

An Open Letter

to our

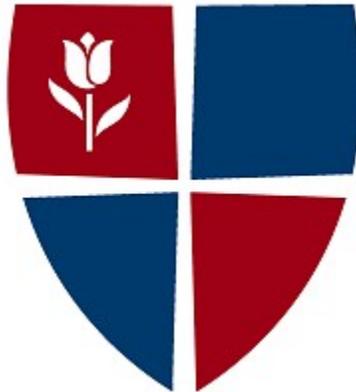


Credo-Baptist & Paedo-Baptist
Brethren

By James Brown

An Open Letter to our Credo-Baptist & Paedo-Baptist Brethren

By James Brown Jr



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Introduction

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

My desire to compose this letter is driven by something upon which I think we all can agree: the quick snippets on social media along with the assumptions and judgments derived from these fragments of information has made the age of instant and seemingly infinite information less illuminating than the primitive days of the telegraph.

In days gone by, the increase of speed and access to information was never meant to be the foundation of knowledge. Today, our whole belief system is based on 140 characters. We have now entered a time where this speed of and access to information often does little more than produce ignorance and confusion. Further, social media is even being used as a tool to suppress truth due to the avalanche of disinformation, slander, and verbal beat-downs.

Even though there have been many blessings from this technology, we would be foolish to think that we have not been influenced by this culture, which is all around us.

Because of the prevailing environment and climate, we desire to give a fuller answer to the potential misunderstanding and disinformation that social media incites. Our present cultural context demands a broader defense of our view of baptism and a broader explanation of our association with Evangel Presbytery.

While this letter may fall under the definition of lengthy, it is by no means exhaustive or systematic. Realizing this is not the final word, I hope it will serve as a conversation starter.

I should also point out that I am not speaking for Evangel Presbytery or anyone else therein. My views are my own and the consensus of Reformed Church of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, my use of "we" should only be assumed as Reformed Church of the Holy Trinity and not Evangel Presbytery. I do not speak for Evangel Presbytery and am not attempting to imply any representation. Any reference to Evangel Presbytery is my understanding or opinion of said body.

In addition to this, I am speaking as a Reformed Credo-Baptist, meaning I am a Reformed Christian who believes the sign and seal in the sacrament of baptism should

be given to professing adult believers. By adult, I am speaking of those who are not infants or children. I am not advocating for any age of accountability, but only that the professing believer be of a mature or responsible age to consent and be accountable for full communion as an individual member of the church.

Certainly, baptism is not the only issue that needs a comment with regard to our seeking admission into Evangel Presbytery, and, it is certainly not the totality of concern. Regardless, the issue of baptism seems to be where the objections are focused, just as they have been for the last 400 years.

Still yet, as Credo-Baptists, we unashamedly announce that we, Reformed Church of the Holy Trinity, have unanimously voted to be united with Evangel Presbytery. We are not lost to the fact that this is unthinkable to many modern Baptists. Because of this, we believe we must explain our course of action. Regardless of any potential misunderstanding, we humbly declare our intention to be associated with this band of godly brothers.

Needless to say, I believe it would be prudent to present a detailed explanation of our motives, intentions, and reasons. We hope this will not only serve as a defense, but more importantly, an aid to unity and peace in Christ's Church.

Prevailing Attitudes

We live in a time of great apostasy and have witnessed the complete eradication of the God-ordained institutions of the Church, the family, and the state. The work before us does not consist of primer and paint. It should be obvious the edifice, framework, and foundations are in ruins. We can either honestly admit the state of things or continue our moronic playacting. I understand it is easier to pretend and continue as if all is well, because to admit the obvious requires rebuilding.

Without question, rebuilding projects contain elements where construction in different areas take place simultaneously. I am not suggesting that we abandon the implications and applications that flow out of the Church, but if there is to be reformation, it must begin at the house of God just as judgment also begins with us (1 Peter 4:17). The simple truth is that we are responsible for much of this and we cannot rightly blame anyone else.

There have been various movements in my lifetime to reclaim or rebuild society. These

efforts have been focused on the family or some area of the state, be it political or cultural. They have primarily been organized as para-church movements and/or organizations, although some of these para-church movements have loosely associated with the Church. Regardless of the approach, all these efforts amount to nothing more than the tail attempting to wag the dog.

The kingdom building strategy commissioned by our King does not begin with the family or the state. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 that He would build His Church and it is this institution that will assault and prevail against the gates of hell. The family and the state are God-ordained and essential, but neither possess the spiritual power necessary for revival and reformation.

