one sentence to the issue, and he provides no support for it: "Because faith is required for those who celebrate the Lord's Supper, the table must be reserved for those who have been baptized" (791). This is a strange statement. Does Dever actually believe paedobaptists have no 'faith' or that it is baptism and not the Holy Spirit that produces faith necessary for remembering the body and blood?

### Modern Theologians and Intercommunion

There are four basic arguments for restricting Table fellowship among current Southern Baptist writers who advocate intercommunion.<sup>19</sup> First, “[A]ll denominations agree that baptism should precede the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>20</sup> For intercommunionists, the real divide between open communionists and intercommunionists has to do with one’s view of baptism, rather than the Lord’s Supper. Since Baptists consider infant baptism to be no baptism at all, allowing paedobaptists admission to the Lord’s Table would be allowing unbaptized persons to participate in the Supper. Put differently, to accept paedobaptists at the Table would be, as Thomas White claims, “to affirm knowingly a theologically errant view.”<sup>21</sup> One of the most commonly used scriptural justifications for baptism as a necessary prerequisite comes from the Great Commission, where the command to baptize precedes the phrase “teaching them to observe all I have commanded.” A similar argument is found in Acts 2. They posit that Jesus gives a well-regulated order of obedience. For intercommunionists, baptism is both the initiatory and prerequisite ordinance for all other forms of church participation.

Second, these Baptists believe intercommunion “is a logical outgrowth of the Baptist view of the church and the Lord’s Supper as an ordinance for the church.”<sup>22</sup> Most Baptists argue that the Lord’s Supper (along with baptism) is “a church ordinance” that belongs exclusively to the local congregation, although, technically, no Baptist confession describes the Lord’s Supper as being “a church ordinance.”<sup>23</sup> Only those persons who qualify as

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<sup>19</sup>Hammett, “*Article VII Baptist and the Lord’s Supper*,” 78. There is a fifth argument used more in 19th century writings against open communion. Hammett (*Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 287) mentions that the logic of open communion can lead to open membership. Such was the case for John Bunyan’s Bedford church; however, open membership plagued neither Charles Spurgeon’s Metropolitan Tabernacle nor modern SBC churches that practice open communion.

<sup>20</sup>Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 283.

<sup>21</sup>White, “A Baptist’s Theology of the Lord’s Supper,” 157. He goes on to claim that persons who reject eternal security would not be allowed to join a Baptist church because he does not agree with them, and unless two agree they cannot walk together. Should this person be allowed to join, it would be incumbent upon the church to begin immediate correction for improper doctrine. If the person refused to change his beliefs after being clearly shown from Scripture, then church discipline would follow and the person would not be allowed to partake of the Lord’s Supper. This would be the case if paedobaptist joined a Baptist church.”

<sup>22</sup>Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 284.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 261; Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 153-55. Technically, no Baptist confession ever describes the Lord’s Supper as being “a church ordinance.” For instance, according to the *BF&M 2000*, baptism is “an ordinance of the church” but that language is absent in the section dealing with the Lord’s Supper. According to Article VI “The Church,” New Testament churches “observ[e] the two ordinances,” but the Lord’s Supper does not



members of the church qualify to partake of the Lord's Supper. White agrees: "I will contend that the proper recipient *must* be a person who could be accepted into the membership of that Baptist church."<sup>24</sup> This is not the same as saying the person must be a member of the church, but only that she could be accepted into the congregation. Paedobaptists do not meet the qualifications necessary to become members of Baptist churches due (at least) to their improper baptism, and therefore do not qualify to participate in the Lord's Supper.

