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GOING PUBLIC

Why Baptism Is Required
for Church Membership



BOBBY JAMIESON

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Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership

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PART 1

Getting Our Bearings

Setting the Stage

Why would anyone write a whole book arguing that baptism is necessary for church membership? Is this even a debate worth having?

Not all debates are. Sometimes it's better just to walk away: "Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge" (Prov 14:7). Sometimes, though, the gospel itself is at stake, which calls for public dispute: "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned" (Gal 2:11).

This book is about an issue that falls somewhere between "just walk away" and "the gospel is at stake." It's not the Trinity, but it's not the color of your church's carpet. It lives somewhere in that vast, neglected real estate between "essential to salvation" and "not worth bothering about." You're reading this book, so presumably you don't think the question is a total waste of time, but it still helps to take a good look at what's at stake before we dive in. So in this chapter I'll give a few reasons this issue is worth arguing about.

That's one among a handful of stage-setting enterprises which will occupy our attention in this chapter. First, I'll clarify what this book is and isn't about. Second, as advertised, I'll give an account of why this is a debate worth having and why I'm entering it. Third, I'll lay out various positions in the debate, clarify some key terms, and describe the position I'll be taking. Fourth, I'm going to discuss two theological issues I think are crucial for getting this issue right and that haven't received the attention they deserve. Fifth, I'll comment on the shape the whole book takes in light of its effort to

rebuild ecclesiological foundations. Finally, I'll sketch where we're heading in the rest of the book.

A One-Issue Book

What is this book about? In one sentence: in this book I argue that according to Scripture baptism is required for church membership and for participation in the Lord's Supper, membership's recurring effective sign. That's all, folks.

So I'm not going to argue for believer's baptism over against paedobaptism. Plenty of others have spoken well to that issue.¹ So in this book I will largely assume, rather than seek to prove, that the baptism of a professing believer in Jesus Christ is the only true baptism. I assume virtually everyone who will read this book is a credobaptist, someone who believes that only professing believers in Jesus should be baptized. Why? Because the church throughout history has held with near-perfect unanimity that baptism is a necessary prerequisite to the Lord's Supper and church membership. The only people who have departed from this consensus are a smallish slice of credobaptists.

The reason for this is not far to seek. Everyone acknowledges that we credobaptists have been baptized. Apart from Quakers no one denies that what we call baptism is baptism. But we, on the other hand, think a huge number of Christians simply haven't been baptized because sprinkling an infant is not what Jesus and the apostles meant by "baptism." There's asymmetry here. Plenty of baptists could join a Presbyterian church, but if baptism is a prerequisite for membership, then those same Presbyterians couldn't join a baptist church. As it happens, they sometimes want to; hence the problem. And the way some credobaptists have sought to solve that problem is to allow those who have been "baptized"² as infants to join their churches, a position I'll refer to as "open membership."

¹ An excellent, in-depth treatment of the issue is Stephen Wellum's essay "Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 97–161. Bruce Ware also offers a helpful argument in *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

² I'm putting "baptized" in quotes here and will often do so with reference to infant "baptism," since I believe infant baptism is not baptism at all. I'm not doing this to be a stick in the mud. Throughout the history of the baptism and membership debate, open membership advocates have sometimes used phrases like "haven't been baptized in the proper mode" or "haven't been baptized as we understand the ordinance" to avoid referring to

In other words, this is a distinctly baptistic burden. Paedobaptist brothers and sisters, you're welcome to stick around; just know that I'm not really talking to you. One more note on the audience of this book: this debate is not limited to those who call themselves "Baptists." If you believe that only believers should be baptized, then this issue is relevant to you, whatever your church is called and whichever other churches you do or don't formally associate with.³

Back to my theme of what this book isn't. This book will not attempt to comprehensively define what constitutes a valid baptism. Neither will I try to say all there is to say about baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership. Finally, I'm not going to attempt to provide a complete pastoral how-to manual on these three things, though I'll sketch a few practical guidelines in the last chapter.

To reiterate, I'm trying to do only one thing in this book: argue that baptism is necessary for church membership and the Lord's Supper. Along the way I aim to rebuild a coherent, biblical understanding of the role both ordinances play in the formation of the church. And wherever possible I'll point to resources on subjects I don't address in-depth. But I hope the book's laser focus on one issue renders it the more valuable to those pastors, elder boards, seminary students, and others for whom this issue is a live one.

A Debate Worth Having

Why then is this a debate worth having? Five reasons. First, even if this doesn't seem like a live issue for you or your church, there's a sense in which it always will be. Every church has to have a stance on this issue. The switch is either on or off: you'll either admit unbaptized persons into membership or you won't. And if you're a pastor who has either adopted or inherited the stance of requiring baptism for membership, you don't need me to tell you

persons they would admit to membership as "unbaptized." Sometimes this preserves a live distinction, in that some open membership advocates would admit those "baptized" as infants to membership but not those who have not been "baptized" in any sense at all. But whatever the nuances, I think this point involves more than mere semantics.

³Throughout the book I use the terms *credobaptists* and *baptists* (note the lowercase b) interchangeably to refer to Christians and churches who hold that believer's baptism is the only true baptism. This is for convenience, not to co-opt anyone to a particular denominational cause. Sometimes I'll use *Baptists* with a capital B when the believers in view self-consciously identify as such.

about the friction that can cause. So this is a debate worth having because there's no way to escape it.

Second, this is a debate worth having because of the cost of holding the position I argue. If you're going to have baptism as a prerequisite for church membership, you better have some good reasons for it. Excluding people from your church whom you're confident are Christians is no small matter, and it tends to generate no small pushback. If you hold this position, you better get used to being called divisive—or worse—whether by a church member's Methodist aunt Molly or by fellow pastors who agree with you on virtually everything but this. With that in mind, if you're inclined to see baptism as necessary for church membership but balk at the political price tag, I hope this book's biblical and theological arguments will stiffen your spine.

A third reason this is a debate worth having is that the issue lies at a crucial juncture between our ecclesiology and the prevailing winds of culture. As we'll discuss in the next chapter, for many reasons open membership feels instinctively right to us today. It seems wrong at a gut level to have to exclude R. C. Sproul or Kevin DeYoung from your church simply because he hasn't been baptized as you understand the ordinance. And yet this instinct departs from a nearly universal consensus of the entire church throughout history. Therefore I'd suggest that if your instinct says "open membership," that should open up a conversation rather than shutting it down.

Fourth, if holding to the historic position usually brings a certain social cost, adopting open membership creates its own set of problems, both practical and theological. On the practical side most churches who adopt open membership put some type of restriction on how unbaptized members may serve. But what restrictions do you set up and on what grounds? If your church is congregational, can unbaptized members vote? On every issue or only on some? Can they serve as elders? Why or why not? And if you allow them to serve as elders, how do you handle the division this introduces into your eldership?⁴ Closed membership carries an up-front social cost, but open membership comes with a price tag of its own, of the "bill me later" variety.

On the theological side, how do you escape the conclusion that you deny in practice what you claim to believe about baptism? How do you escape the conclusion that your church is effectively making baptism an option rather

⁴I'll circle back to questions like these in chap. 10, especially point four.

than a command? Frankly, I don't think you can escape those conclusions, as I'll argue in chapter 10. But for now it's enough to recognize that for whatever problems it seems to solve, open membership creates problems of its own. And those problems should raise the question of whether the position is biblical in the first place.

Fifth and finally, the question of whether baptism is a prerequisite for church membership is a debate worth having because church polity matters. How your church is structured, governed, and constituted is important to the Lord of the church: he's said plenty about it in his Word.⁵ Polity isn't the gospel, but it protects and preserves the gospel. Polity isn't the diamond, but it is one of the prongs which hold the diamond in place for all to see. Therefore, what your church says about baptism, by what you teach and by whom you admit to membership, is inescapably important.

This is also a debate we Baptists have been having among ourselves for nearly 350 years. As such you could be justified in asking what more could possibly be said about it. While much ground has been pretty well covered, I think a couple issues could use fresh attention. I'll introduce them below, and most of the book is taken up with exploring and unpacking them. Because the history of the debate is not critical for understanding the main issues involved, I'm not going to summarize the past four centuries of arguments. Instead I'll simply draw on some of the strongest arguments on both sides as I make and defend my case. In fact, my constructive theological work throughout the book simply waters seeds that are already found in the best historic defenses of baptism as a requirement for membership.

But this isn't just a historic debate; it's also an issue that's receiving renewed attention today. For example, John Piper made waves when he advocated the open membership position at Bethlehem Baptist Church in 2005.⁶ Because Piper argued his case with his usual verve, he'll be a primary dialogue partner. Piper is a hero in the faith to me and many others, so please don't confuse critique with condemnation. Anecdotally it also seems like this issue is receiving

⁵ See my article, "Why New Testament Polity Is Prescriptive," *9Marks Journal* 10, no. 4 (2013), available at <http://www.9marks.org/journal/why-new-testament-polity-prescriptive>.

⁶ Ultimately, the elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church decided to withdraw their recommendation that the church revise its constitution to allow those who had been "baptized" as infants to join the church. Thus, the church continued to practice "closed" membership.

renewed attention among a variety of baptistic evangelicals in at least the US and the UK. So this is a debate that is clearly already taking place, and I think it's a debate worth having.

Granting this is a debate worth having, why have I personally chosen to enter it—and by writing a whole book at that? First let me say why I'm not writing. I'm not writing, as far as I can discern, because I love controversy and can't get enough of it. I'm not writing because I want to score points for my "team," whoever that may be. In fact, I'm entering this debate precisely because I'm on the same team as those who disagree with me on this issue. And if we're on the same team, we should be able to have frank conversations about how the game should be played. I'm certainly not writing because I think baptists are this lost world's great and only hope. And I'm not writing because I think paedobaptists are best kept out of sight and out of mind—far from it. Like so many baptists, many of my greatest theological influences—as well as many friends and partners in ministry—are committed paedobaptists. And I don't love them any less for it.

Why then am I writing? Because this is a pressing question for many pastors and churches, and I think there's a biblical way to answer it. And unless I'm badly mistaken, requiring baptism for membership is an increasingly unpopular stance, so it could use a fresh defense.

My hope and prayer is that this fresh defense will serve pastors and their churches in tangible ways. I think getting this issue right actually results in more unity, not more division. Further, putting baptism, the Lord's Supper, and membership together correctly is a crucial step in building a biblical ecclesiology, and removing baptism from membership has significant, unhelpful effects. I'd submit that settling this issue biblically ultimately helps churches preserve the gospel from generation to generation.

OK, but then why write a whole book on this one little issue? Why not just a blog post or two? We'll return to this question below. For now I'll simply say that lots of arguments need making and lots of arguments need answering. Once upon a time evangelicals wrestled long and hard over the biblical grounds of church polity and practice. I think our increasing willingness to do so once again is a sign of health. By God's grace the center is increasingly secure, but the center isn't all there is. And if we make the center everything and everything else nothing, we set ourselves up to lose the center itself. This book is an attempt to shore up some border territories in an effort, ultimately, to make the capital city a little more secure.

Terms and Conditions

The next bit of stage-setting we need to do is lay out some key terms and concepts for thinking through this debate. Historically the debate has been conducted in terms of “open Communion” versus “closed Communion.” That is, some have argued that unbaptized persons (or, more narrowly, those “baptized” in infancy) should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper. And others have argued that only baptized persons (that is, those baptized as believers) should be welcomed to the Lord’s Supper. However, these terms mask a couple of key issues.

The first issue these terms can obscure is that most historic Baptist writers assumed that the “terms of Communion”—that is, what is required in order to participate—are also the terms of membership. When John Bunyan, Robert Hall Jr., and others argued that unbaptized persons should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper, they were *not* arguing that such believers should be admitted to Communion but still excluded from membership. Instead, they held that unbaptized persons should be welcomed into full membership, which included and was most visibly realized in participation in the Lord’s Supper. Both sides in the debate assumed that, in principle, to be qualified for Communion is to be qualified for church membership.⁷ So even though the debate has been defined in terms of open versus closed Communion, these terms were meant to include, not exclude, the idea of church membership.

However, some churches require baptism for membership but deliberately allow unbaptized persons to the Lord’s Supper. For instance, Ray Van Neste has argued for what he calls “open Communion,” and yet his church does not admit unbaptized persons to membership.⁸ When such a church celebrates the Lord’s Supper, they might fence the Table—that is, declare who is welcome to

⁷ So, for example, John Dagg argued that whoever may be admitted to Communion once may be admitted to membership; no wedge may be driven between the two (John L. Dagg, *An Essay in Defense of Strict Communion* [Penfield, GA: Benj. Brantley, 1845], 45–46).

⁸ See Ray Van Neste, “The Lord’s Supper in the Context of the Local Church,” in *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ’s Death Until He Comes* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 379–86. This position is not without some precedent in Baptist history, especially in the past century. See Anthony R. Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 3 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2000), 418–26.

participate—by saying something like, “If you have repented of your sins and trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation, you are welcome to partake of the elements with us,” or, “If you are a member in good standing of an evangelical church, you are welcome to the table.”⁹ Yet if an individual who had not been baptized or who had been “baptized” as an infant applied for membership in the church, they would not be allowed to join until they had been baptized. This means some advocates of open Communion also hold to open membership, and some do not. Though it’s a little clunky, I’ll call the open Communion/closed membership view the “open-closed” position.

Another problem with the terms *open Communion* and *closed Communion* is that in Baptist circles at least, some have distinguished between “closed” Communion and “close” Communion.¹⁰ In this context, closed Communion refers to the position that only the members of a local church may celebrate the Lord’s Supper. No visitors, whether baptized or unbaptized, are invited to the Table. And, as only baptized Christians are members, baptism is a requirement for both membership and Communion.

Close Communion, on the other hand, also admits members of other evangelical churches who have been baptized as believers. On this view baptism is a prerequisite both for church membership and for “occasional” or “visiting” Communion as well. Thus, closed and close Communion differ only on whether the Table should be open to nonmembers who are also baptized members of other true churches. Neither view would allow unbaptized persons to participate in the Lord’s Supper.

My main goal in this book is not to adjudicate between closed and close Communion. I hold to the latter, though certainly a case can be made for the former. I’ll address the issue in chapter 6. My point here is simply that this distinction makes the terms *open Communion* and *closed Communion* that much more difficult to use.

Further, the terms of the debate today have generally shifted to membership. One reason for this is that speaking about membership makes clear that we’re not simply discussing occasional Communion. Another reason is that, as many churches recover meaningful membership, the question of who can be

⁹ Van Neste’s church fences the Table along the latter lines. See Van Neste, “The Lord’s Supper,” 386.

¹⁰ For a discussion of “closed,” “close,” and “open” Communion, see Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 400–406.

a member naturally follows. Given how the debate has shifted, and because of the ambiguities in the historic terms *open* and *closed* Communion, if I need shorthand, I'll use "closed membership" and "open membership." Though often enough I'll refer to my own position simply by spelling it out, in part because the adjective *closed* isn't particularly flattering or fair.

But what about requiring baptism for membership but not the Lord's Supper? The open-closed position seems like a winsome compromise and a welcome pressure-release valve. However, as I'll argue, baptism is the new covenant's initiating oath-sign, and the Lord's Supper is its renewing oath-sign. By definition the former must precede the latter. Further, the Lord's Supper and church membership are too closely linked to allow baptism to be a prerequisite for one but not the other. So in due course I will argue that the open-closed position doesn't hold water, so to speak. The logic has to sweep clear through one way or the other.¹¹

Key Terms at a Glance	
Closed Membership / Open Membership	Whether baptism is or is not required for church membership
Close Communion / Open Communion	Whether baptism is or is not required for participation in the Lord's Supper
Close Communion / Closed Communion	Whether baptized members of other churches may participate in the Lord's Supper ("close"), or only the members of that local church ("closed")
Occasional or Visiting Communion	Participating in the Lord's Supper in one church when one is a member of another
The Open-Closed Position	Requiring baptism for membership but not the Lord's Supper

Two Key Issues

In the end the open membership position rests on one primary, powerful argument: that local churches should not exclude from membership anyone whom

¹¹ John Hammett writes, "Furthermore, I support strict communion because I am not willing to follow the logic of open communion to open membership" (John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005], 287). I return to this issue in chap. 6.

they regard as genuine brothers or sisters in Christ. There are other arguments which flow from and elaborate on this assertion, but that's it in a nutshell. On this view, to use John Piper's phrase, closed membership churches are guilty of "preemptively excommunicating" genuine brothers and sisters simply because they have not been baptized, and that not due to willful rebellion but to their interpretation of Scripture.

We'll explore open membership arguments in detail later. For now I've simply sketched this one in order to introduce two key issues to which we'll give special attention throughout the book. These are also two issues that, in my opinion, haven't yet received the attention they deserve in this debate.

The first issue is the question of whether baptism is the initiatory rite into the church and how that bears on its relationship to church membership. Does baptism have an ecclesial shape? That is, does it sustain any intrinsic theological relationship to the local church? Typically, open membership advocates either assert or assume that baptism possesses no particular relationship to the church. Instead, it is simply a personal matter of obedience to Jesus.¹² On the other hand, closed-membership advocates typically hold that baptism is the initiatory rite into the visible church and that this is a decisive reason unbaptized persons should not be admitted to membership.¹³

However, on both sides this crucial point tends to be more asserted than argued. Therefore, after sketching most of a theology of baptism in chapter 3, in chapters 4 and 5 I will investigate whether Scripture gives baptism an ecclesial shape, that is, whether baptism is intrinsically tied to church membership.¹⁴

¹² So, e.g., John Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment About Water-Baptism, No Bar to Communion*, in *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 4, ed. T. L. Underwood (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 200–201; John Brown, *The House of God Opened and His Table Free for Baptists and Paedobaptists* (London, 1777; repr., ECCO Books), 2.

¹³ A sampling: William Kiffin, *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church Communion* (London, 1681; repr., Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006), 67; R. B. C. Howell, *The Terms of Communion at the Lord's Table* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1846; repr., Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006), 101; John S. Hammett, "Membership, Discipline, and the Nature of the Church," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 19; Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 349.

¹⁴ When I speak of baptism's "ecclesial shape" throughout the book, I am referring to the fact that the ordinance itself has a churchly and even church-constituting dimension. By saying that baptism has an "ecclesial shape," I mean not merely that it is performed by the church or somehow takes place in the context of the church, though both points are true. Instead, I mean that baptism initiates an individual's relationship of belonging to a

I'll examine the issue from two different angles: first covenant, then kingdom. As will become clear, I think closed-membership baptists have been right to discern an ecclesial shape to baptism. In these chapters, then, I'm simply trying to tend seeds they've planted in order to more thickly describe the ecclesial shape of baptism.¹⁵ This ecclesial shape of baptism is decisive for establishing that baptism is required for church membership.

A second, closely related issue is the theological relationship—or better, interrelationship—between baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership. I briefly broached this subject when I asked whether the requirements for the Lord's Supper can legitimately differ from those for church membership. But the question has many more sides. For example, what exactly is church membership? Where do we see it in the Bible? What more does church membership entail that distinguishes it from the two ordinances? Can baptism and the Lord's Supper ever be legitimately separated from church membership? Should a church baptize someone who *isn't* joining that local body? And, theologically speaking, does such a thing as church membership without baptism even exist?

The answers to these questions, and more like them, all depend on a theological account of the relationship between baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership. So, after considering baptism and the Lord's Supper in their own light in chapters 3 through 6, in chapter 7 I redescribe church membership in light of the church-forming role of the two ordinances. We'll see that baptism and the Lord's Supper are effective signs of church membership: they create the ecclesial reality to which they point. Baptism binds one to many, and the Lord's Supper makes many one.

particular church and enacts a church's affirmation of a believer's profession of faith in Christ. To say that baptism is church-shaped is to say that one cannot rightly understand or practice the ordinance without discerning its relationship to the local church.

¹⁵See, for instance, Joseph Kinghorn: "If, according to the inspired records, [baptism] was intended to be an open recognition of our faith in Christ, and an ostensible act of subjection to him, in the way which he prescribed; it was like an oath of allegiance on entering the service of our country; or like a matriculation on being admitted a member of a public body; an act which is necessary, because it is legally required" (*Baptism, A Term of Communion* [Norwich, 1816; repr., Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006], 30–31). See also William Kiffin's citation and discussion of John Owen's assertion that baptism is "the solemn form of our initiation into Covenant with God" (*Sober Discourse*, 14; citing John Owen, *PNEUMATOLOGIA or A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H Goold, vol. 3 [repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965], 72).

So we'll see that not only does baptism have an ecclesial shape, but church membership has a baptismal (and eucharistic) shape. The first leads us to the second; from the ecclesial shape of baptism we discern the baptismal shape of membership. In some ways, then, these two issues are simply two sides of one coin: the relationship between the ordinances and the membership, and even existence, of a local church. I'm going to argue that this relationship has a discernible theological shape, and this shape makes baptism a requirement for church membership.

Rebuilding Foundations

I hope it's even clearer now why I've given a whole book to this subject. For one, simple proof texting won't settle the issue either way. Churches have no explicit biblical command to admit only baptized persons to membership; yet all Christians are commanded to be baptized, and the New Testament Epistles address all church members as having been baptized (e.g., Rom 6:1–4; Gal 3:27). So again, I think the way forward lies through a holistic theological account of the relationship between the ordinances and church membership.

On one hand I think the ecclesial shape of baptism and the baptismal shape of membership have simply been underexamined. We've been conditioned not to look for it, so we don't see it. And there's some truth in the common charge that baptists have said far more about what baptism isn't than what it actually is. But on the other hand I think our cultural lenses predispose us against discerning the links between the ordinances and the church that stare up at us from the pages of Scripture. If we think of the whole Christian life in individual terms, we'll think of the ordinances in individual terms. We'll see baptism as an intensely individual profession of faith and the Lord's Supper as a personal, almost private devotional experience of the cross. What we won't see is how these ordinances knit us to the church and knit the church together. From one angle, then, this book is an attempt to rebuild ecclesiological foundations that the acid rain of individualism has burned away.¹⁶

¹⁶ One could also say that at present there's a dearth of institutional thinking, which weakens our ability to think well about the institutional dimensions of the church. For brief reflections on this dearth, see Hugh Hecló, "Thinking Institutionally," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, ed. R. A. W. Rhodes, Sarah A. Binder, and Bert A. Rockman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 740–41.

Because I'm trying to rebuild foundations, the argument will take a little while to unfold. Chapters 3–8 proceed in a primarily constructive rather than polemical mode. I put all the pieces of my case on the table before defending the case and then cross-examining the opposition. So I ask for patience from readers who object to the position I'm arguing. I devote a whole chapter to answering objections but only after I've built the framework in which my answers will make sense. Because of this predominantly constructive approach, readers who aren't persuaded by aspects of my case—or even its central claim—should still profit from the biblical and theological exposition that forms the heart of the book. While my main goal is to establish that baptism is required for membership, the theological picture I paint also points in many other practical directions. I hope even readers who disagree with the final destination will be greatly enriched by the journey.

What's Ahead?

I've just introduced the big picture of the book, but I want to close the chapter with a more detailed road map, including a preview of my main arguments. In the next chapter we'll clear some ground for our ecclesiological building project by considering why open membership just feels right to this generation of evangelicals. To put it more technically, I'll question several plausibility structures for open membership.¹⁷ In chapter 3 I'll sketch a concise theology of baptism, unpacking the rite's theological significance minus its ecclesial shape. We'll see that baptism is where faith goes public, which lays the foundation for a cohesive theology of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership.

In chapter 4 we take our first look at the ecclesial shape of baptism and discover that it is the initiating oath-sign of the new covenant. God means for his new covenant people to be visible, and one enters that people through baptism. This means that when churches ask, "Who is a member of the new covenant?" in order to extend membership to them, a necessary part of the answer is asking, "Who has sworn the covenant oath?"—that is, "Who has been baptized?"

In chapter 5 we take a second, complementary look at the ecclesial shape of baptism, this time through the lens of the kingdom. When Jesus inaugurated his kingdom on earth, he gave the church the "keys of the kingdom": the

¹⁷The term *plausibility structure* is from Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

authority to speak for heaven on earth, to representatively declare who belongs to him (Matt 16:18–19; 18:18). And the initial and initiating means by which the church does this is baptism. Baptism, then, is both the passport of the kingdom and a kingdom citizen’s swearing-in ceremony. It’s how a church publicly identifies someone as a Christian and unites that person to itself. Therefore, it’s essential to—and normally *confers*—church membership.

In chapter 6 we consider the ecclesial shape of the Lord’s Supper. We’ll see that while baptism binds one to many, the Lord’s Supper binds many into one (1 Cor 10:17). While baptism is the initiating oath-sign of the new covenant, the Lord’s Supper is the renewing oath-sign of the new covenant. Which means the former must come before the latter.

As I mentioned above, one way to sum up the ecclesial shape of both baptism and the Lord’s Supper is to say that they are effective signs of church membership: they create the reality to which they point. So chapter 7 theologically redescribes church membership in light of its two effective signs. One takeaway, drastic as it may sound, is that speaking of church membership without baptism is like speaking of marriage without vows: such a thing does not actually exist.

In chapter 8 I summarize the whole argument and draw out a few points we see most clearly when all the pieces of the puzzle are put together. In chapter 9 I respond to the seven strongest objections I’ve encountered to requiring baptism for membership. Then in chapter 10 I mount seven objections of my own to the open-membership position. Finally, in chapter 11 I provide a few practical sketches of how this theology of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and church membership should play out in the life of the church.