

Baptism as Worship: Revisiting the Kiffin/Bunyan Open-Communion Debate

Matthew Ward¹

Baptists in America have very strong feelings about the conditions for church membership. In this article, I want to focus on one: believer's baptism by immersion. My current church constitution lists as a requirement for church membership baptism by immersion on repentance of sin and profession of faith. The same qualification appears in both the Philadelphia and New Hampshire confessions of faith, in Pendleton's *Baptist Church Manual*, and in the *Baptist Faith and Message*. Indeed, many Baptists in America consider believer's baptism by immersion to be a non-negotiable prerequisite for local church membership—but perhaps not as many as did a generation ago. Some significant Baptist churches have begun accepting members without that requirement, and that trend will certainly continue. Indeed, I broached this subject with some colleagues in Britain, and they were confused by my intention because they have nearly unanimously removed that condition from their constitutions. It is no longer a debate for them.

This development raises the question: Should this matter simply go by the wayside, another casualty of the inexorable march toward uniformity (or perhaps pastor fatigue)? I know that my pastor has been through several weeks of this discussion with an individual from a Church of Christ background who is presenting herself for membership. Both my wife and I were confronted (blindsided?) with this matter when, as new Christians, we desired to join a Baptist church for the first time. In America, at least, many churches deal with the matter of "rebaptism" on a regular basis.² It is a critical matter worthy of continued attention. To remind us of its importance and perhaps refresh our perspective, I would like to call our attention to one of the first times it was debated publicly in its modern sense—the open-communication debate between seventeenth-century English pastors William Kiffin and John Bunyan—and recast it in the context they considered, as a matter of worship. To Kiffin and Bunyan, the crux of the open-communication debate was whether baptism should be considered an act of individual worship or the church's worship. They revealed baptism to be a critical intersection of ministry, theology, and worship. Their answers to the question could well inform our understanding of this matter and its significance today.

¹ Matthew Ward, PhD, is Associate Pastor of First Baptist Church, Thomson, GA with responsibilities over education and music. His PhD is in Free Church studies.

² I should point out that the term "rebaptism" is a part of the confusion today. When Baptists use this term with prospective church members, it likely (if unintentionally) validates that person's earlier sacramental experience and raises questions of purpose. In truth, we do not "rebaptize"; we baptize for the first time. We do not believe that anything other than an intentional believer's baptism by immersion is biblical baptism, as the confessions of faith listed above state. Obviously, this is not only a pastoral concern but a profound issue for theology and ecclesiology, most of which is beyond the scope of this article.

Two definitions need to be clarified if we are to follow the original debate correctly. First, I would venture that most Baptist readers would associate the term “communion” with the Lord’s Supper. They would assume “open-communion” in the title of this article is the issue of whether Baptist churches should allow Christians who have not been baptized as a believer by immersion to join them at the Lord’s Table (this is where we get the distinctions of “open-communion,” “close-communion,” and “closed-communion”). That is a very important discussion, and Kiffin certainly argued that unbaptized individuals should not be admitted to the Lord’s Table, but the primary issue was actually church membership, of which the Lord’s Supper was a function. Bunyan himself explained, “[B]y the word Communion I mean fellowship in the things of the Kingdom of Christ.”³ And by “the Kingdom of Christ,” Bunyan and many of the authors of that day meant the church.⁴ Kiffin, who argued that baptism should be necessary for church membership as this article will explain, said of any man united with Christ “and being baptized, they have a Right to Church Fellowship, and the Lords Supper, &c.”⁵ “Fellowship,” and by extension “communion,” is the rough equivalent of what we mean by “membership” today. “Open-communion” was the practice of accepting unbaptized individuals into church membership and thus to the Lord’s Table.

Second, the term “worship” probably has a different sphere of meaning to readers today than it did for Kiffin and Bunyan. Without denying that worship was spiritual, devotional, and personal, they usually referred in their writings to worship in its public, instituted, and corporate sense. As a result, their discussions of worship focused primarily on timing and order of church services, “a great part of it lying in nothing else but the right and Orderly Administration of Ceremonies.”⁶ While the Anglicans accepted those ceremonies instituted in the Book of Common Prayer, the Baptists and other nonconformists only acknowledged those instituted by Christ: the ordinances. Kiffin explained that he so heavily priori-

³ John Bunyan, *A Confession of my Faith, And A Reason of my Practice* (London: n.p., 1672), 48. That the terms “communion” and “fellowship” are similar to our word “membership” can be further inferred by Bunyan’s statement, “Mixed communion polluteth the ordinances of God” (*Ibid.*, 58). The Lord’s Supper is understood to be a benefit of church fellowship.

⁴ For example, an early Baptist confession of faith that Kiffin signed said, “Christ hath here on earth a spirituall Kingdome, which is the Church” (*The Confession of Faith, Of those Churches which are commonly [though falsly] called Anabaptists* [London: n.p., 1644], Article XXXIII).

