

“What the Bible Says about Baptism”

Acts 8:26-39 ¹

Tonight, as we celebrate the baptisms of Gilbert Coleman, Brian Hayes, and Eldon Wilson, I thought it might be good for us to think together once again about how we Baptists understand baptism. Though it's not the most important Christian doctrine, baptism is easily the foremost Christian ceremony. With the exception of the Quakers and the Salvation Army, all Christian denominations baptize.

Indeed, it's obviously from this issue that we Baptists take our name. We come from the line of the “Anabaptists,” which means “to baptize again,” and refers to our commitment to believer's baptism as distinct from infant baptism. Some of our forebears literally gave their lives for this distinction.

We say that “we believe what the Bible says about baptism” . . . but what does it say? And why do Christians put the emphasis on baptism that we do?

For starters, Jesus Himself was baptized (Matthew 3:13-17). He told His disciples to baptize (John 4:2), and He told us to baptize (Matthew 28:19). Thus the authority for baptizing is strong, resting on the command of the Risen Lord, integrated with His commission to preach the Good News to all the world, and enforced by His own example at the beginning of His public ministry.

So what did Jesus mean for us to do when He told us to “baptize”? As is the case with all words, this word, βαπτίζω (“baptizo”), has a meaning. For 400 years on either side of the New Testament, the word “baptize” had a definite, consistent, and universally-understood meaning that applied in all fields, not just to religious affairs. This meaning was “to submerge” or “to immerse,” and βαπτίζω was actually the word used to describe the sinking of a ship.

There was no question in those days about sprinkling or pouring. Greek has words for these actions, but those words are never used in the Bible to refer to baptism. Indeed, scholars of nearly all Christian groups agree that what the New Testament practices and teaches is believer's baptism by immersion.

As we consider what the Bible says about baptism, the book of Acts is our primary source document for what the early Church did, while the writings of Paul are our primary sources for how the early Church understood what it did. In the book of Acts, repentance, faith, baptism, and the receiving of the Holy Spirit are always found in close relation to each other. While each situation was different, and there is some variation in the order of things, the New Testament knows of no other baptism but that of a believer—a person who has placed his or her faith in Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, buried, risen, reigning, and coming again to claim His own.

Further, when the New Testament is taken as a whole, it's clear that receiving the Holy Spirit—also called “the baptism of the Holy Spirit”—is a distinct act of God's grace at the time of conversion, whether separate in time from water baptism or not. Believer's baptism is an act that draws its meaning from the person of Jesus and from the relationship that a believer establishes with Him through repentance and faith.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on September 22, 2010.

Though propositional Truth is certainly involved in New Testament faith, faith is not simply agreement that a certain set of propositions is true. New Testament faith has to do with the establishment of a deep relationship of love for and obedience to the Risen Christ as Lord of all of life.

The act of being baptized is a proclamation that our sins have been covered by the Blood of Jesus, that we have entered into the New Covenant with the Father, and that this Covenant has been sealed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Baptism by immersion is a symbol of our *participation* in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and of our *rebirth* into a new life in Him.

Baptism is a public statement that, as Paul put it, *“I have been crucified with Christ. I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”* (Galatians 2:20).

Baptism is a public identification with and a public commitment to all other persons who acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God—those persons across the ages, past, present, and future, who constitute the spiritual, invisible Church, the Bride of Christ. And baptism has always marked the boundary between who is and who is not a member of the visible Church, the Body of Christ in the world today.

Such identification with the visible Church has, from the very beginning and even to this present moment, often meant certain persecution and likely death. In the early church, those who were about to receive baptism often spent the preceding night in a vigil of fasting and prayer, knowing that great suffering lay ahead.

Believer’s baptism is the symbol of a rebirth that cuts life in two. Before conversion, Paul wrote, *we “lived in this world without God and without hope. But now [we] belong to Christ Jesus. Though [we] once were far away from God, now [we] have been brought near to him because of the blood of Christ”* (Ephesians 2:12-13).

In the beginning, believer’s baptism by immersion was universal in the Church. Everyone was a first-generation adult believer, so infant baptism wasn’t an issue. Occasionally, though, the situation arose that a dying person sought baptism and was baptized by pouring for health reasons. Such baptism was considered valid, but it was also considered highly irregular, and if these persons recovered from their illnesses, their irregular baptism prevented them from serving as elders in the church.²

This occasional death-bed pouring led to confusion about both the mode and the purpose of baptism. Some persons began to believe that baptism was necessary for salvation,³ and as increasing numbers of Christians became confused in this way, moving away from believer’s baptism and moving toward the idea of baptismal regeneration, they understandably began to be concerned about their children. It’s hardly a coincidence that infant baptism began to be practiced in the third century, soon after the idea of baptismal regeneration began to gain headway.

Now if babies and the sick need to be baptized, with immersion being dangerous in these situations, then someone has to decide which of the various modes of baptism—immersion, sprinkling, or pouring—

² As centuries passed and new structures developed, such irregular baptism also prevented its recipients from entering “holy orders.”

