

BAPTISM

The Significance of Believer's Baptism

When someone is studying Baptist history you would think that a scriptural understanding of Baptism would help a person grasp what our God given title means. The definition of the word "Baptize" means to dip, to immerse, to submerge, to put under water; to cover completely. John the Baptist was rightfully referred to as John the dipper because "Baptist" means one who dips. You could refer to Dunkin Donuts as Baptist Donuts for the same reason.

I do not believe that history is more important than the authority of God's Word. I think that the history of Baptism can help us see things in perspective as far as where it came from and how the doctrine became corrupted.

Around the Third Century B.C., the idea of baptism became common among many religious groups. It was usually used to signify leaving one religious group and identifying with another religious group. This became a common practice for Gentiles who wished to abandon their pagan religions and identify with the Jews. The Gentiles would be baptized (immersed, according to all historical records) in a public ceremony. Most Jews no longer considered the baptized persons Gentiles and welcomed them as fellow-Jews.

After almost 400 years without a true prophet, God sent John to the Jews. He openly preached repentance and faith in the Messiah, and used baptism as a sign of the reality of this faith in the life of the individual. Baptism had already pictured identification with religious truth and a type of conversion to the religious world. The form of baptism by immersion, plunging someone into the water and bringing them out again, provided a beautiful picture of the death, burial and resurrection of the promised Messiah.

It was easy for the early church to keep the form of baptism (immersion) clear. As long as Greek was commonly read or spoken, it was easy to remember that true baptism was by immersion. The Greek verb *baptizo* and the nouns *baptisma* and *baptismos* were common words in the Greek language. These words had many uses other than in reference to the religious ceremony of baptism. These words always meant "to dip, plunge or cover with water." Because of common familiarity with the Greek language, there was little controversy over the form of baptism for hundreds of years except over the compromise of clinic baptism. For over a thousand years, immersion was the standard form of baptism even when infants were baptized. As late as the 16th Century, such famous historical characters as Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were baptized by immersion as infants.

Clinic baptism was the concept of sprinkling those who were physically limited or crippled. The reasoning was that since immersion was difficult for variously handicapped individuals, then God would accept sprinkling as the best that could be done in such cases. This practice began as early as the Second Century B.C. This unfortunate compromise became extremely important after familiarity with the Greek language ceased. Many who no longer understood the background of the word *baptism* assumed that any identification with Christ, as signified by water, was Bible baptism.

Unfortunately, some of the early churches did not find it as easy to keep the doctrine of baptism as clear as they did the mode of baptism. As early as the Third Century, a church leader named Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, taught that baptism, the Lord's Supper and identification with the church were essential for conversion. This is the first clear example of the teaching of baptismal regeneration. While Cyprian did not use this teaching to justify the baptism of infants, others soon did. Apparently others had already conceived of the idea of infant baptism because Tertullian strongly taught against the idea in the Third Century. There is not one record in history of the baptism of a child until 370 A.D.

As Emperor Constantine began to merge the church and the state in the Fourth Century, baptism took on a new meaning to many people. Baptism was now looked upon as a sign of homage to the state and was often associated with citizenship. When Justinian, in 550 A.D., ordered all non-Christians in the Roman Empire to become Christians, he ordered them all, including the children, to be baptized. Later, in the Ninth Century, when Charlemagne ordered whole Germanic tribes to become Christians, he forced everyone to be baptized, including the infants. Refusal to practice infant baptism became a sign of political resistance.

Scriptural authority tells us four things about Baptism.

1. God **Commands Us To Be Baptized.**

Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 10:48, John 14:15, 1 John 5:3

2. We Are To Be Baptized **After We Believe in Jesus.**

Mark 16:15-16, Acts 2:41, Acts 8:12&35-38, Acts 16:30-33, Acts 18:8,

3. We Are To Be Baptized By **Immersion.**

Matthew 3:16, Acts 8:38-39, Romans 6:3-5

4. We Are To Be Baptized **Immediately.**

Acts 2:41, Acts 16:29-33

When you examine Acts 10:43 and Acts 13:39 you understand that the Old Testament saints were saved by faith without baptism and the New Testament saints are saved by faith without baptism. Baptism has no saving power. Baptism cannot save because Jesus didn't baptize during His earthly ministry, John 4:1-2. Paul said he was not sent to baptize but to preach the gospel, 1 Corinthians 1:17. God says plainly in 1 Peter 3:21 that baptism cannot wash away sin and we are saved by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our Saviour called baptism a work of righteousness in Matthew 23:15 and we know that works cannot save anyone. Anyone who is trusting baptism for salvation is deceived, Romans 3:28.