⁵ William Kiffin, *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church-Communion* (London: G[eorge] Larkin, 1681), 151. In further support of my contention, Kiffin conversely noted that unbaptized individuals should be excluded from “immediate Church-Fellowship” (*Ibid.*, 19).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 117. In this section, Kiffin claimed to be citing Henry Lawrence, Oliver Cromwell’s former council president. In the work in question, otherwise anonymous, Lawrence clarified that we should always think of worship in terms of institution because the only valid worship was that instituted by Christ, which was “solemn and stated for the church, the whole church, at all times and seasons, according to the rules of his appointment” ([Henry Lawrence], *Of Baptisme* [Rotterdam: n.p., 1646], 106). Lawrence’s understanding simply echoed the earlier Puritan William Bradshaw, who preached, “For indeed the outward worship of God, doth consist only of Ceremonies, that is, outward demonstrations of inward Worship” (William Bradshaw, *Several Treatises of Worship and Ceremonies* [London: n.p., 1660], unpaginated section). Bradshaw originally published these treatises in 1604-5 arguing against nationally imposed ceremonies.

tized the ordinances precisely because he desired to “Worship the Lord according to his prescrib’d Order.”⁷ Readers today probably think of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as the ordinances, but Kiffin actually meant everything commanded by Christ for his church. For example, in a work published the same year as his own, Kiffin’s longtime colleague Hanserd Knollys specifically listed prayer, reading Scripture, preaching the gospel, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and singing as “Gospel-Ordinances.”⁸ Baptism and the Lord’s Supper were set apart as the “shaddowish, or figurative ordinances,” which Bunyan esteemed for their unique purpose, “both which are of excellent use to the Church, in this world; they being to us representations of the death, and resurrection of Christ.”⁹ “Worship” in this article thus refers to the outward, corporate actions of a church, and both of the men in question desired to tie those actions directly to the Lord’s commands.

Origins of the Open-Communion Debate

The two foci in this debate have traditionally been John Bunyan’s *Differences in Judgment about Water-Baptism, No Bar to Communion* (1673) and William Kiffin’s *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church-Communion* (1681). Kiffin (1616-1701) was considered by his peers to be one of the fathers of the Particular Baptist tradition in London (the other being Hanserd Knollys). A merchant by trade, he joined the important non-conformist London church led by John Lathrop, who was succeeded by Henry Jessey in 1637. Jessey believed that baptism should be an individual’s decision and not a compulsory factor in church membership (i.e., “open-communion”), causing Kiffin and those who disagreed with Jessey to form their own churches. Leaders of at least four of the seven churches adopting the foundational First London Confession of Faith in 1644 were once part of Jessey’s church, and Kiffin’s church on Devonshire Square became known for its strong stance on closed-communion. Notably for our purposes, John Bunyan printed the entirety of Jessey’s defense of his position in *Differences of Judgment*.¹⁰ Bunyan (1628–1688), though most famous for his still-beloved

⁷ Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, Epistle to the Reader.

⁸ Hanserd Knollys, *The World that Now is; and the World that is to Come* (London: Tho Snowden, 1681), 70-76. The confession of faith Kiffin signed in 1677 labeled those actions as the “parts” of a church’s worship, but that word was a function of their olive branch to the Presbyterians and the Westminster Confession of Faith. Individual signees regularly used “ordinance” when referring to the “parts” of worship in their own writings; see *A Confession of Faith. Put forth by the Elders and Brethren Of many Congregations of Christians (baptized upon Profession of their Faith) in London and the Country* (London: Benjamin Harris, 1677), Article XXII. Henry Jessey, a pastor cited at length by Bunyan, called the ordinances the “wayes and meanes of divine worship, of Christs appointment” (Henry Jessey, *A Storehouse of Provision to further Resolution in severall cases of Conscience* [London: Charles Sumptner, 1650], 9).

⁹ Bunyan, *Confession of My Faith*, 65.

¹⁰ See the requirements for church membership in *Confession of Faith* [1644], Articles XXXIII, XXXIX, and XL. Jessey later clarified that he supported believer’s baptism by immersion—he spoke highly of an Independent who came under conviction of baptism, and he himself was baptized by Knollys in 1645—but he

allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, was a popular preacher and pastor in Bedford who endured years of imprisonment for defying the Crown's religious claims of authority. He was also a prolific author whose works were printed in London, bringing him to the attention of his non-conformist brethren to the south.

The debate over open-communion was much larger than either Kiffin or Bunyan. Kiffin certainly had to deal with it throughout his pastorate because it regularly surfaced in the writings of those connected with Jessey's church. Indeed, in question was the nature of the church itself. Church leaders defined the church by two parameters: matter and form. The "matter" of a church was someone "professing faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ"; the "form" of a church was "that by which these are united and knit up together in one fellowship."¹¹ Everyone agreed on those definitions in general but interpreted them in different ways. For example, the form of a church could refer to any number of things. Was a church united by its profession of faith? Its baptism? Its covenant? Many of the leaders we now call "Baptist" concluded believer's baptism by immersion to be the form of a church. One of Jessey's apologists, a pastor by the name of Praisegod Barbone, rejected such a claim. On the one hand, it implied that Christians must be rebaptized every time they changed churches.¹² On the other hand, it left the nature of the church in a liturgical (i.e., related to worship) no-man's land. If the essence of baptism were in the form of the ceremony, then any ceremonial error (such as failing to immerse the crown of the head) would invalidate the entire baptism: "then is their Baptisme, their Church, and all their actions, nullities and voyd, having error attending them, as they will confesse and must doe."¹³ But if the essence of baptism were not in the form, then sprinkling or baptism of infants should be valid. Either way, the Baptist conclusion was untenable, and Barbone's determination lay in viewing it as a ceremony of worship.¹⁴

wanted it to be entirely voluntary with no hint of compulsion. In his mind, Peter's sermon in Acts 2 established the clear sequence that his hearers first "professed themselves to be one body with them in Christian Worship" and *then* Peter explained baptism to them (Jessey, *Storehouse of Provision*, 127-45).

