

ABSTRACT

Baptism and Membership in the Baptist Tradition: A Study of the Relationship Between Church Practice and Community Life

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Baptism and membership are two practices that have persisted within the Baptist tradition for years. Using the examples of Mission Hills Church (Littleton, CO) and DaySpring Baptist Church (Waco, TX), the purpose of this study is to explore how these two specific practices may be displayed in the Baptist tradition, how they may be connected, and what their connection may imply about church life. To these ends, the thesis first presents a broad overview of Baptist theology concerning baptism. Second, the analysis moves to a discussion concerning select membership styles in the Baptist tradition. The analysis concludes by examining two different attempts to integrate baptism and membership in the life of the church. Finally, the analysis critically evaluates and compares the practices of baptism and membership at Mission Hills Church and DaySpring Baptist Church.

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BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP IN THE BAPTIST TRADITION: A STUDY OF THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH PRACTICE AND COMMUNITY LIFE

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PREFACE

In August 2013, my home church, Mission Hills Church in Littleton, CO, decided to have a special outdoor baptism event in which 150 people were baptized. Most of the people had signed up prior to the event. But if anyone wanted to be baptized the night of the event, spontaneous baptisms were also allowed. After the event people excitedly expressed what God had done that night. However, after spending the entire summer planning for this event, I had some reservations about baptizing a large number of people all in one night. I wondered if this was the best way or even the right way to perform an act that is very sacred to the Christian faith. I planned on researching the baptism methods adopted by Baptist churches in the United States and the culture formed in those churches that allow for the differing number of baptizees on a Sunday. I then was planning on comparing them to Mission Hills Church to determine if group size is a factor that should be considered in baptism. However, what really came of my research became much more interesting to church dynamics and left a larger impression on my personal life than questions concerning the number of individuals that can be baptized on a given Sunday would have been.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Baptism and membership are two practices that have persisted within the Baptist tradition for years. The purpose of this study is to determine how these two specific practices may be defined in the Baptist tradition, how they are connected, and what this may imply about church life. First, baptism and its association with different membership practices within the Baptist tradition will be explored. It will begin with a broad overview of Baptist theology in regards to baptism. Following that discussion, the analysis will move to a discussion over one way to look at membership styles in the Baptist tradition. The analysis will be concluded by relating membership back to baptism and what that implies for church life. Next, the analysis will take a closer look at the practices of baptism and membership at Mission Hills Church, a large Baptist church established in Littleton, Colorado in the 1960s. Subsequently, the same process will be applied to DaySpring Baptist Church, a small Baptist church located established in Waco, Texas in 1993. Finally, these churches will be placed in direct comparison with one another.

CHAPTER TWO

BAPTISM AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE BAPTIST TRADITION

The analysis will begin with a broad overview of Baptist theology in regards to baptism and the different types of membership in the Baptist tradition. Each of these practices informs the way an individual church views its own community and its own rituals and practices. Relating these two practices more broadly will give a foundation to what the Baptist tradition considers important in Christian living and church life.

Baptist Theology – A Broad Overview

In its earliest development, Baptists believed that baptism displayed an essential step for a believer away from the believer's former life of sin.¹ A group of Protestants became convinced that there is individual accountability for a believer's faith that was separate from the belief of the believer's parents. The concept of a "believer's baptism" developed from this belief. They rejected the idea of infant baptism and suggested that baptism past the age of accountability (the age in which a believer becomes individually responsible to believe and profess faith in Christ)² was more in accordance with the way

¹ Brackney, William H. "Doing Baptism Baptist Style: Believer's Baptism." *Doing Baptism Baptist Style: Believer's Baptism*. Baptist History and Heritage Society. (Copyright 2001).

² There are a variety of debates as to when this happens. One perspective suggests that baptisms "prior to age 7 may be well intended but do not have adequate understanding" which may also "compromise the membership of their churches". Another argument from the same journal suggests that early baptism "may cause not only confusion but also eventual dropout due to the premature nature of these decisions". However, there are a number of churches that still perform early baptisms demonstrating "confidence in the ability of these children to make a legitimate, voluntary decision to become a Christian". (Horton, Dennis. 2010. "Ministry Students Ages of Conversion

the early Church practiced baptism in the New Testament. The people who accepted this change were then dubbed as the Baptists. Baptism performed as a believer's baptism is "the single most unique Baptist idea...the unquestionable foundation of the movement and its original core belief".³ As the Baptist church became distinct in its movement away from Catholic and other Protestant churches, "baptismal scenes became common testimony of the faith and life of the growing movement".⁴

Baptism as traditionally practiced by the Baptist church is an act of full immersion in water in the name of the Trinity—that is, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—symbolizing the believer's purification and regeneration. Upon raising the body up from the water, the believer has died to his or her sin and is raised to new life in Christ. This act also represents the act of Jesus' death (descent into the water) and resurrection (ascent from water). The affirmation of the Trinity is based on Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Emphasis added). The only prerequisite for a believer to be baptized is faith in Christ Jesus; however, for most churches within the Baptist tradition specifically, this process of baptism must be completed through a full immersion as opposed to infant baptism or any other form of partial immersion.

with Implications for Childhood Evangelism and Baptism Practices." *Christian Education Journal* 7 (1): 30+. Academic OneFile.)

³ Pitts, William L. "Arguing regenerate church membership: Baptist identity during its first decade, 1610-1620." *Baptist History And Heritage* 44, no. 1 (December 1, 2009): 20-39.

⁴ Brackney, 2001.

There is some specific language that Baptists use in reference to baptism that is unique to their tradition. One of these words is the use of the word ordinance in reference to baptism versus the word sacrament. The major difference between Baptists' use of the word ordinance rather than other traditions' use of the word sacrament is that Baptists believe an ordinance is a person answering in response to the Gospel and a sacrament is the vehicle of God's acting grace.⁵ This is problematic to the Baptist tradition because Baptists in general believe that faith is a personal decision and without personal choice of a believing individual, the act does not have any inherent power.⁶

Though Baptists make up a sizeable and extensive community—there are an estimated fifty million people that make up 140,000 churches in 140 countries around the world⁷—many modern-day Baptist churches have retained this standard basic theological conviction for baptism. Traditionally, Baptists also cling to a belief in individual church autonomy.⁸ Because of this belief, each individual church within the Baptist tradition takes different approaches to the specifics around the baptismal ceremony including what the implications for Christian living are for what follows baptism.

As the Christian movement developed, baptism constituted the primary requirement to formally enter into the body of believers through membership and meant

⁵ Lorenzen, Thorwald. 1980. "Baptists and Ecumenicity: With Special Reference to Baptism." *Ecumenical Review* 32 (3): 257–72.

⁶ Lorenzen, "Baptists and Ecumenicity: With Special Reference to Baptism," 262

⁷ Lorenzen, Thorwald. 1981. "Baptism and Church Membership: Some Baptist Positions and Their Ecumenical Implications." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18 (4): 561–74.

⁸ This has come as a response to the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church that Protestants rejected when the churches broke off from each other.

that the individual belonged to the church community. Presently, in many churches, the completion of the ordinance constitutes permission to enter into the body of believers through formal membership. Whether this is a separate process to be completed after baptism or is conferred upon baptism, is individual to each church body. Church membership in itself has many different meanings, responsibilities, and practices associated with its implementation. This is not surprising since membership is not an ordinance specifically defined within the Bible. Baptists accept two ordinances, the Eucharist and baptism. These two ordinances are clearly introduced in the teachings of Jesus in the Bible. Membership, as it is implemented within the church is not defined specifically within his teachings outside of the general teaching of loving one's neighbor.

Exploring church membership practices is significant to explain the culture of the church and the significance of baptism within the church. To begin, there are three main types of membership that Baptist churches may adopt—open membership, closed membership, and modified-open membership. Each type contributes to and comes from different cultures within individual churches. These three different types of memberships are outlined in order to establish a preliminary framework for membership within the church. However, these descriptions pale to the diversity of practice within the Baptist tradition primarily evidenced in the lack of scholarly articles and books on church membership.

Closed membership is the most common type of membership.⁹ In this form of membership, the believer may only become a member of the church if they have been baptized by immersion in a recognized Baptist Church. Depending on the denomination,

⁹ Lorenzen, "Baptism and Church Membership: Some Baptist Positions and Their Ecumenical Implications," 563–66.

baptism in a church of a different denomination may not be acknowledged because Baptists believe that a believer's baptism is the primary requirement of one's initiation into the Church body.¹⁰ Any other style of baptism is denied, which most explicitly excludes any form of infant baptism. Closed membership also recognizes baptism as a mark of a new stage in the Christian life. This approach strives to make baptism integral to church membership.¹¹ Some churches take this step further and completely integrate the two, conferring membership upon baptism. Assuming the church believes that baptism is a step leading up to membership, the challenge with having membership directly connected with a believer's baptism is that baptism can be seen purely as a step that a believer must take to get to a certain end, divorcing it from its meaning and significance. Therefore, it may be important to these churches to detach the two church practices so that the meaning of both baptism and membership can be fully appreciated by the individual.

