

# Believer's Baptism

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*When a person professes Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the new Christian is typically baptized. Baptism is an act of applying water to an object; in the meaning of the Greek term, baptizo, “baptism” means to dip or immerse a person into water for religious reasons. In the opening gospel stories of the New Testament, John the Baptist baptized his disciples at Bethany beyond Jordan where Jesus met John and was baptized by him (John 1:25-34). Scholars report that forms of baptism or ritual cleansing were practiced by Jewish sects at the time of Christ, so baptism in some form preexisted the Christian movement.*

Among the earliest Christians, water baptism became a sign of identification with the Christian faith and community. Instructed to go and teach the nations, the disciples were also told to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter called on his listeners “to repent and be baptized” (2:38-41), Philip baptized an Ethiopian (8:26-38), and Paul’s converts at Philippi were baptized following their conversions (16:11-14, 31-34). Clearly, baptism was an important experience in being faithful to Christ in the New Testament churches.

## **Baptism in History**

In the next several centuries, the practice of baptism underwent some important changes. In the third century, leaders of the Church began to teach that infant baptism was acceptable. By the fourth century, baptism had become a required sacrament of the Church, administered according to a stated rite, and given to infants.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Christian Church (East and West) continued to stress baptism at the

beginning of life. With the use of an elaborate ritual, priests baptized infants, and upon nomination of the parents, proclaimed each child’s Christian name. Thus, baptism had both a theological and social importance that the early church had not recognized.

In the Reformation, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldreich Zwingli, and others gave less emphasis to the mystical elements of the sacrament of baptism. In keeping with medieval tradition, the terminology of “sacrament” was retained, though with more stress on the role of parents and, later in a child’s development, individual accountability for personal faith.

The radical reformers called “Anabaptists” insisted upon a “rebaptism” as believers. That restored some of the original meaning of baptism from the primitive New Testament context. The Anabaptists believed that becoming a Christian disciple was a radical step of separation from one’s past that required in baptism an act of high symbolism before the Christian community. Anabaptists stand historically just before the rise of Baptists.

## Baptism and the Baptists

Believer's baptism has long been a distinctive mark of Baptists. Indeed, the eighteenth-century American Baptist historian, Morgan Edwards, called it the distinguishing mark of the denomination. All Baptists to one degree or another recognize the importance of a believers' church and the signal rite or ordinance of baptism.

The earliest Baptists evolved in the English Reformation tradition from Puritans, Separatists, and other Nonconformists. They were doubtless influenced by the Anabaptists of the previous century in their views of the Lordship of Christ, Scripture, and the church.

Leaders such as John Smyth, Thomas Helwys, and John Murton among the General Baptists in England searched the New Testament and arrived at conclusions about the true nature of the church. They believed that "a true church of true believers" should be known by a covenant with Christ and among each other, and this should be signified by a new and valid "believer's baptism." They held that because infants were not yet able to claim the faith for themselves, their baptism was not valid. For these first Baptists, baptism was practiced strictly for those who made a profession of faith, and the mode of baptism followed the practice of the Puritans and Separatists in pouring or aspersion (sprinkling) over the heads of the candidates. About 1609 in Amsterdam, the venerable John Smyth rebaptized himself, an audacious act that he later ratified in the Mennonite community. His act brought believer's baptism into clear focus in the emerging Baptist community.

In the second half of the 1600s, some General Baptists such as Thomas Grantham developed a theology of "six principles." On the basis of Hebrews 6:1-2, they taught that baptism was a key issue of Christian identity along with repentance, faith, resurrection, eternal judgment, and the laying on of hands.

Another group of English Baptists emerged in the 1630s from an Independent or Congregationalist church in London. They were known as "Particular" Baptists because they held to a view of the church as a particular "Elect of God." Following their pastors, Samuel Eaton and John Spilsbury, who studied the matters

intensively, they, too, were led to a position of believer's baptism, and they continued to study the matter and seek further advice. Richard Blunt, a member of the small congregation, was sent in 1641 to Rhynsburg in the Netherlands to confer with a congregation of Collegiants (a type of Mennonites) who practiced immersion as the mode of believer's baptism. When he returned to his church in England, he taught and practiced immersion; this became the standard among both the Particular and General Baptists by the mid-1600s in England.