¹¹ John Spilsbury (one of the defecting pastors), *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* (London: n.p., 1643), 41. Jessey offered the most generic description, "Where is *matter* and *forme*, there is a true Church; the *Matter* of a true Church, to be Saints visibly; the *Forme*, a gathering of these out from the world and *joyning of them together* to worship the Lord in truth" (Jessey, *Storehouse of Provision*, 102).

¹² It is important to note that, coming from opposite perspectives, both Spilsbury and Jessey concluded that the first baptizer in an area did not even have to be baptized for this reason (John Spilsbury, *Gods Ordinance, The Saints Priviledge* [London: M Simmons, 1646], 10; Jessey, *Storehouse of Provision*, 59).

¹³ Praisegod Barbone, *A Discourse Tending to prove the Baptisme in, Or under the defection of Anti-christ, to be the Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London: Benjamin Allen, 1643), 20. Barbone agreed that believer's baptism by immersion was the proper form of baptism, but he could not from that conclusion invalidate every other baptism in England.

¹⁴ Note that Jessey believed that a mutual covenant between the members was the form of a church. He came to this conclusion through the hypothetical scenario of three men becoming Christians on a deserted island and then desiring to become a church. He believed that their mutual commitment to worship the Lord correctly together made them a church (Jessey, *Storehouse of Provision*, 68-69). Barbone and Bunyan, on the other hand, concluded that what qualified a man for membership in the universal church must also for a particular church: a true profession of faith; see Praisegod Barbone, *A Defence of the Lawfulness of Baptizing Infants* (London: M. Bell, 1644), 36-37; John Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment about Water-Baptism, No Bar to*

This led Kiffin's colleague, John Spilsbury, to offer an astounding (and to Barbone confounding) compromise, "For answer to this, I must distinguish in Baptisme between the truth in the doctrine of Baptisme, and the outward administration of the same."¹⁵ The doctrine of baptism, including the mode and subject, belonged inviolately to God; the administration of baptism, its ceremonial use in worship, belonged to the church as defined by her covenant. This protected Baptists both from doctrinal deviation and an unbearable liturgical precision. However, not all Baptists were satisfied with his compromise, which is why the First London Confession held its identifiably vague tensions about the nature of the church. William Kiffin believed that baptism was the form of the church; John Spilsbury had just concluded from his debate with Barbone that baptism could *not* be that form. The lingering issues established in this early controversy—the distinction between the church and the individual, and the relationship between the church and her ceremonies—greatly illuminate the course of the open-communion debate and demonstrate its significance to churches today.

The Course of the Open-Communion Debate

The basic impetus for open-communion, namely that a church accept as members those who had been sprinkled as infants or not baptized at all, had occupied Bunyan for some time. He first put his conclusions in print in *A Confession of My Faith* (1672). Defending his "practice of worship," Bunyan began by indicating those with which he would and would not hold church fellowship (communion). To Bunyan, a church was a "community of visible Saints"; such sainthood was determined by their faith, experience, and conversation, and not their baptism.¹⁶ He did not, as he would later say, *despise* believer's baptism, but he did not see it as a delineator of a visible saint or child of God.¹⁷ This was a pastoral concern, "That if there be any Saints in the Antichristian Church [i.e., the Anglican Church], my heart, and the

Communion (London: n.p., 1673), 12, 50. They argued that men through their imperfect understanding of Scripture could not completely destroy God's work in creating a church.

¹⁵ Spilsbury, *Treatise Concerning Baptisme*, 41. Spilsbury even joined Kiffin's church sometime around 1647. This is not to say that Spilsbury in any way minimized baptism. He said clearly that "the ordinance of baptisme instituted by Christ is so essentiall to the constitution of the Church under the new Testament, that none can be true in her constitution without it" (Ibid., 32). His use of the word "true" generated no small backlash against the Baptists. In his response to Spilsbury, Barbone introduced a secondary distinction between the "being" and "well-being" of a church, "there being difference, as before, betwixt a thing and the corruption that attends it." To Barbone, man could not destroy God's church through his error (Barbone, *Defence of Baptizing Infants*, 4, 7, 10). Interestingly, Knollys would follow this distinction, saying, "The Well-Being of a *particular* Church of Saints, doth *principally* consist in three things, viz. Oneness, Order, and Government," which by Order he meant worship ("the Administration of God's Sacred Ordinances"), membership, ordination, and discipline (Knollys, *World that Now is*, 50, 52).

¹⁶ Bunyan, *Confession of my Faith*, 48.