Open membership is the second form of membership within the Baptist tradition.¹² This type of membership affirms that believer's baptism is important but asserts that it is not required for church membership. "Baptism is seen here not as an essential, but as a desirable, mark of the church. It is not a prerequisite for church membership. If baptism is requested, it will in most of these churches only be

¹⁰ Other traditions, such as Mormons, baptize by believer's baptism but not in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit so these churches may choose to use the distinction of a Trinitarian believer's baptism.

¹¹ Cross, Anthony R. 2004. "Faith-Baptism: The Key to an Evangelical Baptismal Sacramentalism." *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 4 (3): 13.

¹² Lorenzen, "Baptism and Church Membership: Some Baptist Positions and Their Ecumenical Implications," 567-8.

administered by immersion and to believers”.¹³ This approach is an attempt to emphasize the importance of the Church as a group of believers, regardless of baptism, and it insists that baptism is not a mere legalistic Christian practice that Christians can mark off of an imagined list of Christian responsibilities. The Church identifies and acknowledges the importance of baptism when it occurred in the believer’s life rather than asserting that it was completely void of meaning to the individual. In doing so, open membership encourages people coming from different backgrounds to be able to join into the Church body that they call home. However, the challenge with having membership completely open to all believers,¹⁴ baptism may be seen as optional to Christian living and practice, thus divorcing it of its importance in the Christian tradition.

The third type of membership is modified-open membership. This type of membership declares that believer’s baptism is the best, but not the only mode and form¹⁵ of baptism. This type of baptism is employed for similar reasons as open membership—so that the Church does not discount the believer’s Christian journey up until the point of membership—but still emphasizes the essential nature of baptism as a mark of the Church. As such, modified-open membership allows the faith of each believer from his or her individual baptism ceremony to have merit. On occasion even infant baptism is an acceptable type of baptism based on the circumstances surrounding the baptism. Thorwald Lorenzen explains, “if a person was baptized as an infant and considers his or

¹³ Lorenzen, “Baptism and Church Membership: Some Baptist Positions and Their Ecumenical Implications,” 568.

¹⁴ Believers: these individuals state that they have come to become members as believing Christians

¹⁵ Lorenzen, “Baptism and Church Membership: Some Baptist Positions and Their Ecumenical Implications.” 569.

her infant baptism after the experience of faith to be relevant and valid, these churches would accept the applicant on that testimony”.¹⁶ Modified-open churches do not want to force believers to be re-baptized just for the sake of membership within a Baptist church. Moreover, modified-open membership is an attempt to accept people from other denominations without trying to make “members of other Christian denominations become objects of evangelism and mission”.¹⁷ Therefore, modified-open churches accept letters of transfer from other churches but do not ask specifics in regards to specific baptism procedures. The challenge with accepting modified-open membership into church practice is that the very basis for which Baptists are distinct from other traditions, namely the denial of infant baptism, is disregarded. The difference between open and modified-open namely is that in the latter type the church still requires baptism as a prerequisite to membership unlike the former.

From these three types of membership practices, it is clear that within the Baptist tradition there are different beliefs on what is the acceptable way to have believers participate in membership of the Church. As was mentioned before, these three different types of memberships provide a preliminary framework for membership within the church. Membership practice is correlated to church culture in that a church chooses its membership type based on its belief but also the membership type forms the belief of the church. Because the Baptist tradition is diverse, there is a diversity of practice within the Baptist tradition on other specifics of membership.

¹⁶ Lorenzen, “Baptists and Ecumenicity: With Special Reference to Baptism,” 269

¹⁷ Lorenzen, “Baptism and Church Membership: Some Baptist Positions and Their Ecumenical Implications,” 564

As was stated earlier, what distinguishes particularly the Baptist Church is its emphasis on baptism¹⁸. It is this ritualistic act that sets the tradition separate from the rest of the world and by this act, faith in Christ is proclaimed. When a group of people is set apart by the same terms or rituals, it is not uncommon for these people to find a sense of community in one another. Thus, to more fully understand the significance of baptism and how it pertains to membership in the Church, it is important to understand the concept of ritual. Ritual is key to initiation into many different types of groups and organizations because it marks the individual's movement from non-member to member as well as drives the member to make a commitment to the group and vow to act upon that commitment in some manner. Without establishing specific rituals, it becomes difficult to discern what it means to be a member rather than a non-member. Within the Church, the meaning associated with ritual can be employed similarly. If baptism is the act that sets a believer apart from the rest, it can be considered a ritual. If so, then this ritual has implications for the believer's commitment to the Church – also called the community of other people who employ the same beliefs. Frank Rees, a Professor of Systematic Theology and Dean of Whitley College, explains baptism in the following manner:

“I would like to suggest to you that Christian baptism is meant to function in this way: far more than the highly individualistic and experiential focus that it has in contemporary practice. It is meant to be the most fundamental expression of our life, our identity, our place in the scheme of things”.¹⁹

¹⁸ Churches other than the Baptist church baptize adults by immersion as well.

¹⁹ Rees, Frank D. 2004. “Baptist Identity: Immersed through Worship.” *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 5 (1): 5–17.

As Rees explains, baptism is the most basic way that the Church declares its collective identity to the world because it is a practice like none other. If so, then it cannot be an individual practice because it gives a unique identity to a collective group as well as to an individual. However, before it is too quickly assumed that baptism also defines commitment, the meaning of baptism in reference to communal practice or living must be defined.

Anthony Cross maintains that when a believer is baptized, the believer is not only baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, but is also baptized into the Church by the Spirit.²⁰ He explains that in the early Church, conversion and baptism were inextricably connected in a way that they almost were one unified act. This connection suggests that the first members of the early Church would choose to be aligned with Christian community even when their choice meant persecution. It would seem that those individuals that are willing to be persecuted together would be unswerving in their dedication to each other in a unique way. The immersive process is the part of baptism most connected to this idea. In immersion believers are immersed in Jesus' crucifixion and are reborn into new life.²¹ In the past, then, the practice of baptism was also a way for the Church community to assess the degree to which an individual understood the gravity of a decision to become part of the church. It is also in this practice, then, members of the church community present would remember their own baptisms and the magnitude of their own decisions. This means when one is baptized, all remember the baptism that they once had and commit to the growth of the individual just as the members before them did

²⁰ Cross, 19.

²¹ Rees, 15.

so as well. The early Church took the act of faith and conversion very seriously, which means that baptism was taken seriously as well.

Therefore, baptism was not and is not meant to be a lonely act in which the believer flippantly decides whether to join a body of believers or not; it is an act in which the “Holy Spirit knits the believer into the body of Christ, the church”.²² Lorenzen explains that the baptism service “concretely expresses commitment to Christian discipleship and entry into full communicant membership of the local Baptist church”.²³ Since baptism has an invaluable connection to community of the Church, then it must also have a connection to what membership should entail within the Church. Made possible by baptism, membership in a community of believers necessarily imparts meaning into the daily life of the believer. If the mission of the early Church was to “go make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them*” (Matt. 28:19, emphasis added), should not associating baptism directly with membership have a large emphasis placed upon it within the church? It would seem that the early Church could not divorce the practices from one another. So because of the meaning of baptism in reference to communal practice or living, it may be assumed that baptism also defines commitment.

In many modern Baptist churches, however, believers are not immediately considered members of a church body right upon baptism as will be seen in the following case studies. They become members at a later time in a process completely separate from baptism. Membership is a step separate from baptism that is taken after the act of

²² Klopfer, Sheila D. 2010. “From Personal Salvation to Personal Baptism: The Shaping Influence of Evangelical Theology on Baptism.” *Baptist History and Heritage* 45 (3): 65–79.

²³ Lorenzen, “Baptists and Ecumenicity: With Special Reference to Baptism.” 267.

baptism. Rees asked a group of his students if a central goal of their churches was the baptism of its members. The majority of what he received in response was “’No’, because they found that it was not meaningful for people”.²⁴ If baptism and membership were connected through a sense of unified identity and community in the world as the previous discussion suggests, then baptism would have additional meaning that is attached to it that would influence people to make a decision to become a part of the Church. Baptism would not be something that could be merely an “optional add-on”²⁵ to Christian living.

Conclusions

The most noteworthy conclusion is that baptism was never meant to be one thing among others within the church. It is meant to reveal an individual’s unity with Jesus and his act on the cross as well as the communal nature of the Church body. Thus, baptism has sociological, phenomenological, and spiritual significance. Yet, this connection is not uniformly agreed on within each individual church, especially Baptist churches, as is primarily seen through the different membership types. This could signify that there are other aspects to both baptism and membership that have been missed in this discussion. For this purpose, the following chapters will identify the practices of baptism and membership in two distinct Baptist churches using the churches’ published documents and through interviews with specific people in positions of authority within the churches. These two churches are a small representation of all of the Baptist churches but their differences will reveal the stark contrasts between the practices of baptism and membership.

²⁴ Rees, 16.

²⁵ Rees, 6.

CHAPTER THREE

BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP AT MISSION HILLS CHURCH: A CASE STUDY

The purpose of this chapter is to understand the method of practical implementation of the practices of baptism and membership at a modern large, evangelical Baptist church. Mission Hills Church was established in the 1960s as a small Baptist church in Greenwood Village, Colorado. Since then, the church has grown in size to over 5,000 members and regular attendees and has moved campuses to where it is now in Littleton, Colorado. The following analysis was conducted by using current documents published through the church and through a series of interviews with the High School Youth Pastor, Shannon Popp, and the Connections Pastor,²⁶ Rick Derbyshire, on the topics of baptism and membership. In the pages following, a description will be made of this large, modern-day Baptist church and how it implements the baptism and membership practices discussed in the Chapter Two. A partial analysis on what this suggests about how these two church practices should interact will also be made.

The first thing that characterizes Mission Hills is its stated mission and vision, posted on its website and contained within its bylaws. Together, these two statements provide formation for everything else that happens within the church including baptism and membership practices. Of these mission and vision statements, Mission Hills bullets four concise versions of its values on its website for easy reference. The four values are as follows:

²⁶ Because of the size of the Mission Hills, there are many different pastors in charge of each aspect of church life. The Connections Pastor oversees membership and baptism procedures.

“Passionate Discovery – We are committed to discovering all that Christ and His Word offers and sharing these truths with lost people worldwide;
Authenticity in Relationships – We are committed to developing life-changing communities;
Whole-hearted Commitment – We are committed to giving our best to honor God and inspire people;
How We Do Church – Invest, invite, connect, grow, and serve.”²⁷

These values reveal that on the whole, Mission Hills is a highly relational church committed to God and to its community with the purpose of going on mission to share the truth of the Gospel to the world. The missional perspective manifested in the committed members of the church contributes to the formation on how baptism is performed on any given Sunday morning. In the sections that follow, the practices of membership and baptism at Mission Hills will be described using these values as a basis and guide.

Baptism Practices

At Mission Hills Church, the primary reason for baptism is obeying Jesus’ command to be baptized. The secondary reason for baptism is being public with one’s faith. During his interview, Rick Derbyshire, the Connections Pastor²⁸ at Mission Hills, repeatedly defined baptism as “going public with your faith” in which the believer is “officially identifying with the person and work of Jesus Christ”.²⁹ As Connections Pastor, Derbyshire is in charge of educating members in the church body on what baptism means as well as preparing those who have not been baptized in the process of being baptized. His definition portrays baptism as a step that distinguishes a Christian

²⁷ Mission Hills Church. "Mission & Vision." Web. Retrieved 03 Dec. 2013.

²⁸ The job of the Connections Pastor is to be in charge of all initial interaction between the church and new attendees as well as coordinating classes, including baptism and membership. It is one of the senior pastoral roles at the church. See Footnote 1.

²⁹ Derbyshire, Rick. Personal Interview. 25 Nov. 2013.

from everyone else because of the Christian's larger, evangelical mission in the world. This concept primarily identifies with "Passionate Discovery", the first of the four values stated in Mission Hills's mission and vision statements.

Through the interview process it was clear that Mission Hills shared much of the conceptual understanding of baptism discussed in the previous chapter. Mission Hills believes that believers get baptized because Jesus commanded it and because it publicly proclaims one's faith but not because it is essential to belief.³⁰ It is an external sign or symbol (Popp suggested that it is similar to a wedding band),³¹ which is completed as an act of obedience to God revealing one's commitment to their faith but is not the actual act of salvation. However, though there are many similarities in the doctrine behind baptism, the way each church prepares its members for baptism is often very different, which contributes to the formation of a unique philosophy behind what baptism means and how this contributes to a discussion on membership.

Mission Hills promotes baptism by encouraging believers to take "the next step in [the believer's] relationship with Jesus"³² and by teaching on how God uses baptism for his glory both through the baptizee and those who witness the event. Therefore, when a believer decides that he or she would like to be baptized, the believer can contact the Connections department to register in a one-hour class that prepares him or her for baptism. The class is fairly similar whether it is for a youth³³ or an adult but is

³⁰ Popp, Shannon. Personal Interview. 25 Nov. 2013.

³¹ Popp, 2013.

³² McSparran, Kelly. n.d., *Adult Baptism Instructions MHC*. Littleton, CO: Mission Hills Church. PDF.

³³ From fourth grade to senior year of high school.

emphasized more in the adult services. The class explains why Christ commanded believers to be baptized and what baptism is including the fact that baptism itself does not save a believer. It also explains the symbolism behind baptism and why a believer must be baptized by immersion.³⁴ The symbolism behind baptism is that just as Jesus put his own desires to death in his crucifixion and rose again in resurrection bringing new life, a Christian believer symbolizes the death of his or her former desires in descending into the water and then symbolizes new life in the church by being raised above the waters once more. Both Derbyshire and Popp explained that immersion is the model that was portrayed by Jesus when he was baptized in Matthew 3; so, that is the model that Mission Hills decided to adopt.

At this point in the baptism class, the pastoral staff allows a time of question and answer so that people who have been baptized by another form may ask questions on why other forms, such as infant baptism or sprinkling, are not recognized at Mission Hills. The main reason that Derbyshire gave for not accepting other forms of baptism related to the model that Jesus gives believers in the New Testament. Mission Hills believes in the concept of believer's baptism meaning that the believer has to have made the personal decision to follow Christ prior to baptism.³⁵ Conscious belief should be quickly followed by baptism because it displays a public representation for an internal decision.³⁶ The Church staff does not want to disregard an individual's faith journey prior to baptism by immersion rather than another form. If there is any conflict, they meet

³⁴ Derbyshire, 2013.

³⁵ This excludes infant baptism because salvation was not a personal decision but rather a decision made by the child's parents.

³⁶ Derbyshire, 2013.

individually with the person. This baptism can be seen as an act of rededication or an act of recommitting rather than a rebaptism. Mission Hills makes sure to emphasize that there is nothing magical about the form. Rather the form is adopted just because it was established in the New Testament to be that way. It is the aspect of a personal decision that is important here, not the act.³⁷ Therefore, if an individual would like to become a member of Mission Hills, he or she needs to be baptized by immersion. This form of membership is called *closed membership*.³⁸ This will be returned to shortly.

Another logistic the pastoral staff introduces is an explanation of the testimonial video that each individual who desires to be baptized needs to complete. In this video, the individual has a chance to tell his or her personal conversion story to the congregation, to explain his or her reasoning of why he or she decided to get baptized (potentially including an person who influenced the decision), and to recite a favorite text or verse in the Bible.³⁹ The final video-edit professionally compiles the stories of all the people wanting to be baptized into one video to be shown to the congregation during the services when baptisms are preformed. Testimony is an important part of baptism because sharing one's faith with the rest of the community "works in the hearts of those who hear it".⁴⁰ Shannon Popp explained that this video is an "opportunity to share the gospel" to people who may be watching in the congregation as well as "have a chance to tell their story".⁴¹

³⁷ Derbyshire, 2013.

³⁸ See Chapter 2, pp. 5-6.

³⁹ McSparran, Kelly. *Adult Baptism Instructions MHC*.

⁴⁰ Popp, 2013.

⁴¹ Popp, 2013

The end of the class is dedicated to explaining logistics of the baptism. This includes quick explanations on how the baptism will be formatted in the service, what the individual should wear on the day of the baptism, and who will be performing the baptism. At Mission Hills they require an ordained minister to do the baptism but another person can be in the water with the baptizee while they are baptized.⁴² After this point, it is straightforward. Mission Hills administers baptisms once a month during each of its five services. During the actual baptism, the baptizee and the pastor have a private conversation in the permanent baptismal tub at the front of the sanctuary while worship music plays in the background. Derbyshire believes that this moment is the most special and meaningful moment in the baptism process. He explained,

“This is a private moment between you and Jesus where I can tell the individual that the Lord loves them and is proud of them. In life it is easy to get discouraged so it is important to me to reassure the individual that they are doing the right thing. *When you see the intensity in their eyes, there is something very special that happens.* It is more than simply a religious activity⁴³ because of the pure joy that enters the person as they choose to go through this important and meaningful experience. In that moment they feel God’s pleasure on them.”⁴⁴

Something unexplainable happens when a believer is baptized that creates a meaningful moment of approval that people will tend to remember for their whole life.⁴⁵

⁴² Mission Hills Church. *2011 Bylaws*. Littleton, CO: Mission Hills Church, 4 Dec. 2011. Word Document.