Third, "closed communion is supported by the relational aspect of the Lord's Supper. It is not just about renewing our commitment to the Lord, but also to the body of believers."<sup>25</sup> Hammett seems most concerned with this aspect of the Supper. He sees tremendous implications for the unity that is found within a local congregation: "But one who is not baptized, and therefore not a member of the church, cannot renew her or his unity with or commitment to the body."<sup>26</sup> There is no doubt that part of the Lord's Supper is a call to unity and purity; First Corinthians 5.7 teaches this concept. Intercommunionists believe that unity is achieved in part through a common baptism. Therefore, paedobaptists cannot be in union with credobaptists since they do not share the same baptism. Despite the call by paedobaptists that open communion demonstrates greater unity, Russell Moore claims that "[c]hurches that recognize the importance of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper for Christian identity have far more prospect for eventual unity than churches that seek to find unity in carefully written manifestos or carefully orchestrated press conferences."<sup>27</sup>

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*technically belong* to the church. Other Baptist confessions employ such verbiage as "gospel ordinance," "ordinance of the Lord," or "ordinance of Christ," but never label the Supper as "an ordinance of the church." For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Jason Sampler "Looking to the Past to Guide the Present: Baptist Confessions and the Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," 12-13, a paper presented to the Southeast Region of the Evangelical Theological Society, Cordova, Tennessee, on March 15, 2008.

<sup>24</sup>White, "A Baptists's Theology of the Lord's Supper," 154. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>25</sup>Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 285.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. However, such an emphasis on this point would tend to lead one towards intracommunion, a practice Hammett rejects. The believers at Troas did not consider the Lord's Supper to demand a commitment to unity of that particular congregation, as they allowed Paul and his companions to "break bread" on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), a seemingly clear inference to taking the Lord' Supper together. Even J. M. Pendleton, a leader in the Landmark movement of the nineteenth century, rejected fellow Landmarker J. R. Graves' insistence upon intracommunion as the only consistently logical form of communion for Baptists. See J. M. Pendleton "Letter on the Extent of Landmarkism; Disagreement with Graves: Letter to J. J. D. Renfroe, April 5, 1882," in *Selected Writings of James Madison Pendleton*, vol. II, compiled and edited by Thomas White, 407-10 (Paris: AR; The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006).

<sup>27</sup>Moore, "Baptist View: Christ's Presence as Memorial," 43.

Fourth, those who support intercommunion see “open communion as denigrating the importance of obedience to Christ’s command to be baptized.”<sup>28</sup> According to this argument, if churches admit unscripturally baptized persons to the Lord’s Table, then what need do they have to submit to baptism? If they are already participating in the ‘continuing rite,’ then why will they submit to the ‘initiator rite?’ Intercommunion Baptists do not wish to be inhospitable to paedobaptists when they keep them from the Table. They simply wish to be consistent in their form of ecclesiology.

### **Modern Theologians Advocating Open Communion**

Intercommunionists give a variety of reasons for why some Baptists practice open communion. John Hammett notes that there has been a renewed opposition to intercommunion, especially among some Moderate Baptists.<sup>29</sup> Nathan Finn claims such reasons include a desire to be ecumenical, to include Reformed Christians, or simply from “theological ignorance or methodological laziness.”<sup>30</sup> However, both Hammett and Finn fail to consider the fact that some Baptists oppose intercommunion because they find no New Testament justification for restricting the Table on the grounds of believer’s baptism.

Two modern day Baptists that advocate open communion include systematic theologians Millard Erickson and Wayne Grudem. Although neither theologian is *Southern Baptist*, both are Baptists and, as authors of two of the most often used systematic textbooks by SBC seminaries, hold immense sway over Southern Baptist theological education. While neither has written a long treatment on open communion, their views are accessible through their respective systematic texts.

In Erickson’s discussion concerning proper recipients, he claims there are only two requirements for the Lord’s Supper that can be clearly affirmed from reading the New Testament, regeneration and right living: “Nowhere in Scripture do we find an extensive statement of prerequisites for receiving the Lord’s Supper. Those we do have we infer from Paul’s discourse in First Corinthians 11 and from our understanding of the meaning of the sacrament.”<sup>31</sup> Missing, however, is any conditional need for baptism. The only necessary conditions for participation in this ordinance are the belief that Jesus is Lord and the absence of flagrant sin.

Erickson holds a high view of the unity of the church, which means an issue such as baptism (while important) is not enough to divide believers when it comes to gathering around the Table: “In other cases, however, since we do not know what the requirements for membership in the New Testament churches were, it is probably best, once we have

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<sup>28</sup>Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 285.