¹⁷ Cf. Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment*, 41.

door of our Congregation is open to receive them, into closest fellowship with us.”¹⁸ But his view had a sharp theological edge:

That touching shaddowish, or figurative ordinances; I believe that Christ hath ordained but two in his Church, viz. Water baptism and the Supper of the Lord: both which are of excellent use to the Church, in this world; they being to us 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 grounds or rule to communion with 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 of 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, then they were ordered to have in their first, and primitive institution: Tis possible to commit Idolatry, even with Gods own appointments.¹⁹

Of great note was his final accusation, that the Baptists essentially worshiped baptism as an idol. In no uncertain terms, he had turned the famous anti-Anglican statement, “the ceremonies are idols to Formalists,”²⁰ against them. In other words, the Baptists treated baptism the same way Anglicans treated the Prayer Book. That made them idolaters, respecting “more a form, then the spirit, and power of Godliness.” Furthermore, because God had not established a law making baptism a “wall of division,”²¹ the Baptists had carried themselves with the same arrogance as those who imposed the Anglican ceremonies.

The first man to respond to Bunyan was Thomas Paul, Kiffin’s one-time co-pastor who wisely secured a preface to his book, *Some Serious Reflections* (1673), from Kiffin. Paul recognized the end to which Bunyan’s line of argument proceeded:

I perceive *Moses* is more beholden to you then [*sic*] Christ; the Servant then [*sic*] the Son, if *Moses* Law in his Moral precepts, be the onely bounds of a Christians Holiness or Sanctification, under the Gospel, for what end, then are all those Gospel-Commands, especially in instituted Worship, they are in your cense of little use to us: obedience to them doth not add to our Holiness, therefore a breach of them, by that rule, must be no part of our sin.²²

¹⁸ Bunyan, *Confession of my Faith*, 132. He used a powerful mantra, “*God hath received him, Christ hath received him, therefore do you receive him*” (Ibid., 92).

¹⁹ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁰ George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded on the Church of Scotland* (n.p.: S. I., 1637; reprint, Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1993), 198.

²¹ Bunyan, *Confession of my Faith*, 116–17.

²² Thomas Paul, *Some Serious Reflections On that Part of M. Bunions Confession of Faith Touching Church Communion with Unbaptized Persons* (London: Francis Smith, 1673), 6.

In other words, assuming Christ had ordained baptism to be part of the church's instituted worship—which was the Baptists' primary understanding of the purpose of the ordinances—Bunyan had thus rendered all ordinances irrelevant. If it did not matter to Christ whether or not his church obeyed him in baptism, it would equally not matter if they prayed, preached, or shared the Lord's Supper. Bunyan was manipulating Christ's worship in the very way by which he accused the Baptists.²³

For any who might believe this but a minor element of a more important debate, consider Bunyan's harsh and direct response to Paul in his quickly released work, *Differences in Judgment* (1673):

But that I practise Instituted Worship, upon the same account as *Paul* did Circumcision, and shaving, is too bold for you to presume to imagine. What? Because I will not suffer Water to carry away the Epistles from the Christians; and because I will not let Water-baptism be the Rule, the Door, the Bolt, the Bar, the Wall of Division between the Righteous, & the Righteous; must I therefore be judged to be a Man without Conscience to the Worship of Jesus Christ? The Lord deliver me from Superstitious, and Idolatrous thoughts about any [of] the Ordinances of Christ, and of God.²⁴

A strong, underlying theological current in England during this time, Puritanism, had as its primary impulse the purity of worship; Baptist, Independent, Presbyterian, all alike desired nothing more than to worship God purely in their churches, and Bunyan put himself squarely in that stream. But Thomas Paul had caught a position that Bunyan left vague, and Bunyan had no choice but to clarify its true implication: “[Baptism] is none of those Laws, neither any part of them, that the Church, as a Church, should shew her Obedience by. For albeit that Baptism be given by Christ our Lord to the Church, yet not for them to worship him by as a Church.” Bunyan recognized, as both Barbone and Jessey had a generation before, that the Baptist position would “un-church” every paedobaptist church. He was unwilling to allow the form of a ceremony that kind of power.²⁵

²³ In Bunyan's response to that accusation, he did not back down from his assertions or their implications: “The act of Water-baptism hath not place in Church-worship, neither in whole nor in part; wherefore pressing it upon the Church is to no purpose at all. Object. *Why may you not as well say that Edification is greater than breaking of Bread?* Answ. So it is, else that should never have been Instituted to edifie withal; that which serveth, is not greater than he that is served thereby. Baptism and the Lord's-Supper both, were made for us, not we for them; wherefore both were made for our Edification, but no one for our destruction. But again, The Lord's-Supper, not Baptism, is for the Church, as a Church; therefore as we will maintain the Church's edifying, that must be maintained in it” (Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment*, 52).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13, 50. Bunyan reiterated this point multiple times, ensuring no misunderstanding on the part of his reader. “As to those Commands that respect God's Instituted Worship in a Church, as a Church, I have told you that Baptism is none of them” (*Ibid.*, 15). “That Water-baptism giveth neither being, nor well-being to a Church, neither is [it] any part of that Instituted Worship of God” (*Ibid.*, 50). “There are some of the Ordinances that, be they neglected, the being of a Church, as to her visible Gospel-Constitution, is taken quite away; but Baptism is none of them” (*Ibid.*, 87). However, Bunyan also added a rather inconsistent caveat: “God also doth thus [have patience] with respect to his Worship in the Church, he commands all and every whit of his will to be done, but beareth with our coming short in this, and that, [and] another Duty” (*Ibid.*, 75).

The crux of the matter was the Puritan interpretation of the definition of worship, in this case outward, corporate, instituted worship. Instituted by whom? Not the Crown, but only Christ. A Puritan reaction to Anglican ceremonialism led those who had this Puritan impulse (including Baptists, Independents, and Presbyterians) to adopt a Reformed paradigm often called the “regulative principle of worship.” Distancing themselves from “book worship,” they acknowledged only those ceremonies of worship instituted and practiced by Christ and his apostles. In their words, the New Testament must be “the sole Canon and rule of all matters of *Religion*, and the worship & service of God whatsoever.”²⁶ As motivation, they insisted, “In the matters of Worship, God stands upon little things.”²⁷ This put Bunyan in an interesting position. In the first place, he desired pure worship as much as anyone, and he acknowledged the regulative principle as the measuring stick for that purity; he considered himself a Puritan in the same way the paedobaptist Independents and Presbyterians did. In the second place, he agreed with Baptists that true baptism was believer’s baptism by immersion. He acknowledged that baptism in the New Testament followed a profession of faith, and its mode taught the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,²⁸ and those who had been baptized as infants had fallen short in this obedience. But in the third place, he did not believe that “water-baptism” made one a Christian any more than failure to be baptized derailed one’s salvation. As a pastor, he argued “that thousands of thousands that could not consent thereto, as we have more gloriously [to believer’s baptism by immersion], then we are like to do, acquitted themselves and their Christianity before men, and are now with the innumerable company of Angels.” A church could only protect its purity by observing the visible sainthood (“faith and holiness”) of its members, and the ceremony of water-baptism could not help it do so.²⁹ He thus concluded that the Baptists had made more of baptism than they ought, idolatrizing it.

However, Bunyan still had to harmonize those three contentions, and his solution as noted above was quite unexpected and ingenious. To justify removing baptism as a bar to church communion, Bunyan removed baptism as an act of church worship. The Puritan impulse for pure church worship did not apply to baptism. This is the most significant and overlooked development in the open-communion debate: Bunyan declared baptism to be an act of *individual* worship and therefore not liable to the so-called regulative principle. Bunyan

²⁶ Bradshaw, *Several Treatises of Worship and Ceremonies*, 10.

²⁷ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship, or, The Right Manner of Sanctifying the Name of God in General* (London: Peter Cole, 1658), 11, cited in Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 50. Burroughs was a Westminster Independent and pastored two significant churches in London. His sermons were published posthumously.

²⁸ Bunyan, *Confession of My Faith*, 76-77, 91, 87-88[2]. After page 95, the typesetter accidentally reset the page numbering to 86; this citation comes from the second instance of pages 87 and 88. Historians argue whether or not Bunyan should be considered a Baptist based on his conclusions in this debate and the fact that he never explicitly endorsed believer’s baptism by immersion. Bunyan may not have used those words, but he clearly supported the theology behind them. Those coming to him out of the Anglican Church came unbaptized. I consider Bunyan a Baptist just as Jessey is considered a Baptist.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66, 70. “A visible Saint he is, but not made so by Baptism; for he must be a visible Saint before, else he ought not to be baptized” (*Ibid.*, 76).

identified himself fully in step with the prevailing nonconformist thoughts about church worship: "Although we receive Members unbaptized, we leave not God's Instituted Worship at uncertainties, especially what he hath commanded us as his Church; we only profess our want of Light in some things."³⁰ Once a Christian had sufficient personal light with respect to baptism, he should be baptized; otherwise, he should be left alone about it. As personal worship, the primary purpose for baptism was "That their own Faith by that figure might be strengthened in the death and resurrection of Christ."³¹ Coercing a baptism availed nothing.

Importantly, Bunyan appended Henry Jessey's defense of the open-communion position. Jessey argued that by making water baptism the form of the church, Baptists had set baptism in the place of the Spirit. Whereas the Spirit united professing believers into the body of Christ, water baptism only divided—"pulling in pieces what the Spirit hath put together."³² The fruit of their emphasis, namely their many schisms and arguments, should give Baptists pause. But Jessey went a step further along lines that Barbone had earlier explored. Baptist insistence on water baptism set them up for liturgical collapse:

It must be confessed, That if exact Practice be required, and clearness in Gospel-Institution before Communion; who dare be so bold as to say his hands are clean, and that he hath done all the Lord Commands, as to Institutions in his Worship? and must not confess the Change of Times doth necessitate some Variation, if not Alteration either in the matter or manner of things according to Primitive Practice, yet owned for true Churches, and received as visible Saints, though ignorant either wholly or in great measure, in laying on of hands, singing, washing of feet, and anointing with oyl, in the Gifts of the Spirit, which is the *Urim and Thummim* of the Gospel?³³

Baptists were not at all uniform in these other practices, some of which were expressly identified as ordinances (it must not be overlooked that the laying on of hands and singing were inordinately destructive to the British Baptist tradition precisely for this reason). Why should baptism receive treatment these other ordinances did not? Those endorsing open-communion did not thereby despise baptism; they simply were unwilling to give it more weight than God himself had. Closed-communion Baptists mirrored the error of the paedobaptists who had built a case for infant baptism where God had not, thus violating the second commandment by "making the likeness of things of their own contrivance, of force with Institutions in the Worship of God." He warned Baptists to reconsider their hard stance, "lest while we look for an Example, we do not overlook a Command upon a mistake."³⁴

³⁰ Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment*, 38.