⁴³ By religious activity Derbyshire means that the act of baptism is not just something that is commanded in the Bible and so must be completed as a part of participating in Christian belief. To Derbyshire, baptism is something that carries a personal meaning and significance that is important to one’s decision to be baptized.

⁴⁴ Derbyshire, 2013, *My emphasis*.

⁴⁵ Popp, 2013.

After the individual is baptized, Mission Hills then expects the baptizee to make an effort to serve within the church body. This relates to the fourth principle that was listed at the beginning of this chapter: “How We Do Church: invest, invite, connect, grow, and serve”. In this principle, many of these five actions tend to happen after baptism. Once an individual is baptized, he or she is expected to invest in the Church financially, emotionally and relationally. The individual is expected to invite others because of the missional perspective given to baptism as well as get connected to the church in a small group where the individual can continue to grow in his or her faith. At that point, the individual should be investing time by serving the church in some capacity. Taking a critical look at these expectations, it is simple to see that these expectations are namely the expectations of a member of the church just without the formal title. Yet, at Mission Hills, baptism and membership are two events independent one another. In the next section, membership is overviewed through the lens of Mission Hills.

Membership Practices

Formal membership once was important to Mission Hills, however it is no longer stressed, which is leading it towards non-existence within the church body. The traditional purpose for membership was to proclaim a commitment to a specific church. One reason that Popp cites as the cause for its diminishing value at Mission Hills is that the American “culture fights against it”.⁴⁶ The culture fights against commitment because it is binding and currently, that is widely unpopular. This is an important argument and will be returned to in the final analysis. It exists primarily for the older members of the congregation who make an effort to ask about being a formal member.

⁴⁶ Popp, 2013.

Despite the lessening focus on membership at Mission Hills, the church still has formal procedures in place if a family or individual would like to become a member. Because of the strict requirement that believer's baptism must precede membership, the type of membership that Mission Hills has adopted is *closed membership*.⁴⁷ To become a member at Mission Hills, the individual must have been baptized by immersion past the age of accountability.⁴⁸ This process occurs at a time separate from baptism and is preformed through completing another class and through filling out an application. On the membership application, the applicant writes out his or her personal testimony including age, date, and circumstance of both conversion and baptism. Other things such as the individual's favorite scripture, interests, and spiritual gifts can be included as well. Another part of the application is indicating how the individual is connected to the church whether that is through a Life Group, Sunday School Class, or Ministry Area.

Similar to baptism at Mission Hills, there is a course offered for individuals to become members at the church. This class is offered every few months and lasts for three Sundays. In the first two classes the applicants learn about the church's history, structure, and beliefs. They then proceed to read a copy of the Bylaws and Church Membership Covenant. The covenant has five values that it emphasizes: "Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Service, and Outreach".⁴⁹ The final class is a private meeting with the elders of the church. In this meeting they share everything on their membership application and agree to abide by the Statement of Faith and Church Covenant, including

⁴⁷ Ch. 2, pgs. 5-6.

⁴⁸ At Mission Hills, this age is set to be around nine years old or as a fourth grade student.

⁴⁹ Mission Hills Church, *2011 Bylaws*.

“the obligations and responsibilities that accompany being a member of the local body”.⁵⁰

This process is most closely related to Mission Hills’s value of “Whole-Hearted Commitment” because it is a longer and more binding process. The following Sunday the new members are formally presented to the church during the worship service. The membership class is designed to be separate from the baptism class so that the church does not assume that the individual wants to take an active part in the church though they were baptized for some reason. Derbyshire explained during his interview that the Bible stresses baptism more than membership but this was most likely because they were contained in one another and were together the public identifier of a Christian from the rest of the world.

Yet this is not the only reason why membership is a part of Mission Hills, though it is the primary reason. There is also a state requirement that the church must have members to receive non-profit tax deduction status. Rick Derbyshire also explained that though membership has not been stressed recently at Mission Hills, it is very important to him because it allows him to commit and be a part of something greater than himself. Making a commitment is selectively making a promise “to be faithful, to pitch in, and to love”.⁵¹ He believes this is important because in the modern era, there is a culture of not making a solid commitment to anything. With this in mind, Rick Derbyshire stresses that membership is just one piece of everything when it comes to a Christian’s faith journey. There is value to membership because it allows the church to know whom they can count

⁵⁰ Derbyshire, 2013.

⁵¹ Derbyshire, 2013.

on and what core values they agree on as well. This is most represented in Mission Hills's value of "Authenticity in Relationships".

Baptism and Membership

In all of the interviews, it seemed that Popp and Derbyshire both believed the basic explanations of baptism and membership were fairly obvious and straightforward. This most likely comes from the church's need to accommodate to a large church body in which the church clearly defines these things so that everyone can have the same foundation of knowledge. This is also seen in the church's need to have separate classes for both practices that are offered at specific intervals throughout the year. These methods can provide meaning to the individual and to the staff that help administer the baptism but it is important to note that the church community is only called to witness the individuals being baptized. At Mission Hills, the personal, emotive, and missional aspects of baptism and membership are the aspects that carry the most weight. The communal aspects were not highlighted nearly as often. The community was only mentioned in reference to the congregation that watches the testimonial videos and baptism from their seats. The physical procedures and processes are fairly easy to explain but describing what actually happens in the act of baptism and if it relates to membership within the church was not as easy for the pastoral staff to explain. This may be because no one can truly know or understand what happens when one is immersed in the baptismal waters. The most noteworthy answer of what baptism was and did was found in Derbyshire's explanation of God's pleasure being bestowed upon the individual. The standard answer was that it was solely an external expression of the believer's faith in which the believer is being obedient to Jesus.

Membership was a fairly vague term when it came to what membership did for the individual, especially because membership is not formally practiced within Mission Hills any longer. It has morphed into more of a personal decision of commitment because of tradition rather than something that is meaningful and is emphasized within the church body as a whole. This why it is more of a formal process in which the church outlines specific requirements and obligations to which a potential member has to agree. Perhaps another aspect of this diminution is that the legal aspects⁵² of membership become the reason for membership. If that is the reason, then membership can really lose its core value as a bond that brings people together in unity. Derbyshire stressed, “In some countries being public is serious. We miss that here. We don’t understand how important it is to let others know”.⁵³ When someone is baptized in countries where religious expression is not allowed, baptism instantaneously puts the individual into a new group of people bonded together by certain beliefs. Thus all members understand the unity that comes from being persecuted, being disowned by family, and even being killed, which draws people together in a unique bond. Yet, the United States is not so different. Just because there is freedom of religious expression, does not mean that there are not ties that should draw people together. For the church to focus correctly, it needs to understand who the church can count on in difficult times and who the church needs to make a special effort to reach out to when he or she does not have the strength to go on any longer. Every individual church takes different approaches to what membership means and how it is enacted. Their beliefs around why and how believer’s baptism is performed

⁵² That is the legal requirement for a church to have members to get non-profit tax exemption status.

⁵³ Derbyshire, 2013.

specifically has implications for what follows baptism in membership into the church, which can be related once more to ritual. Ritual is what sets a group or organization apart from the rest of the world and defines the commitment of the individual to the community of the group or organization.⁵⁴ Therefore, baptism means more than just a personal step in one's Christian journey.

For Mission Hills, the view is missional. In their baptism instructions it explains that the purpose of baptism is that "God would use baptism for His glory in the baptizee's life and all who witness the baptizee's act of faith and obedience".⁵⁵ Therefore, baptism contributes to God's manifestation of glory in the community as well as the believer. The bond is more than personal. In explaining to the community what the believer believes, the individual allows the community to hold him or her accountable in proper Christian living. This act is something that should act on the hearts of those who are there by encouraging the community to act in faith and obedience as well. This also means that baptism allows a person to be vulnerable to the community of Christian believers that surround the tub and is what keeps the individual from believing that "by being baptized [the individual is] a better person".⁵⁶ If these things hold true, it is hard for membership *not* to be tied to baptism. It is difficult to be vulnerable without knowing that there is a church body there to support and encourage the individual regardless of what happens in the future. It is also difficult to go on mission without the support of a grouping of people behind the individual or family.

⁵⁴ Ch. 2, pg. 9.

⁵⁵ McSparran, Kelly. *Adult Baptism Instructions MHC*.

⁵⁶ Derbyshire, 2013.