<sup>29</sup>Hammett, “*Article VII Baptist and the Lord’s Supper*,” 81 fn. 15. He lists such moderate Baptists as John Tyler, G. Todd Wilson, Thomas Clifton, and Fisher Humphreys.

<sup>30</sup>Finn, “Baptism as a Prerequisite to the Lord’s Supper,” 5-6.

<sup>31</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1132.

explained the meaning of the sacrament and the basis of partaking, to leave to the individuals themselves the decision as to whether to participate.”<sup>32</sup> He does not go so far, however, as to endorse a mixed congregation of both credobaptists and paedobaptists. A Baptist church is still composed only of believers baptized by immersion.

Wayne Grudem does not specifically discuss the issue of open versus intercommunion; he does address, however, the issue of unbaptized persons and their relationship to the Supper:

A different problem arises if someone who is a genuine believer, but not yet baptized, is *not* allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper when Christians get together. In that case the person's nonparticipation symbolizes that he or she is *not* a member of the body of Christ which is coming together to observe the Lord's Supper in a unified fellowship (see 1 Cor. 10:17: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread"). Therefore churches may think it best to allow non-baptized believers to participate in the Lord's Supper but to urge them to be baptized as soon as possible. For if they are willing to participate in one outward symbol of being a Christian, there seems no reason why they should not be willing to participate in the other, a symbol that appropriately comes first.<sup>33</sup>

For Grudem, baptism should be a natural outgrowth of a believer's spiritual maturation. Nevertheless, one who has not yet been scripturally baptized should not be barred from Table fellowship. His quotation of First Corinthians 10:17 strengthens his position. How can a church rightly deny a regenerate believer from shared proclamation of the gospel through the Supper? If through the preaching of the Word one comes to salvation in a Sunday morning service, and that church celebrates communion in the same service, must that Holy Spirit filled, regenerate child of God wait until baptism to be part of the 'one body'? For Grudem, the answer is no. Regeneration, not baptism, is the mark of membership into the body. He is quite firm that baptism *should* come first, but he is not willing to make it a *necessary* requirement for participation in the Supper. It would seem to follow that Grudem's understanding of baptism as important but not necessary for participation in the Lord's Supper would also apply to those having received infant baptism, which Grudem would define as no baptism at all. Their false baptism does not keep them from participating in Table fellowship with other believers who happen to be Baptists.

Some might wish to label these men unbaptistic for their apparent lack of regard for baptism's relationship to the Lord's Supper. However, it is helpful to remember that just recently Zondervan reprinted Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, with an updated section on baptism. Grudem's former position was that baptism did not necessarily need to be a point of division between paedobaptists and credobaptists. However, in light of recently proposed changes at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Grudem revised his thoughts on the matter and now finds that differences are too great for these two groups of believers to unite within one

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 996 (1994 printing).

congregation. For Grudem, baptism is necessary for church membership in a local congregation, a defining characteristic of a conservative Baptist. In addition, one must remember that Erickson taught at a Southern Baptist seminary for a number of years as a research professor of theology. Although he since moved to Bethel Seminary and now teaches at Western Seminary, all three schools are conservative Baptist institutions of higher education.

### IS INTERCOMMUNION A NECESSARY BAPTIST DOCTRINE?

Is there a distinctive theology of the Lord's Supper from a Baptist perspective that demands Baptists to restrict Table fellowship from those of differing denominations? Is open communion un-baptistic? Are Baptists giving up a part of their theological heritage by allowing paedobaptists to share in the Lord's Supper? I believe the answer to these questions is no.

First, while other Baptists groups in America long ago gave up the restrictive position of intercommunion, the SBC has been the only primary group of Baptists to continue this practice. Northern Baptists historians Norman Maring and Winthrop Hudson have stated as recently as 1991 that "the practice of open Communion is now almost universal among Baptists in the United States, although in some parts of the South closed Communion still persists."<sup>34</sup> Are those Northern and Freewill Baptists who open the Table to all believers, sub-Baptists or pseudo-Baptists? Overall, they have kept a distinctive of believer's baptism by immersion (and hopefully preserved a regenerate church membership) while also allowing baptism to be no bar to communion.