Too often the Church has been an afterthought, or at best, a hub for para-church networking. However, the Church is not a facilitator or an aid; it is the bedrock of society. The family and the state can only function properly if the Church is our foundation. It should go without saying, but I had better state it anyway: by Church I mean a biblical, orthodox, and faithful Church. The apostate Church may be the foundation for a society, but the result is the same as those societies without any Church.

This is why I believe it is essential for the Church to be our primary focus. Cut off from the Church there is no framework for the family or the state. Paul made it clear that the Church is the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). Without this foundation, the family, nor the state, can function in a God-ordained way.

Yet, my focus is even more narrow because I believe the decayed American Church allows us to rebuild in a better fashion. I am not talking about new blueprints, but better quality and proficiency in certain areas. One of these areas is unity among Reformed Paedo-Baptists and Credo-Baptists.

Also, for the sake of unity, my aim is not to focus on the failures of my Paedo-Baptist brethren. Without question, these things must be addressed, but from my point of reference it must begin with me and those who hold the same practice as I. Therefore, my first concern is the removal of schismatic attitudes, errors, inconsistencies, and illogical deductions among Baptists.

"And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to

thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." –Matthew 7:3-5

Preventative Answers

With that, let me counter some potential misunderstandings by preemptively acknowledging and replying to them.

First, we have not denied Credobaptism and affirmed Paedobaptism. We continue to be committed to our Credo-Baptist view. However, the time and mode of baptism is not the basis of our identity.

We are a Reformed church who holds to a credo position on baptism. We are not a Baptist church who happens to be Calvinistic while redefining the word "Reformed" as exclusively Baptist.

It is this very reason we selected a name absent of the Baptist tag. We find this identity based on one issue to be unhelpful in today's context. I further submit that once "Baptist Identity" became completely infected with Anabaptist separatism, Arminian ecclesiology, and Roman Catholic apostolic secessionism, it moved from unhelpful to schismatic and heretical, most notably in extreme positions like Baptist successionism, alien baptism, denying the universal Church, and Landmarkism.

Again, to use a borrowed and previous analogy, it is comparable to the tail wagging the dog, in that, Reformed Theology has been and is being redefined to guarantee a fixed outcome on the issue of baptism until, in many cases, it is no longer Reformed. This is where we are today with most who call themselves Baptists.

Historically there were two kinds of Baptists: General or Arminian and Particular or Calvinist. Still yet, most American Baptists come from the Particular or Calvinist line, even though many of them, like the Traditionalists in the Southern Baptist Convention, will deny their very own Reformed and Calvinist roots.

This has caused many of our Reformed Paedo-Baptist brethren to conclude that Credobaptism leads to Arminianism. While I reject that claim as too simplistic, I do understand the sentiment. However, I would caution my Reformed Paedo-Baptist

friends to remember that no Reformed lineage has fared well in this day of apostasy. Our sins may be different, but they have led to similar places of apostasy even though we took different roads.

What I believe is the case with Baptists is not the Credo-Baptist application of Covenant Theology, but the redefining of Covenant Theology. When you change the data to guarantee a certain result in one area, do not be surprised when there are unintended consequences.

Whether our Paedo-Baptist brethren remain over-cautious concerning Credobaptism or not, my fellow Credo-Baptists and I must acknowledge that it was a great error to define our theology based upon our practice. Theology should be the foundation for our practices and to reverse this can breed all kinds of errors at best and heresies at worst.

The simple fact is that Credo-Baptists have become way too sectarian on the issue of baptism. The result has been hostility and our Paedo-Baptist brethren rejecting us as being Reformed. This stigma is not without merit since, in many cases, we have sought to redefine Reformed doctrines and principles so they would more easily lead to a Credo-Baptist conclusion.

This has not developed a high level of trust among Reformed Paedo-Baptists and Credo-Baptists. And, if you are a Credo-Baptist who immediately responded to this observation with accusations against our Paedo-Baptist brethren rather than with self-examination, you are missing the point, not to mention helping to prove my point about our schismatic spirit.

I believe Credo-Baptists must address this disagreement on the time and mode of baptism in the context of classical Reformed Theology if we are going to claim to be Reformed. We must recover a Reformed Theology, not a Baptist Theology.

Although there is not one identical explanation of Reformed Theology in every detail, still yet, there is a monolithic view of Reformed Theology in its fundamentals or foundations.