Conclusions

Mission Hills assumes a church community but seems to intentionally define it as separate to church membership. However, there seem to be mutual themes between the two. Perhaps Mission Hills makes the distinction between membership and community because the church is so large. Another possible reason for this distinction is cultural as Popp suggested. In either case, membership and/or community is something that is fairly separate from baptism at Mission Hills. Membership is seen as formal and unnecessary to Christian living whereas baptism has a spiritual significance that makes it vital for Christian living. The distinction between community and membership is interesting and suggests that perhaps in the early Church baptism defined a community with similar beliefs, not a membership with commitments. In the following chapter, the same descriptive analysis will be made of another Baptist church. However, this church has a different culture, is much smaller, and is largely non-evangelical. This will help to determine if this distinction is characteristic only of Mission Hills or if it could be characteristic to the Baptist tradition as a whole.

CHAPTER FOUR

BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP AT DAYSPRING BAPTIST CHURCH: A CASE STUDY

This chapter will take a look at the baptism and membership practices of DaySpring Baptist Church, a small Baptist church located in Waco, Texas. DaySpring was established in October 1993 and currently has about 350 members and regular attendees. Similar to the prior case study on Mission Hills Church, this study was conducted by obtaining information written in DaySpring's bylaws and membership information documents and through a series of interviews with the Senior Pastor, Eric Howell, and the Youth Pastor, Cole Chandler. Much of DaySpring's tradition has been passed down through oral tradition, so this chapter will draw more from the interviews than the written documents. All of DaySpring's practices have been implemented with the phrase, "Sacred, Simple",⁵⁷ in mind. One thing that has followed out of a desire for simplicity that distinguishes DaySpring from many other Baptist churches is its dedication to following the liturgy.⁵⁸ The liturgy is designed to incorporate many early Church practices into church affairs and services. The intent behind using the liturgy for the church service is to keep DaySpring connected to the larger, catholic⁵⁹ church body as well as to provide a simple, consistent, and straightforward format for the church to

⁵⁷ DaySpring Baptist Church. *DaySpring Bylaws*. Waco, TX: DaySpring Baptist Church, 8 Jan. 2001. Word Document.

⁵⁸ liturgy: the whole complex of official services, all the rites, ceremonies, prayers, and sacraments of the Church. (Fortescue, Adrian. 1910. "Liturgy." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09306a.htm>.)

⁵⁹ catholic – universal church, not Roman Catholic church

follow. DaySpring finds meaning through tradition and practices such as the liturgy, which, as shall be demonstrated, influences both its membership and baptism practices. For DaySpring, baptism provides the framework that membership builds upon and, therefore, the following discussion will begin with an explanation of the baptism practices at DaySpring.

Baptism Practices

In a series of interviews with DaySpring pastoral staff, it was made clear that the steps taken by an individual's baptism at DaySpring are each designed to be symbolic of Christ and of community. Formally, DaySpring performs its baptisms by a full immersion believer's baptism. In regards to membership, DaySpring accepts any Trinitarian baptism even if it was not carried out in the same way.⁶⁰ Because the church maintains a relatively small church body, the process of baptism at DaySpring is different for each individual. Most, if not all, of the children and youth have been raised at DaySpring. The children usually go through the preparation process with the children's pastor; the youth with the youth pastor; and the adults with the senior pastor.

Regardless of which pastor the individual receives instruction from, the preparatory process is created with intention. Howell expressed that he hopes that each individual is prepared for his or her baptism, that each individual remembers the day of his or her baptism, and that each individual may enter into baptism as fully as possible.⁶¹ Typically, the baptism preparation includes Scripture-reading assignments, interviews with other church members regarding their baptisms, and memorization of items from

⁶⁰ To be explained in more detail later on in the discussion.

⁶¹ Howell, Eric. Personal interview. 11 Nov. 2013.

what DaySpring has called “The Tradition”.⁶² This includes items such as the Apostle’s Creed and the Beatitudes.⁶³ The length of the preparation time is variable and is dependent on the individual being baptized. Generally, this lasts between four to six weeks. Chandler explained how DaySpring tries to incorporate the baptism preparation time into the season of Lent because traditionally, since the 300-400s A.D., Lent has been a time the Church has set aside for preparation.⁶⁴ When asked why DaySpring decided to implement such a lengthy baptism procedure, Howell responded that they have consciously decided to be slow to baptize individuals. He believes that baptism is an important step on the Christian journey and so it should be taken with care and an element of seriousness. Preparation, Howell explained, is central to who DaySpring is so the process is going to be longer.⁶⁵ Because the church community is small enough to allow individual preparation, DaySpring does not baptize any more than around five people on any given Sunday. There has not been a time in the history of the church in which more people wanted to be baptized, but Howell explained that baptizing more people would change the context in which the baptism is occurring. He acknowledged that the question of number is more of a topic for large churches than a church the size of DaySpring.⁶⁶

⁶² “The resources from the history of the church, to include: the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, The Church Fathers, monastics, and mystics whose thinking and living shape our life together.” (DaySpring Baptist Church, n.d., *DaySpring Information Form*.)

⁶³ Howell, 2013.

⁶⁴ Chandler, 2013.

⁶⁵ Howell, 2013.

⁶⁶ Howell, 2013.

After the preparation process has been duly completed, the next step is baptism. Every moment of the baptism procedure has been arranged with symbolism and imagery connected to the liturgy. The baptismal that DaySpring uses is a common cow trough located outside the sanctuary. Chandler believes that using a cow trough represents a theme of transformation that is interwoven into many Christian practices. Transformation contextualized within Christianity occurs when something ordinary is changed to be the site for something extraordinary to occur⁶⁷—in this case baptism. DaySpring designs the liturgy surrounding the baptism to represent a reciprocity that occurs in which the community demonstrates acceptance for the new baptizee and the new baptizee demonstrates his or her choice to be baptized with this specific community.

DaySpring believes that the baptism event is not an individual step in a faith journey but rather an act that connects a believer into a community. In being a part of an individual's baptism, the community is compelled to walk alongside a person by symbolically entering into the water with him or her.⁶⁸ Therefore, even the church community takes an active part in the baptism when they surround the cow trough.

Another feature to the baptism event is a time for the individual to explain his or her testimony. The concept of story is important to DaySpring. In sharing his or her testimony, the individual is explaining what faith and baptism means to him or her personally and what that looks like in the life of the church. After all of this occurs, the individual is immersed through a Trinitarian baptism.⁶⁹ This is a critical aspect of baptism

⁶⁷ Chandler, 2013.

⁶⁸ Howell, 2013.

⁶⁹ Trinitarian baptism: In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

that becomes important in how DaySpring carries out formal membership. There are religious traditions that DaySpring rejects (i.e. Mormonism) who baptize individuals through a believer's baptism but are not Trinitarian. Therefore, every individual who is a candidate for membership must be baptized by a Trinitarian baptism for it to be accepted.

The baptism event also has symbolism and meaning associated with its actual proceedings. At DaySpring and other Baptist churches there are many different metaphors associated with baptism. One of the most prominent metaphors of the baptism event is the metaphor of life and death. Baptism provides a direct analogy to Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. When an individual is baptized, he or she is lowered into a watery grave, symbolizing death of self in a manner that parallels the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. When the individual is raised out of the water, he or she is raised into a new life, symbolizing purification and renewal to parallel the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is another way that DaySpring interprets the baptism event in regards to communal life in the church. This will be looked at in the section on membership.

Once the individual has been baptized, the most recent person to be baptized (whether they were baptized that day or at another time) is the one that gives a white towel to the new baptizee. White is a symbol of purity and once more represents a new life for the baptizee. Also, in this small action, DaySpring believes that the previous baptizee is symbolically handing down a desire and commitment to the newly baptized individual to live into the call of the Church to go on mission to the world.⁷⁰ Once the new baptizee leaves the cow trough and is handed on the mission of the church from the previously baptized individual, he or she is called upon to lead the congregation in the

⁷⁰ Howell, 2013.

Apostle's Creed, which symbolically demonstrates the individual becoming a new leader in the community.

Both Howell and Chandler emphasized that baptism is a significant and important part of a person's faith journey. They feel that this act is more than just an emotive ritual; baptism is a sacred and holy moment for the individual and the community of believers. It is so fundamental to the makeup of the Baptist church that it is incorporated into the denomination's name.⁷¹ Baptism, as Chandler sees it, brings someone who has nothing in common with those within the church and transforms him or her into one that has everything in common with those within the church; it is the "DNA" for what makes the Church distinct from the rest of the world.⁷² Therefore, at DaySpring, baptism is treated as a serious and meaningful step that provides a framework and foundation for life in the church.

In many ways, DaySpring believes that baptism is not the end of events in one's spiritual journey but rather the beginning of life in the church. The image of this journey is that once the baptism is complete, the individual can no longer be seen as a wanderer on his or her way to belonging and to Christian life. Post-baptism, the individual has found a place to belong and has been initiated into the community of the church. A new journey of living into belonging begins at this point. Baptism is not the first step in a believer's Christian life but it is not the last. Baptism is what binds individuals together as a membered community and the next step, membership, is what sustains the faith.