Second, why is the participation in the Lord's Supper tied to church membership? The primary argument for intercommunion is that a person must qualify to be a member of the church before one can take communion. This seems to be a position without sufficient warrant, as Baptist churches do not stipulate that persons must meet membership requirements before participating in other aspects of worship. No one argues that you must qualify for membership before you can sing, preach, or give to the building fund. Southern Baptists place no baptismal preconditions upon these things.

The difference, intercommunionists will say, is that none of the above acts of worship are ordinances, and the premise is granted. However, the Bible never mentions that the ordinances 'belong' to the church. They are to be practiced by the church, in the corporate fellowship of the church, and under the direction of the church, but they do not belong *to* the church. A case can be made that the ordinances should be practiced within the church without having to concede that ordinances can be practiced only by persons meeting the requirements for church membership. This is the case with baptism; so why not also with the Lord's Supper? A person does not join a church first and then receive baptism.

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<sup>34</sup>Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Judson, 1991), 170.

Instead, the believer is first baptized and then joins the fellowship. Why must a believer be a member to qualify to participate in one ordinance (communion) but not the other (baptism)?

Third, even if most Southern Baptists wish to practice intercommunion, this could be an issue left up to individual churches. Deciding whether to restrict paedobaptists from Table fellowship is difficult for even an intercommunionist such as Hammett.<sup>35</sup> Baptist confessions that declare affirmation of intercommunion place some churches in a difficult position. For instance, in order to affirm wholly the *BF&M 2000*, a church must practice intercommunion. However, it is common knowledge that at least some SBC churches do not practice intercommunion.<sup>36</sup> Are open communion SBC churches less baptistic than those that restrict the Table?

Why must the *BF&M 2000* be so specific on the issue of intercommunion? This confession leaves substantial room to house both Calvinists and Arminians; there is space for those who accept and reject original sin. Is it not capable of accommodating both open communionists and intercommunionists?<sup>37</sup> The idea contained within the *SLC* appendix, that churches should have the freedom to decide in this matter, could work exceptionally well within the modern SBC context. Let congregations be responsible to decide who is

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<sup>35</sup>Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 286. He says specifically, "I regard this as a difficult decision." While he ultimately comes down on the side of intercommunion, he does not seem dogmatic or legalistic about the issue.

<sup>36</sup>This was Jim Goodroe's point at the 2000 SBC Annual Convention, as mentioned above. Not even all of the members of the *BF&M 2000* committee were members (or pastors) of churches that practiced intercommunion. While no statistics are available, it is quite conceivable that a substantial number (not necessarily a majority, but maybe) of SBC churches do not practice intercommunion. In addition, Norman (*The Baptist Way*, 151) even admits that not all (Southern?) Baptist churches practice intercommunion. Although Norman is a firm advocate of intercommunion, he does not deny that there is a legitimate expression of open communion within Baptist theology.

<sup>37</sup>At this point, we must take umbrage with White's claim that to affirm open communion is to affirm a 'theologically errant view.' He seems to take this position a bit far. Does he expect churches to examine a prospective member across a gamut of theological issues? If the church held cessationist views, would a continualist be accused of holding 'a theologically errant view' and considered worthy of discipline? Would a complementarian be considered 'theologically errant' within an egalitarian congregation? One wonders when the demand for conformity might end. This does not mean that a congregationally led church cannot regulate who qualifies to be a member of the assembly, but that there should be latitude in non-essential doctrines within a congregation for the sake of Christian unity.

Is a church in theological error if they have members who affirm both Calvinism and Arminianism, or cessationism and non-cessationism? It is highly unlikely, as well, that a church that has members affirming both intercommunion and open communion are not necessarily guilty of theological error but rather have come to different conclusions on their assessments of the issue.

welcome to their Table, but let us not make it a test of fellowship by including such a restrictive position in our confessional identity. I find the arguments for intercommunion to be more consistent than open communion, but is the issue so vital that we are willing to exclude (with our documents, though often not in action) churches that differ with us?