As we study the doctrine of Baptism I think it would be very helpful to read what soul winning, church-planting Baptist Pastor's have taught in the past as they stood against infant baptism and the pouring or sprinkling modes of baptism used by Protestants and Catholics. J.R. Graves was a great Baptist Pastor who stood against the liberal thinking of his day and was one who understood Baptist distinctive.

"Christian Baptism is not the celebration of a religious rite by modes indifferent, but a specific act to be administered by a specific body, to persons professing specific qualifications, for the profession of specific truths. When one of these properties is wanting, the transaction is "null and void," since, unless the ordinances are observed as Christ commanded, they are not kept, but perverted, and bring upon the parties not the commendation, but condemnation of the Master." -J.R. Graves

What is the biblical doctrine of Baptism? Ask the typical Christian, be they a pastor, worker, church member or nominal attendee, to explain the significance of baptism, and they will answer something like this: "Baptism is a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ." If they are more informed, they may add, "It is the first step of obedience after one believes." These are true statements and attest to the care that good pastors and teachers have exercised in grounding their students in the basics of Christianity.

On an elementary level these answers are fine, but doctrinally there remains so much more to be said. Jeremiah Jeter wrote,

“No man can intelligently and candidly read the New Testament without perceiving that baptism is of solemn import, and designed to exert a momentous influence in the kingdom of Christ.”

Baptism is vitally important in the life of a believer and in the life of a New Testament Baptist Church. Baptism may be explained using three words: Obedience, identification and submission. Before we explore these, we must first lay a foundation.

1. BAPTISM REQUIRES THE PROPER CANDIDATE

- Biblically speaking, baptism is always of believers. By this we mean those who have placed their faith and trust in Christ alone for salvation, recognizing their sinful condition before a holy and just God, and through repentance and faith have received Christ Jesus as their one and only Saviour.
- The clearest example of an individual’s baptism in the Bible is the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:36-39. In verse 36, the eunuch asked, “*...If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.*” The eunuch’s response demonstrated his understanding of salvation as a prerequisite to baptism, “*...I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*”
- Never in the pages of the Word of God is anyone baptized prior to salvation, never is an infant baptized, never is anyone coerced into being baptized nor is anyone born again by their baptism.

2. BAPTISM REQUIRES THE PROPER MODE

- When we speak of the mode of baptism, we refer to the method of baptism. Do we immerse, sprinkle or pour? The student of the Bible will read and study the Scriptures his whole life and never find any mode of baptism other than immersion.
- In the New Testament we have two examples of people going down into the water to be baptized. First, in Acts 8:38-39, both Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch went down into the water and came up out of the water. Second, in Matthew 3:16, Jesus Christ Himself was baptized in the same manner.
- Baptism is a *demonstration* of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When a person dies, their burial is the complete immersion of their body in the ground. Dirt is not sprinkled on the body and called burial. The biblical mode, or method of baptism, is complete immersion in water. No one in the Bible was ever sprinkled. Sprinkling has nothing to do with, and cannot in any way, represent or picture the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

3. Baptism requires the proper administration

- The responsibility of administering baptism was given to the local church by the Lord Jesus Christ.
- It is an ordinance. An ordinance is something that was ordered by the Lord to be commemorated in the local church.
- There are two ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. If we are faithful to the Scriptures, we are to keep the ordinances. Paul complimented the Corinthian believers for keeping the ordinances.
- Ordinances are pictures, or object lessons, that teach doctrine. Our administration of these ordinances teaches either right doctrine or false doctrine. There is no middle ground between the two.

- The ordinances are local church ordinances; that is, they are given to the local church, not an individual person, and as such, are administered by the pastor of the local church as overseer of that church.
- Jesus Christ did not baptize, (John 4:1-3) and the Apostle Paul rarely baptized (1 Corinthians 1:10-18). Why? Because baptism is to be performed by the pastor of the church.
- As Paul was planting churches he would baptize converts to help establish that church. Take for example the Philippian Jailor and his house (Acts 16:33).
- Paul had the authority to baptize because he was an Apostle (we are not apostles). Paul also had authority to baptize because he had been sent out from the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3) and baptized under that church's authority. This is the way we do missions today. A missionary is sent out of a local church and baptizes by the sending church's authority. When the new church is ready to be self-sustaining, a pastor is ordained and he then administers the ordinances in that church.
- This is modeled for us by the Apostle Paul in Titus 1:5. He sent Titus to ordain elders in every city as he had appointed. Paul, as an Apostle, helped the early churches by appointing pastors. This occurred before God gave the written requirements for pastors that we now find in the pastoral Epistles, which are 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.
- We have these Scriptures, so pastors are chosen, based on these written requirements, by the local church. These pastors administer the ordinances in our churches today. Baptism requires the proper administration.