⁷¹ Chapter 2, pp. 2-3

⁷² Chandler, 2013.

Without members committing to foster the church, it would cease to operate as the Church and much of Christian life would be misunderstood.

DaySpring also believes that there is a communal aspect to baptism. When someone is baptized, the members of the church who are present are not just witnesses to the event. Rather, they each symbolically enter the water with the individual and are baptized with him or her. In doing so, the church members reflect on and remember the commitment they made to live into the call of the Church to go on mission to the world that they made during their own baptisms. Chandler thinks that this continual act of entering into the baptismal waters with an individual is what sanctification in the church looks like. Not only is this time a space for reflection and rededication, it is the time for DaySpring to become a new people to the world. The combination of membership and baptism contributes an entirely new way of life that distinguishes Christians from the world.⁷³ The way DaySpring implements baptism fosters a church community. Church community is different than church membership, though at DaySpring it often translates into formal membership.

Membership Practices

At DaySpring, formal membership is stressed less than baptism but still has value to the church. Formally, members are admitted into the church when they are voted on at DaySpring's quarterly meetings.⁷⁴ Membership is an action independent of baptism that occurs when the individual, couple, or family professes desire and intent to become members. The formal membership process is kept separate from the baptism process

⁷³ Chandler, 2013.

⁷⁴ Howell, 2013.

because DaySpring does not want to assume that an individual is ready and willing to make the commitment of being a member at the moment of baptism. Therefore, the church allows a period of time to pass between being baptized and becoming a formal member. However, the concepts of baptism and membership indeed are related at DaySpring. Once an individual is baptized, they are treated as if he or she became a quasi-member of the church. During the period of time that these individuals take between baptism and formal membership or between regularly attending the church and becoming a member, the individuals go through another discernment process with the church. They are encouraged to meet with the pastoral staff and other members of the church to interview them on what membership means to them and what the commitment entails. The individuals also fill out an application for membership. The application for membership consists of one of the following: a profession of faith,⁷⁵ a statement of faith,⁷⁶ or a transfer letter from another church.⁷⁷ According to the church bylaws, a person becomes a member in one of three ways:

1. By profession of faith that Jesus Christ is Lord. Traditional observances of baptism are offered.
2. By transfer letter of membership from another church. Traditional expressions of baptism are accepted.

⁷⁵ Profession of faith: a new profession of Christian belief followed by baptism

⁷⁶ Statement of faith: a statement of Christian belief that includes verification of being baptized. Often used when an individual either has never been a part of another church, has been a part of a different denomination, or has not been a member of a church for many years.

⁷⁷ Transfer letter: “a written communication from one church to another that bears witness of the transferee’s standing, and acknowledges the transfer of membership” (Sargent, Robert J. 2009. “The Church Letter”. Tabernacle Baptist Church. <http://www.tbaptist.com/clientimages/48350/challengerarticles/thechurchletter.pdf>.)

3. By request for associate, or “watchcare”, membership for persons who wish to identify with the Church but who desire to have their official membership remain in another church. Associate members shall enjoy all of the privileges of membership including service on committees, but excluding service on the coordinating council.⁷⁸

The third option for becoming a member at DaySpring has been designed to accommodate its more transitory college and young adult community. One important aspect of membership is that DaySpring requires baptism as a prerequisite to becoming a member. Not all Baptist churches require baptism to become a member but DaySpring has decided this is an important aspect of being a member of the church. As was mentioned earlier, DaySpring practices baptism by immersion; however, if an individual comes to DaySpring after being baptized in another way, the church does not reject other forms of baptism as long as the baptism that the individual received was a Trinitarian baptism.⁷⁹ DaySpring believes that this is a critical aspect in accepting baptisms from other traditions because it eliminates belief systems that DaySpring rejects, such as Mormonism.⁸⁰ DaySpring acknowledges that not all people are baptized through believer’s baptism and does not believe that people who have been baptized through another form need to be re-baptized, as many other Baptist churches require.⁸¹

⁷⁸ DaySpring Baptist Church. *DaySpring Bylaws*.

⁷⁹ See Footnote 10.

⁸⁰ Mormons baptize by believer’s baptism but not in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, DaySpring uses this distinction as criterion for accepting alternative forms of baptism.

⁸¹ Chapter 2, pp. 5-6.

After the candidate for membership is voted in at the church meeting, they are officially called a “DaySpringer”.⁸² By becoming a member, an individual or family receives the privilege of voting in church proceedings and commits to contribute to the Chart.⁸³ The Chart has been divided into five sections: worship, hospitality, missions, spiritual formation, and stewardship.⁸⁴ The Chart is a way that DaySpring organizes the daily work of the church. Items on the Chart include: the lawn mowing team, the cleaning team, the decorations team, and others. The intent behind the Chart was for DaySpring to foster a spirit of service and commitment to the local church. Because of DaySpring’s dedication to simplicity, the church believes it is the duty of its members to take part in sustaining the church. DaySpring strives to maintain a small staff so it relies heavily upon its members to help in the functioning of the church. Without drawing upon its members for support in everyday tasks, the church would struggle to exist as it does currently. DaySpring teaches its members that to participate in the life of the church, to establish ownership in the church, and to function together in an act of service and mission is to be committed to Christian living. A member only has a one-year commitment to the Chart.⁸⁵ After that time, the member may choose to serve the church in a new way or may take a session of rest if external life-circumstances demonstrate necessity.

⁸² “The [slightly humorous] term most often used to describe a member of DaySpring Baptist Church.” (DaySpring Baptist Church. *DaySpring Information Form*.)

⁸³ “DaySpring’s way of organizing and recruiting volunteers for the work to be done.” (DaySpring Baptist Church 2012)

⁸⁴ DaySpring Baptist Church. *DaySpring Information Form*.

⁸⁵ Renewed every fall.

Chandler had much to say regarding what his perspective of what membership is in relation to baptism. Baptism, Chandler asserted, is not just an act of Christian witness to the world, but is an event that initiates entrance into community, which means membership. Chandler believes that the action of becoming a member is an action that is just as intrinsic to the church as baptism because membership characterizes church community. A regular attendee would not commit to doing the work and because of this, DaySpring is extending an act of hospitality to the regular attendee. A member is one that does the work of the church and is an irreplaceable component of the church body. Chandler said, “A member is part of us”.⁸⁶ One feature of baptism that was alluded to prior is the metaphor of death to self followed by life in Christ that the practice of baptism suggests. There is another way of interpreting this metaphor that Chandler proposed in his interview. The descent into the baptismal waters is representative of dying to a life of self, which includes death to a life of individualism, indifference, and concealment. The ascent, therefore, is representative of new life in the church, including life in community, commitment, and vulnerability.⁸⁷ Consequently, when an individual at DaySpring is contemplating and preparing for baptism, in theory, he or she is preparing for membership at DaySpring also.

Conclusions

As is clear in the discussion above regarding baptism and membership practices, DaySpring’s motto, “Sacred, Simple”⁸⁸ can be seen throughout DaySpring. The church

⁸⁶ Chandler, 2014.

⁸⁷ Chandler, 2014.

⁸⁸ DaySpring Baptist Church. *DaySpring Bylaws*.

finds deep meaning through its sacred tradition and practice, which helps in the functioning of the church as well as in membership and baptism. For DaySpring, baptism provides the framework that membership (among other church practices) builds upon. Baptism was never meant to be one thing among others within the church because it is deeply connected to the life of the church. Furthermore, the baptism event is not an individual step in a faith journey but rather an act that connects a believer into a community. It is more than just an emotive ritual that has been passed down throughout history. Rather, baptism is a sacred and holy moment for the individual and community of believers and is treated as a serious and meaningful within the confines of DaySpring. DaySpring ensures that this process is prolonged so that it may be taken seriously and so its people can understand what it means to be a committed church member. By pursuing membership following baptism, it demonstrates dedication to be sanctified with the church, ridding individuals of their own selves so that they may know God more. Therefore, the connection between baptism and membership may be defined: baptism is initiation into membership and membership is the name for that sanctifying process whereby the church is being made holy.⁸⁹

As can be seen from the analyses, the two churches are different and represent different sides of the spectrum of belief contained within the Baptist tradition. Through these two church entities, it is clear that baptism and membership are connected yet the strength of the connection varies from church to church. In the next and final chapter, DaySpring Baptist Church will be directly compared with Mission Hills Church. Conclusions and observations will be made about how baptism and membership are tied,

⁸⁹ Chandler, 2014.

and perhaps, how they should be tied together where they traditionally may not have been. This comparison will then be analyzed in relation to its implications for the Baptist tradition as a whole.