³¹ Bunyan, *Confession of my Faith*, 76. He later clarified, "He therefore that doth it [be baptized] according to his light, doth well; and he that doth it not, or dare not do it for want of light doth not ill; for he approveth his heart to be sincere with God" (Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment*, 95[2]).

³² Cited in Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment*, 113.

³³ *Ibid.*, 116-17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 120-21, 112. Note that Bunyan had earlier readily admitted willingness to overlook an example to the opposite end (*Ibid.*, 78).

It took William Kiffin nearly a decade to issue his famous response to Bunyan, *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church Communion* (1681), because he did not feel worthy of such a weighty matter. This work was far more than a defense of believer's baptism; it was a definitive declaration of Baptist beliefs about worship. The opening of his preface bore the crux of his argument: "What was Praiseworthy in those Primitive *Christians*, to whom the Apostle *Paul* writes, 1 *Cor.* 11. 2. Can be no Blemish, but really a Duty in other Christians, in after times, to imitate." The apostle Paul wrote about preserving traditions, by which Kiffin understood him to mean doctrines, ordinances, instructions, and institutions. But Kiffin singled out one specific area in which he stood against "Romish Opinion": "in matters related to Divine Worship." The greatest audacity of man and bane of Christianity was "Additions and Subtractions in the Worship of God, which are imposed as Magisterially as if enstamp with a Divine Character." There was no greater affront to God than to violate his given order of worship, and the honor of God in worship could not be compromised; "I have no other design, but the preserving the Ordinances of Christ, in their purity and Order as they are left unto us in the holy *Scriptures* of Truth; and to warn the Churches *To keep close to the Rule*, lest they being found not to Worship the Lord according to his prescrib'd Order he make a *Breach* among them." If water baptism was given by Christ to the churches and passed down by the apostles, then Christians should certainly not be ashamed of it, lest Christ be ashamed of them in due turn. Furthermore, no Christian should be found wanting in that rule of worship because his very baptism was itself an initiation into God's "Service and Worship" and the "Foundation of all our Faith and Profession."³⁵ Kiffin could not even countenance the question; man's very relationship with God was at stake.

To begin, Kiffin believed that Bunyan built his argument against a straw man. Barring the door of the church did not bar the door of heaven any more than being baptized produced salvation. Simply because he would not receive an individual into church membership did not mean that Kiffin would refuse to show Christian love and charity. Rather, church fellowship required a different layer of communion. At the very least, someone joining a church should agree with and submit to that church's perspective on the ordinances. If a church allowed a significant disagreement (such as the propriety of believer's baptism) not to affect church membership, "does not such a practice plainly suppose that it is unnecessary?"³⁶ The larger argument was that Kiffin indeed believed that baptism was necessary for the church to worship God because Christ gave baptism to the church for that purpose. Of all ordinances Scripture was explicit about baptism: "Here we have the Order of Gospel Administration, not only Commanded, but Practised. First they Preached; and such as were Converted, were Baptized; such as were Baptized, walkt in Church-Fellowship, &c. Breaking of Bread and Prayers." Christ never indicated a separate way of admitting church members, therefore admittance by baptism must still be in force.³⁷

³⁵ Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, To the Christian Reader, and Preface (neither paginated). He repeated his statement about baptism as an act of sacred initiation and dedication on page 100 and attributed it to John Owen.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19, 21-22, 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29, 89.

In multiple places, Kiffin turned Bunyan's argument against him. Bunyan did not accept infant baptism; he believed that people coming into his church with that background were coming unbaptized. But nowhere in the Bible was "unbaptism" approved or baptism considered unnecessary. Bunyan's position was the human invention, not the Baptists'. If baptism could be shown as an act of the church's worship, Bunyan would thus be proven the idolater. But Kiffin did not want the paedobaptists to believe themselves exempt from his argument. Infant baptism was not commanded or practiced in the Bible, which meant that it was also a human invention. The same argument used against "unbaptism" would demonstrate that infant baptism was idolatrous. Kiffin's conclusion was unequivocal:

From the whole of what hath been said, we may Infer these Corollaries or Inferences,

1. That God hath Prescribed a particular way and method in which he will be Worshipped.

2. That he is so tender and nice therein, that the least Variation from his own Stated Order will not be allowed by him, which appears by the punishment of such as Transgressed, and the praises given to such as kept his Ordinances and they were Delivered unto them, mentioned at large before.

3. That to swerve from the Lords Institutions, and Invert his Order, has a direct Tendency to Destroy all Modes of Worship, and consequently all the publick and solemn Exercise of Religion, in as much as the same Reason by which one Ordinance may be changed, or Discontinued, will equally prove the change or Discontinuance of any, yea of all at long Run.

And if the first Churches might not be Constituted without this Ordinance of Baptism, neither may those that succeed them, because the same Reason that made Baptism necessary to them, makes it also necessary to us. For Gospel Order settled by Apostolical Authority and Direction, as this was, hath not lost any of its native worth and efficacy, or obliging Vertue, by any Disuse or Discontinuance occasioned by any, but ought to be the same to us now, as it was to them in the beginning of such Order; especially considering the day wherein we live, many indeavouring to bring in their own Inventions into the Worship of God, which should make all Christians be more careful and Zealous to Cleave to the Institutions of Jesus Christ, as they were first Delivered by the holy Penmen, and the Practice of the Primitive Christians.³⁸

Baptism was indeed an act of the church's worship blessed by Christ: "*Baptism* is not only ordained and ratified by the great Law-giver, as well as the Supper, but that it is dignified with as *Spiritual Encomiums* as any Gospel Ordinance can be."³⁹ To Kiffin, the open-communion debate was not merely about a requirement for church membership; it was about preserving God's church and maintaining man's relationship with God:

Because it preserves the Beauty of the House of God: For whatsoever is prescribed by the Lord Jesus, with respect to his Worship, is full of Beauty, Harmony, and Order, every thing

³⁸ Ibid., 57-59.

³⁹ Ibid., 26.

answering its respective end, and what is signified thereby: and as Grace shines in its lustre in the orderly exercise thereof; so do the Ordinances of Christ: For as Regeneration is the first work of God upon the Soul, in order to the exercise of the Graces of Christ given, so hath he appointed Baptism, as that which is the first Ordinance to be Practised.⁴⁰

The gospel of Christ provided more than a way to eternal salvation, it offered a means by which man could enjoy a relationship with God in this life. For that man then to decide to modify God's gracious means smacked of an impudence incompatible with a regenerated spirit. Baptists were not the idolaters; those who made optional believer's baptism by immersion were.

The Significance of the Open-Communion Debate

As stated in the introduction, some Baptist churches have begun questioning whether or not baptism should be a condition for church membership. Placing this debate in its original form, as a matter of the church's worship, should help us re-ascertain its significance. First and foremost, it gives the debate an importance that might otherwise be missed. Bunyan and Kiffin did not think questions about baptism a quaint disagreement; they worried about the nature of the church and the relationship between God and man. Bunyan believed that the Baptists had turned the ordinance of baptism into a wall of division God did not design it to be. Kiffin believed that Bunyan had turned a clear command of God's worship into an option by misunderstanding its purpose as an act of the church's worship. There were two relationships in the background of this debate: that between the church and the individual, and that between the church and her ceremonies. To Bunyan, the individual preceded the church. An individual's standing before God came before any rule created by a church, and an individual's worship must be treated separately from that of the church. As an act of individual worship, baptism was not subject to the rules applying to the church. Kiffin soundly disagreed. To Kiffin, baptism lay at the intersection of individual and church worship, and both individual and church were under the Word of God. Neither an individual's desire nor a church's grace could set aside God's rule for worship, which clearly included baptism. To Bunyan, the church must be separated from her ceremonies, or ordinances. He felt that the Baptists were unfairly punishing individuals for a former church's ceremonial failures. Such an error could not somehow invalidate that entire church; every church has erred in some way. Kiffin again disagreed. To Kiffin, a church was her ceremonial action. Excusing any church's clear error in a matter so precious as God's worship set a dangerous precedent. A church desiring to be a church of God must carefully and unceasingly seek to perform only those actions God has given them by which they must worship him.

Second, identifying baptism as an act of worship highlights the hermeneutical dimension underlying the debate. I earlier mentioned what is often called the regulative principle of worship, that only those acts commanded or practiced in the New Testament are lawful in worship. Its traditional counterpart, the normative principle of worship, drew the ire of Kiffin:

⁴⁰ Ibid., 38.

It is supposed, That whatsoever is not forbidden in Scripture, is Lawful; and so the Receiving of Believers that are not baptized to the Supper, being not Prohibited, is therefore Lawful.

Now that this is a Pernicious way of Argument, has been largely Demonstrated about the beginning, as tending to bring all Humane Inventions into Gods Worship, to which we refer . . . and I very well remember, That the Old Nonconformists who faithfully followed the Lord according to the Light they had received, rather than they would kneel at the Sacrament, thought it their Duty to forbear the Practice of that great Ordinance, giving this as their Reason: To leave (they say) the Practice of Christ and his Apostles in the manner of Receiving the Sacrament, and to follow the Practice of Men, in a posture Invented by Men is not safe.⁴¹

Kiffin, like many others of Puritan leanings in England, verbally embraced the regulative principle (as his first corollary argues), and that was his dominant means of biblical support. Jessey and Barbone, as described above, saw a great error in such a proposed hermeneutic: Scripture did not address every condition of every ordinance. Every pastor in every church had to infer circumstances of the ordinances for use in a church's worship. Bunyan noted that denying the Lord's Supper to any Christian for any reason other than personal examination was itself a violation of that hermeneutic. Kiffin's response, that every known circumstance implied "an express prohibition of the contrary,"⁴² satisfied him but probably not Bunyan because Bunyan, too, claimed to follow the regulative principle. Both parties saw significant inconsistencies in the other's hermeneutic, which becomes apparent when the context invokes a term such as "regulative principle." This debate addressed the nature of the church *and* the nature of Scripture. It clarified that the parties involved had a theological priority *prior* to Scripture: a desire to rightly know and worship God. Their use of Scripture followed that priority.

