

BAPTISTS: BELIEVER'S BAPTISM

Ask most non-Baptists (and even some Baptists!) what is *the* Baptist distinctive and they likely will say, "Baptism by immersion only and no baptism of infants." Of course, there is no *one* Baptist distinctive. Why then do many people regard baptism as practiced by Baptists to be our distinctive? A possible reason is that Baptists are one of the very few denominations which practice believer's baptism by immersion and do so as a symbol of having been saved, not as a requirement for salvation.

In previous centuries, rulers of both state and church launched persecutions against Baptists for this practice. In the face of such harsh resistance, as well as the relative inconvenience of immersion, **why have Baptists stubbornly held to the belief in and practice of believer's immersion? The answer is found in basic Baptist convictions.**

Articles XXXIX and XL of the First London Confession
by Baptists in 1644
(original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation)

"That Baptisme is an Ordinance of the new Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed onely upon persons professing faith, or that are Disciples, or taught, who upon a profession of faith, ought to be baptized.

"The way and manner of the dispensing of this Ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water...."

Baptism Is Only for Believers

The New Testament records that *baptism always followed conversion, never preceded it, and was not necessary for salvation (Acts 2:1-41; 8:36-39; 16:30-33)*. Since Baptists look to the Bible as our sole authority for faith and practice, we believe that baptism is only for those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Furthermore, Baptists point out that in the New Testament a commitment to believe in and follow Jesus as Lord and Savior was always *voluntary*. Therefore, baptism as a sign of such commitment ought always to be voluntary.

Because of these convictions based on the Bible, Baptists do not baptize infants. This refusal has resulted in persecution. For example, Henry Dunster, the first president of Harvard University, was forced not only from office but also banished from Cambridge for refusing to have his infant children baptized in the state-supported church.



Baptism Is Only by Immersion

Although some early Baptists baptized by pouring or sprinkling water over a person, Baptists concluded that immersion of a person's entire body in water was the only biblical way to baptize. Therefore, in spite of persecution, inconvenience, and ridicule, they began to practice baptism only by immersion. Today, that is the Baptist way throughout the world.

The belief in immersion as the proper mode of baptism is based on the Bible for several reasons:

- ◆ The English word "baptize" comes from a word in the Greek language—the language in which the New Testament originally was written—that means "to dip, submerge, or immerse."
- ◆ Jesus requested John the Baptist to baptize him in the Jordan River as Jesus began his public ministry. The biblical account of the baptism indicates that it was by immersion (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11).
- ◆ Christ's disciples in New Testament times baptized by immersion (Acts 8:36-39).
- ◆ Immersion is a means not only of declaring that Christ died, was buried, and was resurrected to provide salvation but also of testifying about our own hope of resurrection (Romans 6:5).
- ◆ The New Testament teaches that immersion is a way to symbolize that a believer has died to an old way and is alive to walk a new way in Christ (Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:11-12).

Baptism Is Symbolic

Baptists believe that the Bible teaches that baptism is important but not necessary for salvation. For example, the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43), Saul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-18), and the people gathered in Cornelius' house (Acts 10:24-48) all experienced salvation without the necessity of baptism. In his sermon at Pentecost, Peter urged those who had repented and believed in Christ to be baptized, not that baptism was necessary for salvation but as a testimony that they had been saved (Acts 2:1-41).

Thus, baptism is symbolic and not sacramental.

Baptists believe that the Bible teaches that baptism symbolizes that a person has been saved and is not a means of salvation. Baptism is not a way of channeling saving grace but rather is a way of testifying that saving grace has been experienced. It does not wash away sin but symbolizes that sin has been forgiven through faith in Christ.

While baptism is not essential for salvation, it is a very important ingredient for obedience to the Lord. Christ commanded his disciples to baptize (Matthew 28:19) and therefore baptism is a form of obedience to Jesus as Lord. Baptism is one way that a person declares, "Jesus is Lord."

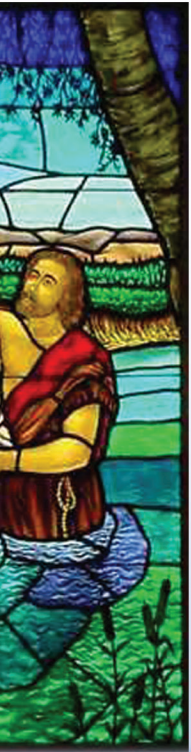


***"Therefore we are
baptism into death: th
raised up from the d
the Father, even so w
newness
Roman***

A reason Baptists often use the term “ordinance” when referring to baptism is because Jesus ordered his disciples to baptize persons in his name.

Person, Place, Timing, and Setting for Baptisms

The Baptist concept of the priesthood of all believers indicates that the local congregation can authorize any believer priest to perform baptisms, not just a pastor or someone who is ordained. In most Baptist churches, the actual practice is for the pastor or a church staff member to perform baptisms. And some Baptists believe that only those who have been “called to preach” should baptize.



When possible, a public place is preferred by Baptists for baptism since baptism is a type of public profession of faith.

A variety of settings have been used. In the past, most persons were baptized in rivers or lakes. Sam Houston, a mid 1800s political leader, was baptized in a creek near the Independence Baptist Church in Independence, Texas. In more recent times, churches have built baptisteries inside buildings. Many other places continue to be used, however, such as swimming pools, lakes, rivers, ponds, creeks, oceans, and even animal watering troughs.

Baptists opt for no particular timing in regard to baptism except that baptism is to follow a person’s conversion. Since baptism is not essential for salvation, there is no requirement to baptize immediately upon a person’s profession of faith. Some churches baptize very soon after a public profession. Others have a practice of asking the candidate to participate in a class for new Christians before being baptized.

Baptists regard baptism as a church function. Baptists consider baptism not so much as an individual act but as one involving a community of believer priests, that is, a church. In a sense, baptism symbolizes a covenant between the person being baptized and a church. Thus Baptists believe that when a person trusts in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord he or she ought to make a public profession of that faith and be baptized into the fellowship of a church. Baptists sometimes refer to baptism as the “door to church membership.”

**buried with him by
not like as Christ was
lead by the glory of
e also should walk in
of life.”
ns 6:4**

Conclusion

Baptists, believing strongly in religious freedom, respect the right of others to baptize in whatever way they choose. Similarly, Baptists want to exercise our right to express our convictions.

Baptists in the past endured terrible persecution for their commitment to believer’s baptism. ***Surely Baptists of today will hold fast to believer’s baptism, never taking it lightly, and will make every effort to assure that future generations understand its vast significance.***

For further information, see www.baptistdistinctives.org

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the *Baptist Standard* in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler G. Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication.

Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series: (1) Baptists: Who? Where? What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only by Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Baptist Church Life: Organization, Worship, Officers, Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.

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