³ This conclusion was based on selective reading of Scripture (e.g., Acts 2:38) rather than on thorough-going study and interpretation of the entire New Testament. The technical name for this belief is “baptismal regeneration.”

is authorized in a given instance. Church leaders and officials began to assume this duty, and little by little the Church became the sole custodian of baptism as a “saving sacrament.” Things had now moved a long way from the instructions of Jesus, and considerable confusion now surrounded both the purpose and the procedure for the baptism Jesus commanded.

It’s significant that the oldest rituals for infant baptism actually require the administrator to ask the child if it repents, believes in Christ, and renounces the ways of the world, with the sponsor or parent answering for the child. The presence of such an exchange, however artificial, demonstrates that the early church required faith before baptism. Much later, the great reformers—Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli—permitted infant baptism only because otherwise they would have excommunicated the whole church (!), but they had problems explaining why they kept it.

Taken together, the inevitable result of all this has been that the distinction between the Church and the world became more and more fuzzy and indistinct. Through infant baptism, people were admitted to the Church without being born again. These persons had not experienced God’s redemption. They did not have a new heart and mind. They did not have the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. And they did not understand that membership in a church is not the same thing as being *born again*.

The New Testament teaches that *personal* repentance for *personal* sin followed by *personal* faith in the Lord Jesus Christ must precede baptism in every instance. The issue here has nothing to do with infants or adults. The issue is not a question of age in any sense, but of intelligent, freely-chosen faith, unprompted by adults who confuse baptism with salvation. The central issue in baptism is not infant baptism vs. adult baptism. The central issue is FAITH baptism vs. NON-FAITH baptism.

Confusing the issue even more, some churches baptize infants but do not hold that this saves them, requiring later instruction and confirmation to complete this work. Such baptism is ostensibly done to secure the effect it has on the parents, but more often than not such baptism generates a false sense of security that leads to less religious instruction in the home, not to more. Baptists are much more comfortable with a process of infant or child *dedication* in which the parents are the participants, not the child, maintaining a clear distinction between such dedication by parents and later repentance and faith in the child’s own heart.

Having said all this, we find that there are four basic options with respect to baptism:

1. Either baptism is only for those who can understand and believe the Gospel for themselves, or else it isn’t, and infants and other unbelievers are valid subjects for baptism.
2. Either salvation is by faith alone, and doesn’t depend on baptism at all, or else salvation depends in some way on baptism and is incomplete without it.
3. Either the New Testament teaches baptism by immersion, preserving the symbolism of death, burial, and resurrection, or else it doesn’t, and any amount of water, applied in any fashion, will get the job done.⁴
4. Either baptism finds its significance in the mind and heart of the one receiving it, or else it takes its meaning from the understanding and qualifications of the administrator, and what the recipient believes and understands is irrelevant.

⁴ The first identifiable “Baptist” congregation that practiced believer’s baptism was an English congregation in Amsterdam led by John Smyth. Smyth baptized himself by pouring in 1609, and then similarly baptized the other confessing Christians in the group. It was not until 1641 that a recovery of baptism by immersion took place.

There are many “sticky wickets” here. For example, if the sufficiency of our baptism depended on the faithful character of the administrator, we’d have to keep that person under surveillance as long as he or she lived, to be sure we ourselves ended life with a “baptism that worked.” You and I can be very glad that the validity of our baptism depends, not on the administrator, but on the faith of the baptized and on the faithful mercies of God!

Even so, we Baptists sometimes find ourselves contending for the qualifications of the administrator when we insist on “rebaptizing” persons who come to us from other Christian denominations, and who have been immersed as believers already. The question then becomes whether we are contending for “Baptist Baptism” or biblical baptism.⁵

Much of life hangs on being able to ask the right questions, and as I understand the situation, the right question here is never one of “rebaptism,” but of biblical baptism; and a person has either been baptized in a way that satisfies Scripture or else he or she hasn’t. Baptists understand such scriptural baptism to have three components:

1. The candidate is baptized by immersion, preserving the New Testament practice and the visual and physical symbolism of the act.
2. The candidate is so baptized after her or his personal, intelligent, and uncoerced confession of faith in Christ, and not before.
3. The candidate understands that baptism has no saving effect—we are saved by grace alone (Ephesians 2:8-9)—and baptism is therefore a symbol, an act of obedience, not a sacrament, or an act of salvation.

If these three requirements have been met, no matter when or where or by whom, then a candidate for membership has experienced biblical baptism, and that baptism should be accepted as such.

As I conclude this overview, one last thing needs to be clearly stated, and it is this: our Christian faith does not rise or fall on the purpose and mode of baptism. Our Christian faith is anchored, not in water, but in the saving blood of Jesus, and while we may keep closer company with those who share our understanding of baptism, any persons who lift up the Name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior, the Lord of the Universe and our soon-coming King—*any such persons*—are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we gladly make common cause for the Kingdom of God with them.

After we present the baptismal candles and certificates to Gilbert, Brian, and Eldon, I invite you to join me in reading *The Apostles’ Creed* as our benediction, one of the very earliest Christian confessions of faith. *The Apostles’ Creed* is still in weekly use in many Christian traditions, and as we read it together, we join our hearts with brothers and sisters around the world who are members of God’s “catholic” or “universal” Church

⁵ This practice took its rise from J.R. Graves and the “Landmark Controversy” that began in 1854.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
where he sits at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria.