



Why We Practice Believer's Baptism by Immersion

By Calvin Fowler

And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Introduction

Theologians in the academy, as well as in the local church, have wrestled with the subject of baptism for years. Those who disagree about the meaning and the mode of baptism would, more times than not, say that they disagree based on how they understand Scripture.

Needless to say, there have been plenty of lively debates throughout history (some seasoned with salt and others with hot sauce!) and there will surely be plenty more. But, for many church members today, it does not seem like a topic worthy of debate. Maybe we have been influenced by our postmodern culture that says “truth is relative” and “what’s good for you is good for you, but don’t claim that there is a right way or a wrong way.” That could be the case, but maybe the indifference about baptism has more to do with confusion than it does anything else.

The issue of baptism can be confusing because of the fact that various denominations use the same word, but actually assign the word completely different meanings. Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Catholics (just to name a few) all use the words “baptism” and “baptize,” but each would understand their meanings to be quite different.

It is our desire to exercise the ordinance of baptism in the way that Christ commands it, not according to our own traditions or preferences.

This is confusing. Most people would never think that we mean different things when we baptize. They would just think that churches do things differently. Some sprinkle. Some dunk.

So, what’s the big deal? Why does it even matter? Simply put, it matters because the ordinance of baptism was given by Christ to His church. Therefore, it is our desire to exercise the ordinance of baptism not according to our own traditions or preferences, but in the way that Christ commands it. We can all have different opinions—as many brilliant theologians have through the centuries—but what matters is what Scripture teaches us about baptism. As Baptists, we believe the Bible speaks clearly to the **what** of baptism, the **who** of baptism, and the **how** of baptism.

What is Baptism?

The Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, beautifully explains the meaning of baptism when he says,

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a

death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin” (Romans 6:3-7)

Paul tells us that baptism represents the believer’s identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. It is a glorious drama that gives a visual picture of the reality of what has happened to the Christian through the New Birth and what will happen to the Christian when he dies. Through this picture, the Gospel is boldly proclaimed, even without words.

Who Should be Baptized?

Is the Christian ordinance of baptism only reserved for believers—those who have personally placed their trust in Christ alone for salvation—or should infants be baptized, too?

In the Bible, you will find three things that appear over and over when it comes to baptism:

1. People hear the Gospel (“1. ...*that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures*” (1 Cor. 15:3-4).
2. They believe in Christ (2. “*For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ*” (Rom. 10:13-14, 17).
3. They are baptized (“3. *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matt. 28:19-20).

They hear...they believe...and they are baptized.

A brief survey of the book of Acts demonstrates a clear Scriptural pattern for believer’s baptism and removes the notion that baptism after faith is just a Baptist tradition.

In Acts 2, Peter preaches a powerful sermon on the day of Pentecost in which three thousand people come to faith in Christ (see Acts 2:14-41). The Bible says that when the people heard the message, they were convicted (v. 37) and that “*those who received his word were baptized*” (v. 41). Those who received his word, believed the gospel and then were baptized as a testimony of that belief.

In Acts 8, Philip the evangelist was preaching to the crowds in Samaria. The Bible tells us that “*when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women*” (Acts 8:12). Again, they heard Philip preaching the Gospel, they believed the message, and they were baptized. Later in the chapter, it is recorded that Philip shared the Gospel with an Ethiopian eunuch who also heard, believed, and was baptized (Acts 8:27-38).

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord’s Supper.

—Baptist Faith and Message, 2000

In Acts 16, we learn of Lydia, the first convert on European soil. She heard Paul's message, the Lord opened her heart and she was baptized! (Acts 16:14-15). In the same chapter, we have the famous account of the Philippian jailer's conversion.

"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God." (Acts 16:30-34).

Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord" (v. 32) to the jailer and his household. The Gospel message was heard and embraced by everyone in the house. They were all baptized and the jailer "rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God" (v. 34). (1)

Finally, in Acts 18, The Bible tells us that Paul was in Corinth preaching the Gospel and that "*Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household*" (v. 8a). "*And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized*" (v. 8b). The pattern is unmistakable: they heard...they believed...and they were baptized.

It should also be noted that early church history supports the baptism of only believers. Church historians tell us that the basic text (written around 150AD) of what later became known as "The Apostles Creed" was mainly used during the ordinance of baptism. As a test of right belief, the baptismal candidate was asked three questions:

1. Do you believe in God the Father almighty?
2. Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost and of Mary the virgin, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose again at the third day, living from among the dead, and ascended unto heaven and sat at the right of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead?
3. Do you believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?" (2)

Baptism was nothing less than a public profession of personal faith in the triune God. It was the confession of a sinner who had been reconciled to God through faith in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. It was the new believer drawing a line in the sand and publicly confessing Christ as his Lord. Consequently, **baptism before faith is meaningless**. The scriptural and historical act of personally identifying oneself with a crucified and resurrected Lord is circumvented when water is sprinkled on an infant's head and it is called baptism. Using the word "baptism" for something other than the personal testimony of a believer's faith in Christ actually disguises the biblical meaning of baptism to the point that it is not recognizable at all.

How Should We Baptize?

We now look at the **how** (or mode) of baptism. Our English word "baptize" comes from the Greek word baptizo, meaning "to dip" or "to immerse." We baptize by immersion because we believe that the clear meaning of the word *baptizo* demands it. (For a detailed study of baptism, see J. L. Dagg's Manual of Theology. Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order, 13-73.) However, not only does the meaning of the word demand immersion, but also the meaning of the ordinance is best pictured by it. Baptist Theologian Russell Moore says,

When we submerge a penitent sinner beneath the waters of the baptistery, we are confessing something quite particular before the congregation, the watching world and the principalities and powers of this age. We are confessing that we believe Jesus of Nazareth was immersed in the very wrath of God in the place of this sinner, that He was buried and that God raised Him from the dead. We are confessing that that we believe that

this sinner may die and may rot away in the grave, but that at the last day she will join the pioneer of her salvation in the resurrection from the dead. (3)

Moore mentions the graphic picture of “submerg[ing] a penitent sinner beneath the waters of the baptistery.” This visual picture of the Gospel of grace would be completely missed if a believer was sprinkled with water, rather than submerged under the water. The picture is death, burial, and resurrection and it can only be seen with immersion.

Conclusion

We believe that baptism is only for believers, not because we are Baptists, but because we believe that the meaning of baptism, as well as the clear pattern of Scripture, requires it. We only immerse because we believe that baptism by immersion is the only mode that underscores and clearly represents the meaning of baptism (identification with Christ). It is our desire that we exercise this beautiful ordinance in a way that everyone who is watching would “see the picture” of the Gospel of grace. This desire for obedience to the Word of God compels us to make it a requirement for membership in our church.

We believe that baptism is only for believers, not because we are Baptists, but because we believe that the meaning of baptism, as well as the clear pattern of Scripture, requires it.

We hope that this brochure will be helpful to all who are thinking through the issue of baptism. If you have any additional questions or would like to discuss this important issue further, please feel free to contact East Cooper Baptist Church at the address and phone number on the back of this brochure.

Endnotes:

1. It should be noted here that those who advocate infant baptism look to verses like this and say 1. that there must have been infants in the house, therefore, infant baptism is taught in Scripture. This is an argument from silence. The text does not indicate that there were any infants in the jailer’s house. In fact, what it does say is that all were old enough to hear the Gospel, believe in Christ, and be baptized! The entire household rejoiced in the fact that that “the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation, to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16).
2. Justo L. Gonzalez, 2. The Story of Christianity. Volume I: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 63-64.
3. Russell D. Moore, 3. “Taking a Stand: Guarding our heritage.” The Tie, Vol. 73, No. 2 (Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 10.