CHAPTER FIVE

AN ANALYSIS

Initially, this exploration was intended to determine if baptism and membership were individual practices among many within the Baptist tradition or if they carried more meaning through being combined within the church tradition. I came to this study with the belief that baptism would have more weight and definition within Baptist churches because of its establishment in the New Testament. Because baptism is included in many of the biblical teachings, such as within the Great Commission,⁹⁰ it has been studied and analyzed throughout church history and this has created a solid theology within certain populations and caused divisions within others. What I discovered was that baptism is defined similarly in both of the churches studied but also that it was implemented differently. Furthermore, I found that membership is defined differently at each of the churches but was implemented very similarly.

Baptism

As was discussed in chapter two, in its earliest development, Baptists believed that baptism shows a radical step away from the believer's former life of sin. In the early church, baptismal scenes became common testimony of the faith and life of the growing

⁹⁰ Matthew 28:19-20 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

movement.⁹¹ As the Christian movement developed, baptism constituted the primary requirement to enter formally into the body of believers through membership. The three different types of memberships that were outlined establish the framework for membership in a primary sense.⁹² However, these descriptions pale in comparison to the diversity of practice within the Baptist tradition. The magnitude of what this could introduce to the church is overlooked and this is particularly evident in the lack of scholarly articles and books on church membership. The concept of ritual is a part of many faith traditions including Christianity and baptism may be considered such a ritual within Christianity.⁹³ Ritual sets a group or organization apart and establishes one's commitment because it marks the individual's decision to make a movement from non-member to member, establishing the identity of the individual as well as the collective. Ritual also demonstrates the marriage of the practices of baptism and membership. One was not present in the early Church without the other. Membership in a community of believers imparted meaning into the daily life of the early believer through the act of baptism. In the early Church, a public declaration of faith meant that the believer was willing to be different than the world the believer lived in, that he or she would suffer alongside the early Church body. While the membership at Mission Hills and DaySpring

⁹¹ Brackney, William H. "Doing Baptism Baptist Style: Believer's Baptism." *Doing Baptism Baptist Style: Believer's Baptism*. Baptist History and Heritage Society. (2001).

⁹² Ch. 2, pp. 4-6.

⁹³ Note: How this plays out and the importance of ritual within different faith traditions is an identified place of further research and analysis outside of the scope of this paper.

does not necessarily mean that individuals will suffer, the early Church practices add meaning that modern membership practices have ignored.

Mission Hills Church and DaySpring interpret baptism in a similar manner but put it into practice differently. At first glance it appeared that the churches viewed baptism's effects moving in opposite directions in reference to the community of believers. At Mission Hills, the primary reasons for baptism are to obey Jesus' command to be baptized and to make a public statement of Christian faith, which produces the effect that one moves externally from the church community. DaySpring, however, believes that the baptism event is not an individual step in a faith journey but rather an act in which a new believer is connected into a community, which produces an effect that moves one into the church community. Consequently, the intended direction of influence for each of these churches was different. Yet, that difference aside, how each church defines baptism was fairly similar. Mission Hills views baptism as a step that distinguishes a Christian from everyone else because of the Christian's larger, evangelical mission in the world. It is more than simply a religious activity because of the joy that enters the person as they choose to go through an important and meaningful Christian experience. Similarly, DaySpring believes that baptism has a larger meaning. They feel that this act is more than just an emotive ritual that the Church has maintained over time. To DaySpring, baptism is a sacred and holy moment for the individual and community of believers forming the "DNA" for what makes the Church distinct from the rest of the world.

In this way the two churches are similar because both churches view baptism as the mark that makes a Christian distinct. Not only is it a clear mark of Christian belief, baptism is a sacred moment of Christian experience unique to those who are being or

have been baptized because it is in those moments where God becomes more apparent. To both churches, baptism is more than an activity or ritual. This is significant because it demonstrates the spiritual and contemplative thought on the subject of baptism that pervades the Baptist tradition. Lorenzen explains, "Baptists have no central office which would determine an official Baptist theology. Every local church is autonomous, and within the Baptist constituency wide varieties of theology and church practice are evident".⁹⁴ Because of the more evident dissimilarities of the two churches in structure and location, it is significant that the spiritual interpretation of baptism within the two churches has taken similar language, especially in a denomination that is as diverse as Lorenzen details. This may imply that the spirituality and basis for which Baptist churches found their baptism practices on is larger than a singular denomination and is much more central to free church traditions within Christianity. This suggestion aligns with the amount of study and analysis on the topic of baptism throughout church history.

Where these churches differed was in the concrete implementation and practice of baptism at each church. For example, at Mission Hills, an individual who wants to be baptized registers in a one-hour class that prepares him or her for baptism. On the other hand, at DaySpring, the individual prepares for baptism for a time anywhere between four to six weeks, depending on the individual being baptized. One potential reason for the difference is the way that each church approaches baptism within the context of its church culture. Much of DaySpring's tradition has been passed down through oral tradition and because of this, the church has found deep meaning through its traditions and practices. Also, the population of DaySpring is more academic in the sense that a

⁹⁴ Lorenzen, Thorwald. "Baptists and ecumenicity with special reference to baptism." *Review & Expositor* 77, no. 1 (December 1, 1980): 21-45.

larger proportion of members and attendees at this church have advanced seminary and theology degrees and teach at Baylor University in Waco. These factors in turn affect the way the church makes decisions on how to put baptism into practice. Therefore, everything that is implemented at a church like DaySpring is intended to be steeped in tradition, meaning, and symbolism. Mission Hills, on the other hand, has expanded rapidly over the past few years and has become quite large. The church that exists currently is completely different than the church that existed five years prior and its traditions and practices have been altered (intentionally or unintentionally) along with its new population. One of the results of this expansion is that Mission Hills has streamlined its baptism process so that many more people can be baptized on any given Sunday. Also, the city that Mission Hills is located in—Littleton, CO— is a suburb and the demographic reflects a middle class suburban population. The number of advanced seminary or theology degrees is significantly less than at DaySpring. This is important because the individuals within the church are more likely individuals who have not studied or given thought to some of these ideals and practices. As expected, therefore, the topics of importance at DaySpring are not as apparent at Mission Hills.

The different methods employed by DaySpring and Mission Hills fall within the traditional Baptist understandings of baptism and membership are not necessarily right or wrong; however, there is an aspect of the spirituality of baptism that can be lost within each method. At DaySpring, the process can become excessively long and rigorous, thus potentially deterring people from deciding to make the effort to be baptized. However, it may be argued that if this were the case, those individuals would not be ready for their baptisms. For a church that is very communally focused, this could be detrimental

because individuals who were ready to be baptized could miss the spiritual growth that may come from becoming baptized. Depending on the individual, decisions that are made and implemented quickly can be as beneficial as slow and intensive discernment. By trying to impart meaning into every individual step of baptism, the overall significance can lose meaning over time. Likewise, at Mission Hills, the process can happen so quickly that people do not truly understand the spiritual magnitude of what baptism means. The excitement that a quick decision makes may die out before it has the ability to make a lasting impression on the person. For an evangelical church, this could be dangerous because individual spiritual growth may be sporadic and may not be fostered sustainably. For either church, these dangers can result in a loss of spiritual growth and understanding for an individual. Yet, despite these setbacks, baptism has maintained an important place within each of these churches and ultimately, has identified people in a way that has meaning and makes Christianity distinct. These dangers are also why post-baptism practices in discipleship and growth, even membership, are important for these churches to identify.

Membership, on the other hand, was more diversely defined but more similarly implemented at the two churches. At both churches, the process of membership occurs separate to the time of baptism. The application and approval processes are largely similar within each church. The board of elders at DaySpring votes prospective members in at a quarterly meeting and then introduces them into the congregation during the weekly worship service. The board of elders at Mission Hills approves prospective members and likewise introduces them during the weekly worship services. By becoming a member at both churches, an individual or family receives the privilege of voting in

church proceedings and commits to serve within the church. Both churches require a period of discernment and education on the church's history and dogma before making a commitment to being a member. There are a few procedural differences in the type of baptism accepted in order to be a member and the option to become a watchcare member at DaySpring but by and large, the implementation process is similar.

Not surprisingly, where the two churches differ in agreement is in their respective interpretation of what membership means for a community of Christian believers. Formal membership once was important to Mission Hills; however, it is no longer stressed because the church believes modern culture fights against commitment and consequently believes the individuals within the church would fight against it as well. The rapid growth of the church is drawing in more individuals and families who are young, a population which lends itself to contemporary cultural influences more than older generations. Membership still exists at Mission Hills primarily for the older members of the congregation who make a decided effort to pursue formal membership. At DaySpring, formal membership is stressed less than baptism, which reflects one element of the perspective at Mission Hills, but it is more important to DaySpring than to Mission Hills. Members within DaySpring believe that it is membership that characterizes church community in a way that is consistent with tradition and therefore cultural variations less important. DaySpring also tends to merge its church practices more than Mission Hills. They believe that baptism was never meant to be one thing among others within the church because it is deeply connected to the life of the church.

