

Covenant Membership At Trinity ARP Church

Policy Statement for exceptions to Vow #5

Vow # 5: Do you accept the doctrines and principles of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, so far as you understand them, as agreeable to and founded on the Word of God?

The Session of Trinity ARPC adopts this position paper in order to welcome Christians who, for personal reasons, cannot fully subscribe to all of the doctrines and principles of the ARP Church and yet desire to covenant together with other Christians at Trinity ARPC. Namely, for this statement, the Doctrine of Infant Baptism.

With regard to the doctrine of baptism our church confesses...

WCF 28.1-4

1. 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 the newness of life.[7] Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world.
2. 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.
3. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.
4. 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.

The Synod, Presbytery, and Session of this church affirm this to be the biblical teaching. Yet, not all Christians agree that the baptism of infants is biblical. There have been and still are differences on this subject. The question for Trinity ARP Church is whether there

should be an exception to our requirement for membership for those who honestly and humbly do not agree with infant baptism, but nevertheless seek to become a member of Trinity ARP Church.

The Session of Trinity ARP Church affirms that an exception should be made to allow credo-Baptists,¹ to become members of Trinity ARP Church.

Reasons for this affirmation include the following:

1. **Biblical requirements for church membership:** The biblical requirements for church membership are faith and baptism as we see throughout the Book of Acts and in a nuanced way in the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. (vis a vis – Jesus and the thief on the cross) Nowhere do we find a requirement for a full agreement on all doctrinal points. A necessary consequence would be the oversight of elders in the determination of acceptable exceptions without violating the essence of the Gospel or the Confessional Standards.

2. **The nature of the church:** The church is the body of Christ and who he is gathering we are in no wise to leave out. The initiatory rite by which one joins the church is baptism. To esteem total agreement on the recipients of baptism higher than the reception of those with a credible personal profession is to give baptismal views a higher place than Scripture gives it. Is baptism essential and necessary? Yes. It reflects the nature of the church.

WLC # 165 Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ hath ordained the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life; and whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's.

For this reason we cannot bar those who are engrafted into Christ by faith and are baptized but take exception to infant baptism. It would be wise, it seems, to go no further than Paul when he said: “that you receive one another as Christ has received you, for the glory of God.” Rom 15:7

¹ Refers to those who maintain profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is required for candidates of baptism.

3. All doctrine is essential, but not all equally essential.²

We do not require agreement on the doctrine of Christian liberty, the gift of faith, the spiritual gifts, or eschatology etc. for membership. We understand that people are at different levels of understanding and commitment on these various matters. We do not require that people have understanding of these matters before membership, but that they are willing to learn and grow in grace and knowledge. Not all doctrines are equally essential.

Permitting different understandings regarding the recipients of baptism is not rejecting baptism itself, the church, or the Session. Nor can it truly be termed as disobedience. Some might say that infant baptism is disobedience to Scripture and others might say not baptizing your infants is disobedience. In a sense, one of these is true. The subject of baptism is a difficulty in the church and the church struggles with this difference. Yet, the solution is not division but ongoing teaching, prayer, study, admonition and growth in grace. Differences in this area have, historically, not been considered heretical.

The Session of Trinity ARP Church is not indifferent to this exception. It is a question of how much lenience is granted to those who truly believe they are obeying when they understand the command to be baptised is to embrace believer's baptism.

4. The Lord's Supper and Church Membership: It seems contradictory at best to permit a visiting member of a Baptist Church to fellowship at the Lord's Table with us – but to refuse membership on the grounds of his baptistic convictions and thereby disallow him to fellowship at the Lord's Table with us as a professing member.

We maintain that infant baptism is biblical and we will teach it and practice it. However, it does not follow that those who interpret obedience to the same command another way are so seriously deficient in their profession that they should be excluded from the visible body of Christ. John Bunyan expresses this conviction well concerning his allowance for disagreement on baptism when he says, "I speak not this, because I would teach men to break the least of the commandments of God; but to persuade my brethren of

² Much of the material that follows is from Dr. John Piper and his work, *Should We Require Agreement of All Members On the Doctrine and Practice of Baptism*. (Page.19ff). http://www.desiringgod.org/media/pdf/baptism_and_membership.pdf

the baptized way, not to hold too much thereupon, not to make it an essential of the gospel of Christ, nor yet of communion of saints.” Then later he adds, “God also doth thus with respect to his worship in the church, he commands all and every whit of his will to be done, but beareth with our coming short in this and that, and another duty.”

This exception would be permitted in cases where, after significant study, thought, discussion, and prayer, a candidate for membership sincerely and humbly believes that it would be contrary to Scripture and conscience to affirm infant baptism.

In such cases the Session will discuss and direct the candidate concerning...

1. Requirement for ordained officers in the church: Holding an office in the church is distinct from church membership. The responsibility of teaching and obeying doctrinal truth is given to the ordained officers in the church. Therefore subscription to the sum and substance of the standards and their theology is required.³ Members, therefore, who cannot in good conscience adhere to infant baptism, cannot hold office as long as they maintain their exception. However, the church of Christ is a place where there is room and time to grow in grace and truth, and, possibly, to change. This exception does not limit the candidate in any other area of communicant church membership.

2. Promoting peace in the midst of difference: The candidate who wishes to join the membership of Trinity ARP Church, but who takes exception to our doctrine of infant baptism must have a humble non-divisive attitude and a passion to further God’s kingdom through Trinity ARP Church. In such cases the Session will seek for evidence that there is a humble, teachable openness to more light under the teaching and leadership of the Session. In this regard, the Session will draw particular attention to question 7 of our vows of church membership.

³ The *ARP Form of Government (FOG)*. Chapter 9.D.3.(3). 3. At the time of the ordination and installation service, the officers-elect shall present themselves before the congregation, and shall solemnly promise, according to the annexed formula, to maintain the doctrine, government, discipline, and worship of the Church. *Formula for Ordination and Installation for deacons, elders, and ministers; question 3.* (3) Do you accept the doctrines of this Church, contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, as founded on the Word of God and as the expression of your own faith and do you resolve to adhere thereto?

Do you submit yourself in the spirit of love to the government and discipline of this Church, and seek the peace, purity and prosperity of this congregation so long as you are a member of it?

The candidate would thereby lovingly support his brothers and sisters as they present their infants for the sign and seal of Christian baptism.

The statement of exception.

I _____, believe and love the purpose and goal of Trinity ARP Church. Her Head and King is Jesus Christ, in whom and through whom, I together with you am a brother/sister in the Lord. In covenanting together with you to join the membership of this local church I affirm the doctrinal Standards of this church with one reservation - After significant study, thought, discussion, and prayer, I continue to believe that the recipients of baptism ought to be professing believers only. Yet, I am willing to learn and grow in the grace and knowledge of God's Word. Therefore, I will study, listen to God's Word, pray together with you, and be willing to change as the Lord enlightens me.