Nevertheless, when the defense of a certain practice becomes more important than theology, there tends to be a desire to change theology to uphold the practice. It is the conclusion dictating the evidence. This is pure sectarianism in its worst form. We must

do better than that even if our best exegesis and systematic theology leads us to a Paedo-Baptist conclusion. If we are more concerned about where the truth may lead, we have become unhelpful and detrimental to the building and advancement of Christ's Church.

I am convinced that Reformed Theology, as expressed in the Reformed confessions, is the Biblical truth. It is why I am Reformed and not just soteriologically Calvinistic. I hope we would rather see our practices change, if they are Biblically inconsistent, than to deny what we affirm to be the fundamental articles of Christianity.

Second, we are not engaged in some secret operation to facilitate a transition from Credobaptism to Paedobaptism. There is not some kind of cabal at work to subvert credo views on baptism. This is not to say that we, or our Paedo-Baptist brethren, are agnostic on the issue of baptism. Both Credo-Baptists and Paedo-Baptists are committed to their views and would be happy to see the other persuaded to their point of view.

However, as we attested above, if Paedo-Baptism is the true and proper practice of Reformed baptism then I want my practice to be according to the truth. Nevertheless, I am committed to Credobaptism because I believe it to be the proper and true type. Could my view change? Certainly! Is there any knowledge of this transpiring? No!

The desire for charity, honesty, and consistency does not necessitate retracting a Credo-Baptist practice, and it is a sad day if such an attitude exists among us.

Third, this is not a modern ecumenical movement. Liberals have trashed the word ecumenical to the point it seems unusable, even though its meaning has to do with a whole body of churches promoting unity and cooperation. Despite the actual meaning, the modern liberal use of the term does not describe the union we are seeking.

In spite of the modern hijacking of the term, we are ecumenical in the sense of the Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions. It is a unity and cooperation in the orthodox faith and practice of the Reformed Church that we are seeking. This we will not deny, for we are commanded by Paul in sacred writ to “[endeavor] to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

Evangel Presbytery describes this intention clearly by stating its formation is established “in the mainstream of historic Protestant and Reformed practice and

doctrine.”

Our desire here at Reformed Church of the Holy Trinity is not a unity absent of doctrine, but a unity of truth and love as defined in Scripture, which is the “only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.”

Positive Affirmations

So, what is going on here? Have we lost our minds or is there a positive affirmation of the truth we are seeking to employ? Without question, we intend the latter.

First, we are choosing to esteem one another above ourselves and walk in love as the people of God have been commanded (Philippians 2:1-3). The baptism wars over the last 400 years have oftentimes been uncharitable, and in many, if not most cases, sinful. We have slandered one another, persecuted one another, and excommunicated one another, all because we make a different application in our degree of continuity and discontinuity of the same theology.

These sins are numerous and varied, but its basis is found in two misunderstandings in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith (2LCF).

The first is the misapplication of the “great sin” in WCF 28.5, which states:

“Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.”

This statement of "great sin" has been used to divide the body of Christ by applying it to principled Credo-Baptists when the actual wording is about despising or disregarding the ordinance or sacrament of baptism. At worst, a true Reformed practice of credobaptism is only a delayed baptism. Yet, if such is the case, it is a delayed baptism that upholds the proper and true type.

Let me interject here that it is legitimate for our Paedo-Baptist brethren to question much of what is described today as Reformed Credobaptism. In many cases, it is just a carryover of General Baptist principles among those who have adopted Calvinism

rather than a reevaluation of baptism in light of Reformed Theology.

As a Credo-Baptist, the erroneous and schismatic attitude of some Paedo-Baptists and misapplication of the WCF is not my primary focus as I have stated earlier. However, this does not negate the fact that the schismatic application of the “great sin” to Credo-Baptists is not intrinsic to the WCF.

The Scottish Presbyterian theologian, James Bannerman, wrote that “The proper and true type of Baptism, as a Sacrament in the Church of Christ, is the Baptism of adults, and not the Baptism of infants.”

Of course, this needs some explanation because James Bannerman was a principled Paedo-Baptist and we are not trying to use this statement as a “gotcha” quote. What we are saying is that Paedo-Baptists and Credo-Baptists are in agreement concerning the proper and true type of baptism. The difference that arises is [to] the timing and mode of baptism for the children of believers.

In other words, we have all the same doctrine, purpose, and elements of baptism; only the sequence and application of baptism differs. Therefore, to accuse Credo-Baptists of a “great sin,” as if they are denying the doctrine and practice of baptism in accord with Reformed theology, is untrue. Because Reformed Paedo-Baptists do not believe baptism regenerates since the “efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered,” we are all getting to the same place. Paedo-Baptists baptize infants, but this baptism is not effectual until repentance and faith are professed; Credo-Baptists wait until repentance and faith are professed. It is the same place but different in time and mode.

This erroneous confessional misapplication also applies to Credo-Baptists. In 2LCF 29.2, the Credo-Baptist version states:

“Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance.”

The important part of this statement is the understanding of “only proper subjects.” Notice this statement agrees with the Scottish Presbyterian James Bannerman. The baptism of believing adults is the “proper and true type of baptism.” It is at this point where the difference is found—the application of baptism to the infants of believers.

Again, we are talking about time and mode.

For Baptists, the key is understanding what is meant or should have been meant by "proper."

This word can be used in the sense of legitimate and illegitimate, and that is where I am at odds with some or many—whatever the case may be—Reformed Baptist brethren. The idea of legitimate/illegitimate has led to all sorts of repugnant views like “alien baptism” and “re-baptism.” Or, as the most ardent Baptist defenders will state, "It is not re-baptism, it is baptism."

While this may have been the case with some or many of the London Particular Baptists, there was a significant number who held to an “open membership” view and practice. London Baptists who held to open membership allowed Paedo-Baptist membership in their churches, and it should go without saying that open membership and alien baptism cannot be held together. Therefore, I do not believe the illegitimate/legitimate distinction is intrinsic in the 2LCF.

Understanding “proper” in the sense of its nature takes into account varying degrees. An “open membership” type of Credo-Baptist can affirm paedobaptism as belonging to the same nature yet lesser in its proper and true type. Lesser in its propriety and typology does not make it illegitimate or alien.

In light of this consider WCF 25.4-5:

“This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

“The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will.”

Similarly, although not as detailed, the 2LCF 26.3 states:

“The purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan; nevertheless Christ always hath had, and ever shall have a kingdom in this world, to the end thereof, of such as believe in him, and make profession of his name.”

The point I am attempting to make is the confessional view of the true versus false is that of degree. Although there is an absolute line that distinguishes a church of Christ and a synagogue of Satan, even the purest of churches are “subject to mixture and error.” This means there is no perfect church, which also means, every church has degrees and various mixtures of truth and error.

Therefore, it is essential to understand what is primary concerning the fundamental articles of Christianity that would comprise a true church and the marks that define a faithful church of Christ. These three marks are identified as: (1) the faithful preaching of the Word; (2) the faithful administration of the sacraments; (3) and, the faithful administration of discipline. It is at this point—the faithful administration of the sacraments—where definitions of fundamental, secondary, and indifferent should determine our fellowship with churches of Christ and our separation from synagogues of Satan on the subject of baptism.

This does not mean that secondary and indifferent topics are unimportant or relative. Even in secondary and indifferent issues, there is one truth and not many. Still yet, we need to remember that even though the will of God is absolute, this absoluteness may have permissible differences that do not fall outside of prescribed unity. Let's not forget the degree and abundance of issues in the churches of Corinth, Galatia, and Crete.

Paedo-Baptists rightly affirm that the New Testament does not explicitly abrogate the Old Testament covenantal token or sign to mark the children of covenantal parents. Credo-Baptists rightly affirm there is no positive command to continue giving the covenantal sign to the children of believing parents since the types and shadows of the ceremonial law are fulfilled in Christ. Both of these arguments are credible since there is no express statement in the New Testament directly affirming or denying Paedobaptism or Credobaptism. Each position is the result of a practical application of logical deductions taken from necessary consequences in Scripture. Neither view is unfaithful or violates Reformed fundamentals or principles. Therefore, the real issue concerning fellowship among those who differ on baptism is the theology of baptism

rather than the practice of time and mode.

If this is true, the issue we must address at this time is the slandering and straw-manning of faithful members of Christ's body; for, it is not an issue of orthodoxy or faithfulness, but one of diversity within Reformed permissibility. For whatever reason, it appears the real objective today is to produce disciples of our Credo-Baptist or Paedo-Baptist practices rather than making disciples of Christ.

We Credo-Baptists must repent of our participation and contributions to this unwarranted schism in Christ's body. We can no longer excuse our sins by accusing our brethren of sin. We must own up to our false accusations, faulty arguments, and quarrelsome spirit.

Therefore, our purpose in uniting with Evangel Presbytery, or I should say one of our purposes, is to walk in love with the churches of Christ as we have been commanded. Despite the problems and differences in the First Century Church, Paul commands the churches at Ephesus to walk together in love (Ephesians 5:2). The Apostle John goes so far as to call us liars if we say we love God but hate our brothers (1 John 4:20). And let us not forget it was our Lord who said that our display of brotherly love would authenticate to the world our Christianity.

“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” –John 13:34-35

Could this be one of the primary causes of our loss of standing in our society? I believe it is! We have given false testimony and profaned the name of God by our lack of love and unity. Profaning the name of God is blasphemy and our division, strife, and hatred is a form of it.

So, rather than constantly calling to remembrance the sins of our brethren, we are repenting of our sins of division, strife, and hatred, and, choosing to, "above all things," as Peter said, "have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

Have Paedo-Baptists wronged Credo-Baptists at various points in history? Absolutely, but instead of holding a grudge, we must forgive our brethren and walk together in love. Have Credo-Baptists wronged Paedo-Baptists at various points in history?

Absolutely! And because we have wronged our brethren we should repent, make reconciliation, and walk together in love.

To attribute love and forgiveness as abandoning our principles, convictions, or practices is pig-headed, and I refuse to be a party to this any longer. Therefore, I will seek unity in the fundamental articles of Christianity and be charitable in issues not vital to the Christian religion.

Second, we are seeking to bring understanding, consistency, and clarity to the baptism debate.

This is a difficult task because our differences are real. We are not just playing word games hoping no one will press the issue. We are not Credo-Baptists with a wink and a nod, void of any meaning. We take this issue seriously, both in our affirmations of credobaptism and denials of paedobaptism.

This seriousness demands that we seek to understand, be consistent, and pursue clarity regarding both views. However, the real question is, “of what sort or type do these differences consist?”

Unfortunately, the differences are presented as counterpoints because most Credo-Baptists and Paedo-Baptists are confused about or exaggerate their practice. This is largely due to the distinctions of adult versus infant or immerse versus sprinkle as if these distinctions are the designations of different baptisms.

Examples of different systems would be the sign and seal view versus the memorial-only view, or, a sacramental view versus a baptismal regeneration view. There is a difference between the Reformed Paedo-Baptist system and the Roman Catholic system and between the Reformed Credo-Baptist view and the Church of Christ, but it is not based upon time or mode.

What is evident from the discussion above is that timing and mode is not the main issue; credobaptism nor paedobaptism is the essence of true baptism. If it were, then Reformed Baptists would have more in common with the Church of Christ than with Presbyterians and Presbyterians with Roman Catholics rather than Reformed Baptists. Any knowledgeable and honest assessment understands it is Reformed theology that separates Reformed Baptists from Cambellites and Presbyterians from Romanists.

As an example, let's experiment with baptism in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

WCF 28.1 states:

“Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world.”

A Reformed Credo-Baptists would affirm this paragraph in its description of the nature, meaning, and importance of baptism. Roman Catholics and Cambellites could not affirm this statement due to their denial of baptism being a sign and seal, and because of their affirmation that baptism is the regenerating power.

Therefore, Romanists and Cambellites affirm the same kind of baptism but disagree with timing and mode. Such is the case with Reformed Paedo-Baptists and Credo-Baptists, it is not a matter of nature or kind but of timing and mode.

WCF 28.2 states:

“The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.”

Reformed Credo-Baptists and Paedo-Baptists both affirm this statement.

WCF 28.3 states:

“Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.”

Reformed Credo-Baptists disagree with this statement as to the mode of baptism, believing that immersion is the proper and true type of baptism. This is not a different baptism or a different nature of baptism, but a difference in the application.

WCF 28.4 states:

“Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized.”

Reformed Credo-Baptists disagree with the timing of baptism with regard to the children of believing parents. However, we do believe the children of believing parents should receive the sign and seal. The question is when?

We believe the proper and true type of baptism is after regeneration but also upon a profession that is capable of examination and accountability. Yet, this is not a disagreement concerning the sign and seal but a difference of time. Reformed credobaptism and paedobaptism contain the same nature and elements of baptism even though it is in a different sequence.

WCF 28.5 states:

“Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.”

Here we are in absolute agreement with the importance of baptism and in denying baptismal regeneration.

Although we are united here in our verbal profession, I want to address an issue attached to the view we say we profess.

To scorn or have contempt for the true nature of baptism is a great sin, and we Credo-Baptists, along with our Paedo-Baptist brethren, have committed this sin in our disparaging of one another. In our vilification of one another, we have spoken ill against the nature and meaning of Reformed baptism. To make matters worse, we have so despised one another that we have adopted extreme views in our scorn and contempt for one another. The result is our informal or formal excommunication of each other causing us to be guilty of this "great sin."

On this point we both should agree: we effectively made the Reformed view of baptism null and void and inept to contend against heretical views of baptism, all because we

are hyper-focused on time and mode. Again, I am not saying it is unimportant. My conscience is bound to credobaptism just like my brethren who are bound in conscience to paedobaptism.

However, the question is, should our conscience anathematize our Reformed brethren whose judgment differs? [And] Let's be honest: this is what we are doing when we prohibit faithful brethren and churches to be in communion with us.

The Scottish Baptist minister, James Haldane, wrote in 1807:

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

Yes, we have a decision to make—unite or separate. There is no third way.

WCF 28.6 states:

"The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time."

Here it is a little tricky because most modern Baptists would disagree with this statement even though Reformed Credo-Baptists should affirm it. Except for the timing and mode implications in parenthesis, this is a statement Credo-Baptists need to

closely examine.

At the very least, to affirm the efficacy of baptism to the moment it is administered is a tip of the hat to baptismal regeneration. If the efficacy of baptism is tied to the moment of its administration then regeneration is upon baptism. An affirmation of the Westminster wording is consistent with Reformed credobaptism—we do not believe efficacy is tied to the moment of baptism.

Benjamin Keach, who was a signer of the 2LBC, wrote that baptism becomes an "effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them or in him that administers them, but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of His Spirit in them that by faith receive them [baptism and the Lord's Supper]."

Some or many Baptists may not see this clearly due to the extreme practice of re-baptism based upon the schismatic doctrine of alien baptism. I contend that the practice of re-baptism, based upon the Anabaptist view, must be abandoned. If there is ever going to be a unified Reformed Church, it is essential that Reformed Credo-Baptists affirm there is one baptism. This is a dividing line to distinguish those who are Reformed Credo-Baptists and those who are Calvinistic Baptists.

We must realize that even in cases where regeneration and a true profession of repentance and faith follow Christian baptism, it does not diminish the efficacy of baptism as a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace. It is a means of grace, but it is only effectual by the election of the Father, the passive and active obedience of the Son, and the operation of the Spirit.

Lastly, let's consider WCF 28.7:

"The sacrament of baptism is but once to be administered unto any person."

Finally, Credo-Baptists should, if they do not, affirm there is one Christian baptism. This should have been more clearly affirmed in the past and should be clarified in the present. Reformed Credo-Baptists and Paedo-Baptists affirm one baptism in two different forms.

One baptism is what we have found in our quick and general analysis. It is one in nature, meaning, and importance, yet distinct in two diverse practices. The problem is

that all the doubling-down over the last 400 years has splintered the Reformed church into irreconcilable and unrecognizable groups. As if this was not bad enough, this division has been made worse by the belligerence, ignorance, and apathy of our day.

Reformed Credo-Baptists and Paedo-Baptists, although in agreement with the nature of baptism, have made idols out of their specific timing and mode. It is this extremism for which we must all repent.

The conclusion of this little experiment is to show that we need to think about this issue more clearly than we have in the past. Reformed Paedo-Baptists and Credo-Baptists are of the same kind, just as Romanists and Cambellites are of the same character.

Third, we desire to set in order the things that are lacking.

In case you are one of those isolated Christians playing *Little House on the Prairie*, you should have noticed that we are living in an age of disorder and decay. This decay is not in spite of a faithful Church; [but] rather, it is the result of an unfaithful Church. In many or most cases, local churches have so degenerated as to become synagogues of Satan.

Because of this downgrade and apostasy, the enemies of Christ have made their desire to annihilate Biblical Christianity from Western Civilization no secret. The present crisis should help us see that the time has come to cease our division and unite in the truth of Christ. I am dismayed that so many are blind to this urgency, but regardless of what others do, the truth of Christ and this present crisis demand we set in order the things that are lacking. Paul sent Titus to bring order in Crete, and the American Church needs to be reordered today.

I guess the thing that amazes me most, and not in a good sense, is the level of hostility and controversy surrounding any call to unity and peace among the Reformed churches. The way I see it, we have two options: (1) we can continue in our isolated and divided state guaranteeing our complete collapse and destruction; (2) or, we can unite and build upon the prophets and apostles with Jesus Christ as our cornerstone as we have been commanded.