Baptists in Asia, Africa, and Europe adopted the practice of believer's baptism by immersion. As missionaries reached out and new congregations were formed, baptismal scenes became common testimony of the faith and life of the growing movement. William Carey, for instance, was likely responsible for the first believer's baptisms in Asia when he performed the ordinance at Serampore for visiting non-Baptist missionaries. Later, Baptist missionaries such as William Dean and J. Lewis Shuck carried the ordinance into the Chinese community, first in Siam and later in mainland China. As early as 1792, David George, a former African-American slave, emigrated to establish the colony of Sierra Leone in West Africa, and he practiced baptism for believers. Similarly, Lott Carey was among the pioneers in Africa of believer's baptism when he organized Liberia as a colony and started a church there.

In Europe, the celebrated Johann Gerhard Oncken was baptized by an American Baptist, and Oncken preached believer's baptism by immersion in Germany, Hungary, and Eastern Europe. As the practice of believer's baptism by immersion spread, most Baptists preferred to baptize outdoors in a lake or river, while some in Britain, North America, and India built baptisteries or "baptisterions" to use for the ordinance.

Like their brothers and sisters elsewhere, Baptists in the United States also perfected the practice of believer's baptism by immersion. Early colonial Baptists in New England followed English and Welsh Baptist precedents by baptizing only believers, while ensuring that it was a voluntary act of faith and not a routine of church membership. Baptizing in ponds and at the

seashore, they paid a heavy price from the authorities for their audacity in believer's baptism and their refusal to have their infants baptized. Obadiah Holmes and others were imprisoned for their beliefs, while Henry Dunster (first president of Harvard College) and William Screven (a merchant from Kittery, Maine) and others were banished from their homes.

Later in the United States, Baptists used the ordinance of baptism to demonstrate their faith publicly. Some churches baptized candidates as conversions occurred or a catechetical class was finished. After revival meetings or special evangelistic outreach, many candidates were often baptized together. Some churches followed the ancient practice of holding baptismal services at Easter to identify with Resurrection Day, while in other cases several congregations joined together for combined baptisms.

Since Baptist meetinghouses did not have baptismal facilities indoors, a river, stream, or pond frequently sufficed. The event was typically public and drew the attention of townspeople and differing faiths.

Inclement weather was not a deterrent for early North American Baptists who wished to baptize outdoors. New England and Canadian Baptist records are replete with episodes of winter baptisms where ministers broke the ice on ponds or rivers and candidates were baptized in ice cold water.

In the 1800s, especially in the northern regions, new church buildings featured indoor baptisteries that were usually located under the floor of the pulpit area. In southern and western Baptist churches, the indoor baptistery was located behind the choir area and elevated for all to view. An exceptional example of American Baptist baptismal architecture was created at the Sansom Street Baptist meetinghouse in Philadelphia where pastor William Staughton designed a baptistery in the center of a circular auditorium to emphasize baptism as a central feature of the church.

Among contemporary Baptists, the process of being baptized is fairly uniform. Most congregations expect that younger persons will be catechized, that is, instructed in the basic principles of Christianity, and that each candidate will give evidence of a personal conversion and desire to follow Christ. Older candi-

dates may fulfill these expectations by a conversation with the deacons and/or the pastor in which they define their Christian experience.

Once the date of baptism has been set, candidates are often prepared by donning a white robe (this is quite significant among Russian Baptists) and led into the water one at a time. The pastor usually introduces the candidate and may ask for some public words of testimony. Then each candidate is immersed as the minister recites a baptismal formula such as "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," accompanied by some phraseology that recaptures Romans 6:3-4. Then the candidates are introduced to the congregation as members of the fellowship (if membership has been conferred by a separate action). In some instances, after the baptismal ceremony, candidates may be invited to receive a "laying on of hands"—which historically has signified the gift of the Holy Spirit. The service closes with the singing of an appropriate baptismal hymn. Some churches present a baptismal certificate to candidates.

## **The Meaning of Baptism for Baptists**

The name Baptist derived from the emphasis the denomination placed on baptism. Early Baptists called themselves "Churches of Christ," "those who followed the baptized way," and "God's free people," among other names. But the term "Baptist" remained, and it was incumbent upon Baptists to understand fully their position.

Most Baptists believe that baptism is a rich symbol. By this we mean that baptism in itself does not convey salvation or transformation, but it is a sign of what has happened in a spiritual sense to a new believer. The water used in baptism is not sacred but is a vehicle to enhance the symbolism of spiritual washing or regeneration. As a symbol, baptism conveys several levels of meaning for a Christian believer. In a most profound sense, it pictures in vivid form the gospel of Christ itself. As the apostle wrote in Romans 6:3-4, a believer is said to be buried into Christ's death, buried with Christ, and raised to new life in Christ. Only baptism by immersion portrays this spiritual transformation in the fullest sense.



Baptists also believe that baptism is an important way of professing one's faith in Christ. Theologically, as salvation is a gift of God, not through human achievement (Eph. 2:5, 8), and faith itself is a gift (Rom. 12:3), baptism is God's gift to the Church to allow the faithful a means of expressing their faith and gratitude for God's redemptive work. By being presented publicly as a candidate for baptism, the believer affirms personal commitment to God in Christ and the expressed faith of the congregation. And, by being immersed, the candidate professes an adoption of the gospel in personal life. Typically, adults, youth, or older children who understand the commitment of faith to Christ and wish to respond to God's call are acceptable candidates for baptism.

Believer's baptism has also been understood among Baptists as a sign of obedience to Christ. As Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan (Matt. 3:13-17), similarly each follower of the Lord should be baptized. Jesus also said in his "Great Commission" (Matt. 28:19, 20) that disciples should go forth teaching and baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Some Baptists also recover the rich symbolism of the Old Testament (Lev. 11:25, Heb. 9:10) where, like ceremonial cleansing from unclean things, baptism becomes a rite of cleansing from sin and personal renewal both for the candidate and the congregation. As an initiatory rite into membership of the family of God, baptismal candidates are symbolically purified or washed as their sins have been forgiven and washed away (Acts 22:16). Baptism for the entire New Testament community became what circumcision had been for males in ancient Israel (Eph. 2:11-13, Col. 2:11-13).

For many Baptists, baptism is a visible symbol of Christian unity within the church. Since Christian experience is important to Baptists, baptism becomes a kind of uniform experience that all believers can share. Because baptism is conducted publicly, it is first a witness to the church, with which all other baptized believers can identify. Also, since baptism is a picture of the gospel, it presents all baptized believers with the reality of being "in Christ" (Gal. 3:26-27). This provides a deep sense of unity within a congregation as well as among members of the larger body of Christ.

In many ways, baptism is a seal on important promises. In being baptized, a believer is assured that sins are forgiven (though not in the act of baptism itself) and that we are participants in God's kingdom. Further, by identifying with the death and burial of Christ, baptism assures us that we shall likewise see the resurrection and eternal life (Titus 3:5-7). Finally, because Jesus commanded that baptism should be conducted to the end of the age, baptism becomes a seal of the promise that Christ will return to claim his people (Matt. 28:20).

The relationship of water baptism to the Holy Spirit has also received attention among Baptists over the centuries. Fundamentally, early Baptists believed that upon believer's baptism, each believer received the Holy Spirit, as in Acts 10:47. This meant that the Holy Spirit indwelt believers. Some symbolically laid hands on the baptized believers to signify the coming of the Spirit into that person's life (Acts 8:17). Generally speaking, Baptists did not connect the New Testament passages about the baptism of the Holy Spirit that manifested itself with extraordinary gifts of the Spirit with water baptism. However, in recent years under the influence of the charismatic movement, significant minorities of Baptists do claim to have been baptized with water and then, as a separate act, with the Holy Spirit. This has produced manifestations such as prophesying and speaking in spiritual languages (Acts 19:2-6).

Finally, for Baptists there is an important connection between baptism and relationship with a local congregation. In the New Testament church, baptism led to fellowship and communion with other believers (Acts 16:15) and to being part of "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:26-29, NRSV). Thus, for most Baptists, only baptized believers may become members of a church and enjoy the obligations and responsibilities of membership. For others, baptism is practiced and taught, but not required for membership. Believer's baptism is always a voluntary act of the individual, in response to God's grace.

Doctrinally, baptism cannot stand on its own without reference to other key elements in the character of Baptists. Baptism is tied to what Baptists believe about the church as a gathered fellowship of Christian believ-

ers. Similarly, baptism is related to religious liberty and soul freedom as an entirely voluntary act that allows a person to profess personal faith. Baptism is inextricably tied to mission as it vividly portrays the gospel and fulfills Jesus' Great Commission for all true disciples. Most importantly, baptism cannot be separated from one's doctrine of Christ, since Christ himself was baptized and his redemptive work is depicted in baptism by immersion as a new relationship in Christ that all believers enjoy.