At Mission Hills, membership is just one part of a Christian's faith journey and is a distinct step separate from baptism. There are small amounts of value to membership at

Mission Hills in that it allows the church to know whom they can count on to give and serve. It also establishes more fully which core values the church and its members agree on. These are beneficial because it establishes a consistent base for a church that has been increasingly transitory in recent years. Despite these benefits, membership has been allowed to become purely a personal decision to commit rather than something that is taught and emphasized within the church body as a whole. Despite the lack of emphasis, however, many people do become members. This suggests that there is still a sense of community and connectedness within the church body, even if it is not called membership. On the contrary, at DaySpring, the action of becoming a member is an action that is just as intrinsic to the church as baptism and is intentionally interwoven from the first moments of entering the church building. There are themes of community and membership woven into each practice within the church and these are most evident in baptism. The contemplation and preparation process for baptism is also, in theory, a part of preparation for membership at DaySpring.

Church Membership

Over the course of my investigation, I found that membership is less defined within the Baptist tradition. A church may ignore the process of membership altogether seeing it as an archaic practice and another church may implement it just to the point of being a mere formality to appease those within the church who find it valuable. In the former case, membership has not been officially terminated but most likely is on its way out of the church. One possible reason for why membership has lost momentum over the past years is that, by and large, people do not know how to articulate what membership was, is, or should be. This can be seen in the diversity contained within Mission Hills and

DaySpring. This diversity persists at a whole church level as well as within the individual staff members that were interviewed. Each person interviewed had a unique personal perspective on membership and its tie to baptism.

Another possibility for diversity in membership practices is related to how the church articulates and implements other practices within the church from a leadership standpoint. During interviews, the pastoral staff at both Mission Hills and DaySpring almost instantaneously started to describe the formal process of membership when asked about what membership looks like at each of the churches. When asked to expand upon the theological or spiritual significance of why the church decided to implement membership in that way, the pastors did not have much to say. This does not mean that there was not a reason but rather suggests that they were not a part of the conversations about why the church decided to implement membership in that manner.

Membership, then, may be something that is around but has not been given enough academic and spiritual study to establish cohesive themes and understandings within different Baptist churches. One thing that was important to both of these churches was the concept of story and how community fits into this concept at some point. At Mission Hills, the process to become a member took longer than the process to get baptized suggesting that the church holds that there is importance for the increased difficulty. Yet, when asked why, Mission Hills, as an institutional entity, did not have a specific reason. Individual members, however, have mentioned that though membership has not been stressed recently at Mission Hills, it is very important because it allows them to commit and be a part of something greater in an era where there is a culture of non-commitment. How DaySpring, a much younger church, has implemented its membership

procedures reflects the attitude of Mission Hills's current members. Dedication to be sanctified alongside the church is an important concept to DaySpring. So, somehow, membership still persists within the church. It is as though people believe that making a formal statement of belonging within a church is intrinsically important for either faith or Christian living.

What seemed evident at the end of the analysis was that the perspective each church took towards baptism was connected to how the church viewed membership in the church suggesting that even if there was not a defined connection between the two, the mentality of the church connected the practices. Baptist churches that are more internally focused,⁹⁵ represented by DaySpring, seem to take baptism more as an important step on a journey within a church community. Baptist churches that are more externally focused,⁹⁶ represented by Mission Hills, seem to view baptism more as an expression of belief that has the power to change the lives of others. Either way, baptism at these churches carries a sense of entering into community within the church – whether or not that is formalized through membership.

⁹⁵ Internally focused in the sense that membership was more important and their primary focus was addressing the spiritual needs of the church body

⁹⁶ Externally focused in the sense that their primary focus was evangelism and expansion of the church body rather than establishing membership

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The analysis displayed in this thesis is an attempt to discern how two specific practices—baptism and church membership—may be defined in the Baptist tradition, how they are connected, and what this may imply about church life. What I discovered was that there is not a single persisting way that baptism and membership have been set up within the Baptist tradition. By looking at DaySpring and Mission Hills, it is clear that baptism at these churches carries a sense of entering into community within the church even when that sense of community was not formalized through membership.

In the second chapter, I explored baptism and its association with different membership practices within the Baptist tradition. The chapter began with a broad overview of Baptist theology in regards to baptism followed by a discussion about membership styles in the Baptist tradition. The analysis was concluded by articulating a few preliminary conclusions about the relationship between baptism and church membership and what that implies for church life.

The third chapter presented a detailed description of Mission Hills Church. I concluded that, in that particular context, the process of baptism was an integral part of a faith journey. Mission Hills viewed baptism as a step that distinguishes a Christian in his or her larger, evangelical mission in the world. Church membership still exists at Mission Hills but it is primarily implemented for the older members of the congregation who have made a decided effort to pursue it.

The fourth chapter presented a similar analysis of DaySpring. I argued that, at DaySpring, baptism was deeply connected to the life of the church. It connected a believer into a community and provided the framework that membership builds upon. It was found that formal membership is stressed less than baptism but still has an important place at DaySpring because of the church's focus on community life.

In the final chapter, I placed these churches in a side-by-side comparison. I suggested that Mission Hills and DaySpring interpret baptism in a similar manner. On the other hand, they define membership more diversely but implement it similarly. To both churches, baptism is more than an activity or ritual. Also, to both churches, making a formal statement of membership within a church seems to have some intrinsic importance for faith and Christian living. What I found was that the lack of scholarship on the topic of membership has inadvertently influenced how membership is characterized in the Baptist tradition as a unit. This is important because it suggests that there has not been much academic thought and study regarding membership. This means that there were many differences within the small scope of church traditions that were analyzed in this paper. Therefore, church culture, especially in an academic sense, had the strongest influence over membership practices.

Therefore, I must conclude that the relationship between the two practices of baptism and membership is defined and practiced uniquely within each church within the Baptist tradition. Baptism had definitions that paralleled other churches but membership did not. The two practices are connected because the perspectives each church took towards baptism were connected to how the church viewed membership. The persisting

desire for membership even when it is not emphasized suggests that church life is more meaningful if the church practices are connected within the church.

EPILOGUE

One important study that developed over the course of my study is what happened at the church I currently attend. University Baptist Church (UBC) has never had membership as a part of its church life. It is a fairly new church that believes that community is an integral process of Christian living but does not have any opportunities for formal membership. However, the subject of membership has kept coming up within the congregation to the point that a committee has been formed to define what that might look like within UBC. Why it continued to come up is a bit of a mystery. Perhaps it is either because of past church membership experiences making it seem like membership is a necessary practice or because membership somehow has a meaning associated with it that people desire and tend towards.

One of the most common words that can be heard within the church is the word “community.” As UBC developed as a church, community became its primary focus because the church believed that it is from communal living that Christian living can truly come. Therefore, every activity in the church is directed towards community – whether that is through service, small groups, worship, or other church happenings. What the membership committee has discovered is that membership in the church is something that is difficult to define because membership as a concept has many different meanings associated with its implementation. There are many different contemporary forms of membership that can be reproduced to some extent but when it came to how it would work within the UBC church context, each model fell short. As we tried to define a specific membership model, we traveled to other churches and learned from each of

them. What UBC has striven to establish in their membership practices was to make the membership process counter-cultural. The current young adult generation, as they have seen it, is a very involved yet under-committed culture. UBC wants membership to become something that is one of life's most defining associations similar in commitment to Christian marriage.

What we as a committee have established aligns with what I have concluded in this analysis. Below I have reproduced an excerpt from the membership document our committee has compiled which explains the beginnings of what we have written as language for membership at UBC.

Membership at UBC is a commitment to follow the words of Paul in Romans 12 that we “be devoted to one another in love.” It is a *covenantal relationship* rather than a contractual obligation. Signees of a contract are interested primarily in protecting their rights and clarifying terms of a “deal.” Participants in a covenant are interested primarily in how they can give themselves sacrificially to one another to benefit the relationship. Participants in a covenant are also so committed to the relationship that they see their membership within it within the foreseeable future... We also see membership as an impetus for fulfilling our mission of “...forming a community in the way of Christ that embraces beauty and lives missionally.” In entering into a covenant relationship with each other, we are committing ourselves to being formed in the way of Christ through community, to discover and embrace those things which are beautiful, and to find our mission in the world.⁹⁷

These conversations and the conversations that are continuing around UBC's membership process have drawn many of the persisting questions throughout this exploration together for me and allowed me to tangibly put into practice what I had discovered.

⁹⁷ This comes from a rough-draft document that is yet unpublished and was created by the membership committee (myself included) at University Baptist Church in Waco, TX.

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