In Western Civilization, the whole ecclesiastical framework lies in ruins due to internal rot and external vandalism. In one sense this rebuilding project is granting us the

opportunity to correct some past and present errors, even though the mere suggestion of past errors gives way to accusations of non-confessionalism.

For some reason, many Reformed folks take this suggestion as a rejection of confessionalism. No matter how absurd this may be since we are not denying any tenants of the confessions (only an improper application of certain areas), it is nonetheless a mindset we must correct.

In the case of Reformed Baptists, some things need to be tweaked depending upon one's understanding of the 2LCF. However, we must remember, the 2LCF was written for the broad acceptance of Credo-Baptists. This is why, in comparison to the WCF, the 2LCF remained silent in so many areas. The Credo-Baptists were so divided that if there was going to be any communion with one another, they had to adopt a more libertarian view toward the association of churches. This has created confusion to the point where the confessional silence in 2LCF is used as an affirmation of Baptist distinctives.

For example, it is alleged that since the 2LCF does not identify baptism as a seal, all Reformed Baptists reject this view. However, Hercules Collins, one of the signers of 2LCF, wrote in his catechism that the "sacraments" were "sacred signs and seals."

Another example of this affirmation by silence regards chapter 7 of the 2LCF. Since the 2LCF does not state the Covenant of Grace as one covenant with two administrations, it is alleged by some that Reformed Baptists hold to a different Covenant Theology than Reformed Paedo-Baptists. While many or some Credo-Baptists do hold to a different theology on the Covenant of Grace, this does not mean that all or most English Credo-Baptists held to what is being termed today as 1689 Federalism. The confession is silent because there was a diversity of beliefs among the London Baptists, many of which were not fully developed at that time.

Yet, the most famous Credo-Baptist theologian, John Gill, wrote:

"The covenant of grace is but one and the same in all ages, of which Christ is the substance...For though the covenant is but one, there are different administrations of it; particularly two, one before the coming of Christ, and the other after it."

My point is that Reformed Credo-Baptists were very diverse and the 2LCF deletions

from the WCF cannot be used as evidence of universal denials. Some Credo-Baptists leaned toward and were influenced by Presbyterians, some with the Independents, and some identified and were sympathetic with the Anabaptists in various issues of theology and government. Basically, in these three categories are found the Right-wing, Center-right, and Left-wing of the Reformation. It is the influence of the Left-wing of the Reformation (Anabaptists) we must rid ourselves of today.

Present Advancements

While much needs to be said about these things, the first clarifying project needs to be a more consistent view of baptism in relation to freedom of conscience. Our forefathers came to an understanding of freedom of conscience on baptism and other issues in the civil realm; however, it never took root in ecclesiastical unity and authority. We must remember all of this took place in a specific historical context beginning with a civil monarchical system and an ecclesiastical state-church system. To make it more confusing, the civil monarchical views were divided into absolute and constitutional.

In America, these views were modified in the civil realm to allow for Protestant equality and the rejection of a national church based upon a republican form of government. In spite of this, civil nor ecclesiastical liberty of conscience was never fully defined or applied in such a way to restrain individualism, autonomy, and anarchy while preserving ecclesiastical unity and authority. As a result, freedom of conscience became the liberal tool to erode the fundamental articles of Christianity.

Freedom of conscience was quickly transformed into a libertarian doctrine and used as a tool by socialists to destroy civil and ecclesiastical republicanism. In my opinion, one of the reasons for this was the inability of orthodox Protestant churches to maintain a united front. We were content with our little kingdoms and adopted ecclesiastical autonomy which set the stage for individualistic autonomy.

There are many other complex issues, but in the final analysis, we were willing to allow freedom of conscience to be hijacked by the Jacobin heresy of radical libertarianism as long as we were included among those allowed to "live and let live." The problem is that we never read the fine print—there is no such thing as neutrality.

Despite the negative results, freedom of conscience was not the issue of our demise. Instead, it was our division that weakened and undermined the authority of the Church

in allowing every issue to become a matter of conscience. Yet, after all these years, we are still fighting among ourselves on the issue of time and mode.

What this means is that we must unite on what is specific to our fellowship in the body of Christ and extend grace in what is secondary and indifferent. For Reformed folks, the question is whether the time and mode of baptism are primary, secondary, or indifferent as it relates to ecclesiastical communion, both particular, regional, and general.

In a Reformed context, the time and mode of baptism does not change the nature or faithfulness of a church. Therefore, it must be an issue of Christian liberty and conscience as long as it is not cloaked in individual autonomy causing disorder in the Church. If a particular liberty is not used to destroy unity in doctrine, peace in subordinate issues, and order in its discipline, by what authority do we excommunicate it?

