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- *Reconciling church doctrine (adult baptism) and spirit*
- *The limits of confrontation*

*[Note: this message addresses a problem which arose when it was discovered that an adult member of a church, who had been elected to a position of leadership within the church, had in fact never been baptized. This person is referred to as "Michael."]*

God bestows strength and grace upon you and all who turn to God in need.

We have spoken in the past briefly of some of the problems emanating from conflicts between doctrine and God's will. God's presence is constant. It is the human interpretation of that presence which is constantly in change.

The problem that Michael faces is man-made, not God-made. It is not unique. The conflict between the doctrine and the spirit has been present ever since humankind began codifying beliefs in a form which provided a source of recognition for God's action in history. The Bible is a direct witness to the development of doctrine as a means of understanding God's presence. Two people never view the same object in the same way. If those two people wish to be united in their understanding of the object, certain common grounds for that understanding must be agreed upon. The purpose of the common grounds is not to be limiting, but rather to clarify, to somehow define.

Thus it is in the development of the church. There have been many groups of two people, so to speak, who have attempted to view God with a sense of some form of common perspective. No commonly agreed upon perspective fully shares a complete understanding of God. All views are limited, but all views are, within those limitations, valid to the extent that they were developed through prayer and an earnest searching for truth.

The sacrament of baptism is one common ground which unites the faith of many. Remember that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It is a symbol. It is not more than that. The symbol itself is unimportant; what it represents has much meaning. We are not trying to lead you to a belief that all must be baptized. That would be saying all must be involved as participants in a symbolic act. That would make the symbol vital.

It is more important for Michael to consider carefully his position within the concept of the meanings behind baptism. If he cannot, in good conscience, embrace what baptism symbolizes, the baptism for him would be hypocritical. If he feels in complete accord with the meaning of baptism, the fact that it is a symbol should play no part in his decision. All of this is not for the immediate future. It is a decision, it is an issue, it is a search for values which lie somewhat more distant from the present. But this issue is at the center or starting point from which this crisis grows.

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God is fully aware of Michael's talents, his strengths, his abilities, his motivations, his continuous development. Michael may be assured that these talents, these activities, have been directed and will continue to be directed in God's will through prayer. Michael's sensitivity is great. His need for reasoning, the need for rightness, and his sense of morality is directed by God, and he may be constantly supported and encouraged by his sensitivity to God's presence in his life.

The immediate question is, "What to do?" Should he wait, or should he actively participate in the decisions at hand? In fact, participation may be viewed in two ways. It can be interpreted as a visible, personal involvement, or it may be viewed as an invisible, spiritual involvement. It would be best for Michael not to become actively, personally involved at this time, but his responsibility for the actions affecting him, and in turn many others, is great. Michael's faith has the capacity for much strength and endurance. In a very real way, he has within his spiritual being the potential for reaching the souls, the consciousness of others. The best route for him to follow is to pray for the power of patience and tolerance and a wider application of the concept of love.

Viewed from our perspective, this issue is not one of acrid confrontation. In its broadest sense, the issue holds within it the potential for enormous growth and deepening understanding. It will not be achieved easily, but that does not make it a confrontation. Confrontation implies right versus wrong, good versus evil. There is, therefore, a more important goal to be achieved than winning a confrontation. If one wins, what has been gained? Nothing. A selfish sense of fulfillment? Nothing. A sense of pride? Nothing. A sense of influence? Nothing. If one grows through the challenge of understanding another dimension to loving thy neighbor, one has gained everything. You see, there is no victory in confrontation. The only victory is growth.

In the end, the result of the pending issue is unimportant. What is important is how you approach it. With prayer for the capacity to love, Michael can't lose. With prayer that others may search more deeply into their own beliefs, none can lose. There is much, therefore, to gain. Of course, we don't expect you to rejoice in the shadow of this image of frustration and fear of rejection, but the agony, the frustration, can be defused. It can be erased from the emotions that you carry with you.

The best procedure is not waiting...it is being involved with prayer. Pray for your growth. Pray for the growth of others. Realize you are all equals. None is better, no one is the victor, for that implies that someone else must be the loser.

God surrounds this issue in all its facets with love and desire for your growth. As always, God gives you a choice. You can choose to grow by taking up the challenge and reaching out to others. You can choose to do nothing and just let events happen. In the latter case, no growth is achieved, no potential realized. None has grown closer. Therefore, be confident of God's presence and concern, and God's love challenging you to grow through the strength which is offered. With your prayer we see the matter

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resolved out of which will come greater understanding. The challenge may be doctrine, and although doctrine has its problems, you can move forward constructively in its presence. Be confident, be strong, be faithful to God's wishes exercised through your prayers.

We bless you with God's light which shines directly to you as it does to us. Feel its warmth and recognize its brilliance in each of your lives.

Amen.