An important major difference between the *FLC* and the *SLC* is that the 1644/1646 confession served eight churches while the 1677/1689 was signed by representatives of thirty-six congregations. We might learn something of the situation between two confessions. The more churches that are served by a common confession, the greater will be the demand for flexibility over rigidity in certain areas. If the *BF&M 2000*, which potentially serves more than forty-two thousand congregations of the SBC, is truly to be a confession for all SBC churches, it does not have enough flexibility over the issue of intercommunion and open communion.

Thankfully, we have an instructive anecdote from a revered Baptist statesman, Herschel Hobbs. In recounting his experience as chairman of the committee that composed the *BF&M 1963*:

The committee was conscious of the fact that its responsibility was to present a statement of faith for *Southern* Baptists, not simply for any single regional group of them.

For instance, late one night it [the committee] finished the statement on "Baptism." The chairman noting that the group was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted, suggested that it adjourn and take up the "Lord's Supper" the next morning. When the committee convened the next day one member requested the privilege of reading a proposed statement on the "Lord's Supper." It called for closed communion of the tightest sort.

Another member spoke something as follows: "That statement pleases me very much. And it would be accepted by the people of my state. For that is exactly what we believe and practice. However, we must remember that we are not preparing a statement of faith for any one state, but for all Southern Baptists. It must be broad enough for all of them to live comfortably with it."<sup>38</sup>

While the situation was different then, Hobbs's story still has application for today. The *BF&M 1963* committee presented an intercommunion understanding of the Lord's Supper that suited the churches of that day. However, a number of SBC churches in the twenty-first century do not find those same restrictions to be a necessary component of Baptist ecclesiology. I hope that our next confession will be mindful of this lack of consensus within the SBC.

David Dockery, Baptist statesman and President of Union University, argues similarly for Southern Baptists of today. In his latest work *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal*, chapter three is dedicated to an examination of and proposal for Southern Baptist

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<sup>38</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs, "Southern Baptists and Confessionalism: A Comparison of the Origins and Contents of the 1925 and 1963 Confessions," *Review and Expositor* 76 no. 1 (Winter 1979): 60.

worship practices “then and now.” While not treating the issue of open communion and intercommunion in detail, the summary paragraph of the chapter contains a telling footnote about this matter. He writes, “Of course important questions such as closed or open communion and regulative or normative worship principles remain to be answered. I think it is important to recognize that Southern Baptists have had diverse practices on these matters, and even as we develop areas of commonality and consensus, we must agree to differ on some issues.”<sup>39</sup> In our quest to remain solidly conservative but not dogmatic about every issue, there seems to be both historical precedent and recent renewal towards a desire to allow diverse understandings and practices on the issue of open communion versus intercommunion.

## CONCLUSION

Southern Baptists have a heritage and a duty to do their best to model a church built upon the foundation of the New Testament. Among other things, this means we must continue to admit into our membership only those demonstrating spiritual regeneration. Christ's bride should be pure, and unbelievers have no part in the intimacy of our fellowship. We also believe the New Testament calls Christ-followers to submit to believer's baptism by immersion. Such an act demonstrates to the outside world a person's commitment to burial and resurrection in Christ's likeness. We dare not affirm or accept other forms or meanings for baptism. We should not fail in our duty to perform needed church discipline as well. A New Testament church is a disciplining church. These are all essential characteristics of Baptist churches. However, there does not seem to be a *necessary* link between church membership (or specifically baptism) and participation in the Lord's Supper.

Paul's instructions on the Lord's Supper, the only definitive worship instructions given in all of the New Testament, say nothing of the need for baptism as a prerequisite. We have only assumed it was necessary. While this might be the case, should we be quick to reject those whom Christ has accepted? Can we excise from the body those who have already been grafted in? Are paedobaptists unable, alongside credobaptists, to proclaim the death of our Lord until His coming? Will Southern Baptists be willing to reconsider the issue of intercommunion? Early British Baptists, as well as some modern Baptists, have demonstrated that open communion does not deteriorate or denigrate a regenerate church. Open communion simply allows brothers and sisters to proclaim together the death of our Lord. Despite some ecclesiological differences between credobaptists and paedobaptists, our united proclamation would be a testimony to the overcoming power of unity that exists for those of us who are in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>39</sup>David S. Dockery, *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Proposal* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 129, n.37.