Finally, the open-communion debate forces a church to explain the relationship between baptism and membership. Bunyan complained that Baptists made baptism the initiating ordinance into church membership. However, their hermeneutic could not support such a conclusion because there was no testimony in Scripture of the idea; in fact, there were examples of people being baptized in Scripture without mention of a church (the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius, and Lydia).⁴³ Thomas Paul explicitly denied believing or teaching that baptism was the initiating ordinance into church membership. Rather, "consent ON all hands" made someone a member of a church and not baptism. Kiffin then explored the implications—if baptism was not into a local church, then what was it? His solution was simple: believers "should still be Planted together by Baptism, not into this or that particular Church,

⁴¹ Ibid., 120-21. Those who sided with Bunyan pointed out that the Bible never commanded forbearing the Supper, which makes that nonconformist practice itself an example of the normative principle.

⁴² Ibid., 29.

⁴³ Bunyan, *Confession of my Faith*, 70-75.

but into that one Church of Christ, which is distributed into several parts and particular Societies.”⁴⁴ Because believer’s baptism by immersion was the only acceptable form of that ordinance of God’s worship, Kiffin’s vision clearly meant one great Baptist church in each city.⁴⁵ Considering the current day’s geographic mobility and proliferation of denominations, Kiffin’s conclusion likely sounds naïve, even alien. Yet it is a perfectly consistent conclusion from his theological concerns. Indeed, this debate opens questions that are significant and forces us to pursue their answers.

Conclusions

If a reader has not considered some of these questions before, they might seem daunting, but that is why I find the open-communion debate so important. Matters of worship cannot and must not be separated from matters of theology, in particular hermeneutics and ecclesiology. Modern attempts to do so have created a mixture of church services, some of which may not be traceable to any sort of biblical precedent. What should we think of the questions raised in this debate? To begin, what is the form of a church? What is it that turns a group of Christians into a church? Jessey, Barbone, and Spilsbury are right: baptism cannot be that form for all of the reasons they gave above. Consider the wide variety of baptismal ceremonies in Baptist churches today: different configurations of baptisteries, even pools and ponds; different words used on the part of the person baptizing and being baptized; different responses by the congregation; different timings, placements, and everything else. Clearly, we have separated the doctrine of baptism from the ceremony of baptism. And most Baptist churches accept “transfers” of membership from other Baptist churches. Likewise, a profession of faith cannot be the form of a church, else that would render local churches indistinguishable in a New Testament sense. Yet many Baptist churches still consider a profession of faith and baptism to be critical parameters for a church. That leaves Spilsbury’s conclusion, that faith and baptism are elements of the covenant that binds the people into a church of God. His solution allows for the variety of baptismal ceremonies and makes a place for paedobaptist churches that have erred on major elements of that ceremony (mode, participant, and purpose).

The New Testament clearly teaches believer’s baptism by immersion, and it is understandable why Kiffin would elevate its importance in his own ecclesiological environment. But it was also unnecessary. Bunyan clearly built a straw man of false dichotomies; salvation should not be conflated with church membership. Baptism does not have to be made the very form of a church to be prioritized. This is where the context of worship should really help us today. One of the most important tasks given to the church is the pure worship of God. That means our church covenants should highlight corporate worship according to the New Testament patterns. Because baptism is a part (and I would go so far as to agree with Kiffin that it is the foundational part) of every church’s worship, there can be no mistake about its place in that covenant. Does this leave space for our ceremonial diversity? I believe it does. And it

⁴⁴ Paul, *Some Serious Reflections*, 4; Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 138.

⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, Hanserd Knollys held a similar position (Knollys, *World that Now is*, 8, 44, 45).

also gives us necessary and appropriate doctrinal parameters for that diversity. Baptism is given to the church as a means by which it worships God. While Bunyan was correct that individuals are not baptized *into* a local church, his conclusion that baptism had little to do with that church (and everything to do with that individual) was not. In baptism, the individual declares faith in Christ and the church affirms; the individual follows Christ and the church enables; the individual symbolically enters new life in the Kingdom and the church symbolically receives on behalf of that Kingdom. It is an act that should give a local church a unique sense of unity with all churches of God on earth. Because Bunyan believed baptism isolated Baptists from other Christians, he concluded that the “one baptism” in 1 Corinthians 12 could only be salvation.⁴⁶ But we do not have to be so cynical. Baptism can and should be a beautiful picture of unity—union of the individual with Christ, of the individual with the Church, of all churches with one another—but all within the doctrinal parameters of what God has declared right for his worship.

Baptism should not be minimized or neglected. Certainly, churches should not make decisions about it based on expediency, public pressure, or some other form of worldly input. Rather, it should be treated as an act of the church’s worship. The debate related above should make it clear that doing so opens a myriad of possibilities for that church. Tracing all the implications, only some of which were examined above, will be a challenging but fruitful endeavor for church leadership, if only because it forces that leadership to identify the rules by which it makes decisions for worship. Let baptism retain its rightful place as a foundational act of worship to the glory of God. And let that place solidify the reason why Baptists acknowledge believer’s baptism by immersion.

⁴⁶ Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment*, 28-30.