### Other Issues About Baptism

In their need to arrive at an understanding of baptism that is scripturally valid and useful to the church, Baptists have taken different positions on aspects of baptism. For instance, some baptize only in "living waters"—active or flowing waters as in a stream, lake, or ocean (John 5:1-7, Didache 7:1-3). Others have accommodated themselves to indoor facilities; with a painting or stained-glass window scene usually of a river, this is a prominent feature of the architecture of many Baptist churches.

Baptists have for the most part rejected ideas that baptism itself is regenerative, that is saving within itself. It is not necessary for salvation, but it is important for Christian believers to observe. Baptists refer to baptism as an "ordinance," or a teaching of the Bible that Jesus intended his followers to observe. Minorities of Baptists think of baptism as a sacrament, meaning it is a rich practice that conveys deep meaning spiritually to the believer. Those who use the term "sacrament" do so in part to engage in helpful theological dialogue with other Christians and to recover a widespread understanding in early British Baptist life.

Baptists have been criticized because their rejection of infant baptism appears to have no place for children in an adult or believers' church. Instead of baptizing young children and infants, Baptists prefer to dedicate children to the Lord in a public church service where the parents and the members of the church are called upon to live exemplary lives before children, and to teach them the ways of the Lord. Water baptism is not an element in that service.

On the basis of 1 Corinthians 15:29, some interpreters believe that the New Testament allows for baptism by proxy or "baptism for the dead." Baptists agree that there is no evidence from church history that either of these are ever practiced.

Another issue that has energized some Baptists is whether baptism should be required before a congregation approves full membership. Traditionally, this has been the understanding of most Baptists. However, in the late 1700s, some British Baptists began to argue for "open communion," by which they meant that they invited all who followed Christ to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Later in the 1800s, British and American Baptists were influenced by participation in the ecumenical movement, and some congregations began to practice "open membership." These churches allow persons who are professing Christians to be given all the rights and privileges of church membership without having been baptized as believers (assuming they were baptized as infants).

### Contributions of Baptists to the Christian Family

One of the important ways Baptists have influenced Christians worldwide is their relentless teaching and publication on the subject of baptism. Baptists have written more books on this subject than on any other topic. In the 1800s, Baptist writers compiled lists of Scripture that supported their understanding of believer's baptism by immersion and presented them in response to other pedobaptist (literally "child or infant baptizers") writers. Sometimes, this resulted in public debates, for instance with the Disciples of Christ, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Perhaps a high-water mark of polemic baptismal thinking was reached in the 1850s when some prominent Baptists in the United States refused to cooperate further in the mission of the American and Foreign Bible Society over the allowance of several forms of baptism by different cooperating denominations. A small group of Baptists formed the American Bible Union that produced a "Baptist Bible," characterized by the English translation of *baptizo* not as "baptize" but as "immerse." This purist translation did not prevail, and few copies were

sold. After a decade or so, these Baptists rejoined other denominations while still staunchly defending their understanding of the “biblical” way of baptism.

Aside from the heavily polemical treatises, Baptists have certainly plumbed Scripture for all the possible meanings of baptism. This has been an important contribution to Christian theology, as Baptist studies of the doctrine of the church and mission are. One of the least recognized literary and liturgical contributions of Baptists has been the production of baptismal hymns, penned especially for the rite of baptism. A London Seventh Day Baptist, Joseph Stennett, who wrote of baptism by immersion as entering a “watery grave,” composed what may be the oldest surviving collection of baptismal hymns, dated about 1700.

In major studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other Christians have come to appreciate the Baptist position on believer's baptism by immersion as consistent with the ancient churches. As the World Council of Churches statement on “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” (1982) put it, “baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament.” Many denominations today not only teach the Baptist position, but also practice believer's baptism by immersion as part of their understanding of the church. Particularly in North America and related missionary contexts, Baptist baptismal practices have become so widely accepted that one observer has been prompted to describe the “baptistification” of religious culture!



# Notes & Questions for Discussion

## Questions for Discussion

1. Why is baptism for believers only important to the Christian community?
2. How did Baptists arrive at the position that only immersion is a scripturally valid mode of baptism?
3. Describe the variety of baptismal practices among Baptists.
4. Compare the several meanings of baptism in Baptist life and thought.
5. How has baptism shaped the identity of the people called Baptists?

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