Like it or not, this is how it all boils down. By what authority should we force conformity on time and mode when it is based on applications and conclusions derived from necessary consequences? Do we really believe it is our Biblical duty to formally or informally excommunicate our brothers over this issue?

In addition, the time and mode of baptism does not have any significance to ecclesiastical government for faith or practice in the Visible Church. Apostolic order does not necessitate one view of time and mode in a communion of churches. Why shouldn't a particular church holding to one view or another be in communion with another church who holds to the other view of time and mode? Differences in this matter is not a breach of ecclesiastical authority or the bonds of unity.

One of the reasons why it was a dividing issue in the 16th and 17th Century was due to the state-church context of the time. It was politicized because it was civil as well as ecclesiastical.

This is no longer the context or understanding of the Church. Some adjustments have already been made since the 16th Century and it is time to reevaluate ecclesiastical communion regarding baptism.

The American expansion of equality and union among Protestants in civil affairs demands a similar expansion of equality and union ecclesiastically. This expansion may

have been too broad in the civil arena; nonetheless, we must either go back to the State-Church model or better define and exercise republicanism.

Past Affirmations

This call for Reformed unity is not new. I want to make it clear that I am not talking about something without historical merit. It may not have been widely applauded or zealously pursued, nevertheless, it was to various degrees a foundational part of the Reformation.

Many Reformed men like John Bunyan and John Flavel worked for understanding and peace on both sides of this issue. Flavel implied the uncertainty of the issue by stating, "There are difficulties in this controversy which may puzzle the minds of well-meaning Christians."

Calling for Protestant union, John Owen wrote, "And if there do ensue hereon some variety in outward rites and observations, as there was in all the primitive churches, who pleaded that the unity of faith was commended and not at all impeached by such varieties; yet, whilst the same doctrine of truth is preached in all places, the same sacraments only administered, — wherein every protestant subject of the nation will be at liberty to join in protestant Christian worship, and to partake of all church ordinances in the outward way, and according unto the outward rites, of his own choosing, without the authoritative examination or prohibition of any pretended church power but what, in his own judgment, he doth embrace, — no inconvenience will follow hereon, unless it be judged such, that the protestant religion, the liberty of the subjects, and the due freedom of the consciences of men sober and peaceable, will be all preserved."

Amid great contention, many worked for peace and union among the Reformed churches. Richard Baxter observed that "if all the Episcopalians had been like Archbishop Ussher, all the Presbyterians like Stephen Marshall, and all the Independents like Jeremiah Burroughs, the breaches of the Church would have soon been healed." Unfortunately, the cooler heads did not prevail and we have endured 400 years of the Reformed Church shattered into pieces.

Because of our track record, many have abandoned all hope of a united Reformed Church. Regardless, debating whether we should pursue unity is like debating "whether there should be preaching, praying, keeping the Sabbath, or any other commanded

duty," as the fiery Scottish Presbyterian minister James Durham wrote.

Concerning this assumption of unity, Durham said, "And though possibly it be not in all cases attainable, because the fault may be upon one side, who possibly will not act unitedly with others, yet is this still to be endeavored, and every opportunity to be taken hold of for promoting the same."

Brethren, this is our opportunity to actualize what our Reformed fathers desired. We may not see it realized among all Reformed churches, but even if this opportunity is missed on a national scale due to the obstinance of many, there are some who, on a small scale, can know the blessings of a union of truth, love, and peace in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

Although this open letter to our Reformed Credo-Baptist and Paedo-Baptist brethren is not an exhaustive explanation of our reasons for pursuing this course, we hope that it is adequate to provoke dialogue instead of anathemas.

We also acknowledge there are other issues to address besides baptism. The biggest hurdle is most likely church government since Reformed churches fall into Presbyterian, Congregational, and Independent models. Some might suppose Congregational and Independent are redundant; however, all three models have made various American adjustments over the years, some for the better, others for the worse. Some have become more republican and others more democratic, but a simple revival of Federalism would go a long way to pave the way for unity.

Despite all the additional issues we could list, we only get a few short years on this earth. It will be to our shame if our claim to fame in the celestial city is one of division and ineffectiveness rather than rebuilding and advancement.

Brothers, this is not a call to lay down your swords; it is a call to turn your swords toward the gates of hell in a united front.

May God have mercy upon us!

"Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the heathen, to give thanks unto thy holy name, and to triumph in thy praise." –Psalm 106:47