THREE KEY WORDS EXPLAIN BAPTISM

1. OBEDIENCE

Baptism is the obedience to the command of the Lord Jesus Christ. Just prior to ascending into heaven, Jesus Christ gave His disciples what is commonly called, "The Great Commission." He commanded them, "*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...*" (Matthew 28:19-20) Therefore, water baptism is a command to be obeyed. Jesus said, "*If ye love me, keep my commandments.*" (John 14:15)

Baptism should be one of the very first acts of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. Here are some examples from Scripture of people who were saved, and then after their salvation (and only after), were baptized in water. They serve as good examples for us today: the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:37, 38); Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48); the Apostle Paul (Acts 9:1-9); the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:30, 31); Lydia (Acts 16:14, 15); Crispus and many Corinthians (Acts 18:8).

2. IDENTIFICATION

In baptism we identify with Jesus Christ, a body of doctrine and a local church.

In baptism we identify with Christ. This is demonstrated for us in the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible gives us several examples of the identifying nature of baptism. The Holy Spirit identified with Christ at His baptism, "*And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him.*" (Mark 1:10) The Father identified with Christ at His baptism, "*Thou art my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.*" (Mark 1:11) Christ also identified with us at His baptism foretelling his death, burial and resurrection for the remission of our sins.

In baptism we identify with a body of doctrine. Why did Jesus request baptism from John the Baptist? After all, John's baptism was *"the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins."* (Mark 1:4) Of what sins did Jesus need to repent? Of what sins needed He remission? None, of course! Jesus Christ, in order to *"fulfill all righteousness,"* (Matthew 3:13-15) needed to identify with John's message – his body of doctrine. The following verses demonstrate John's message:

"John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." (Mark 1:4)

"John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me." (John 1:15)

"He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." (John 1:27)

John was calling people back to Messianic Judaism. He was telling them to look for the coming Messiah. Jesus identified with this message, affirming it through His baptism.

The followers of John were identified in Scripture as his disciples.

- Matthew 9:14 *"Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?"*
- Matthew 11:2 *"Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples."*
- Luke 11:1 *"And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples."*

How did these men become John's disciples? Through baptism; baptism identifies us with a body of doctrine.

In baptism we identify with a local church and that church's doctrine. *"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."* (Acts 2:41-42) The door to church membership is baptism. We are baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ at salvation (1 Corinthians 12:13). This momentous event is testified of and pictured in our baptism by water into His only physical, visible body on earth, the local church. Baptism is the physical picture of the spiritual reality.

If a person is saved and then baptized in a church that does not believe in the eternal security of the believer, that person has identified through their baptism with conditional salvation. To become a member of a Baptist church that person must identify, through scriptural baptism, with the proper biblical teaching of eternal security. Second example: If a person has been genuinely born-again and is then baptized in a church that teaches baptismal regeneration (this is the teaching that one must be baptized in order to be saved), that person has identified through their baptism with a false gospel and would need to identify, through baptism, with the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. Third example: if a believer has been baptized in a non-denominational church that receives members who have not been scripturally baptized that person has identified with unscriptural baptism. To become a member of a Baptist church that person would need to be scripturally baptized.

Baptists have been called "re-baptizers" for centuries because of their faithfulness in this area of biblical doctrine. However, Baptists are not "re-baptizing". The former baptism was either not administered properly, (sprinkling, pouring, forward three times, etc.) and was therefore not scriptural baptism, or the church that administered the baptism espoused false doctrine. If the latter is true then, of course, that baptism could not possibly be scriptural baptism because it identified the believer with false doctrine. So, Baptists do not "re-baptize", they practice biblical, believer's baptism.

3. SUBMISSION

Baptism is the believer's public testimony to his identification with Christ in salvation, his identification with the local church in membership, and his submission to Christ and His purposes for the believer's life. Baptism also demonstrates submission to the local church and its authority in his life. *"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you."*(Hebrews 13:17) *"Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble."* (1 Peter 5:5)

LET'S REVIEW

BAPTISM BASICS

Baptism requires the proper:

- **Candidate:** only saved people.
- **Mode:** only immersion.
- **Administration:** only the local Church.

BAPTISM MAY BE EXPLAINED USING

THREE WORDS:

- **Obedience:** to Christ.
- **Identification:** WITH Christ, a body of doctrine, and a local church.
- **Submission:** to Christ and to the local church.

If you have not been scripturally baptized in a Bible-believing Baptist church or have questions about your baptism, speak to your pastor. He will help you to be obedient to our Saviour.