

Baptism – what's it all about?

Introduction

'Baptists' get their name from the practice of Believers' Baptism. In our next session we'll look a little more at how the 'Baptist' denomination started, but the main thing that made it different from other churches at the time was that it didn't baptise infants and instead insisted that every individual had to make a decision to become a follower of Jesus (a Christian) for themselves before they could be baptised as a 'believer'. Nowadays, many different church groups believe that Christian faith is not something that can be 'given' to someone through baptising them as a baby, or because they might happen to be born into a 'Christian' country and, like Baptists, choose to baptise only those who have made their own decision to follow Jesus rather than baptising babies.

What does the Bible say about baptism?

- Jesus was baptised – Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptised by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to talk him out of it. "I am the one who needs to be baptised by you," he said, "so why are you coming to me?"

¹⁵ But Jesus said, "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires" So John agreed to baptise him.

¹⁶ After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."

- The first Christians were baptised – Acts 2: 38-41

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." ⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

- Believing the Good News about Jesus and then being baptised seems the 'normal' way of becoming a Christian – Acts 8: 26-27 & 35-38 (also Acts 10: 44-48 & Acts 16:31-34)

²⁶ As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, "Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia...

³⁵ So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus. ³⁶ As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptised?" ³⁸ He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptised him.

What does baptism 'mean'?

Being baptised by being completely immersed under water is both a very dramatic and a very symbolic act. The Bible refers to baptism as having several different meanings – all are important in different ways.

- Being born again – John 3:5-7

³In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

⁴"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

⁵Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'

Jesus describing baptism in this way (being 'born of water') can be seen as a reference to natural birth. Jesus is saying that just as we are born physically, we also need to be born again, but spiritually. Baptism demonstrates this spiritual birth into a new life as a Christian.

- Being washed – Titus 3:5

⁵ [God] saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is sometimes referred to as 'like having a bath'. Just as a physical bath washes away that which makes us physically dirty, so baptism symbolises having the things that make us spiritually dirty washed away – sin. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross brings cleansing from sin for those who choose to accept him and become Christians. Baptism symbolises that cleansing process.

- Being buried and raised to life again – Romans 6: 3-4

³ Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? ⁴ For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.

Baptism marks the end of living life without God – like 'dying' to your old life, but also symbolises 'coming alive again', this time to a new life with God.

- Being immersed in the Holy Spirit – Acts 2:38

³⁸ Peter replied, "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The bible closely links baptism with receiving the Holy Spirit to help us to live for God in the future in his strength. Baptism can be seen as being 'plunged' into the Holy Spirit who will enable us to live for God as serve him effectively from that moment onwards.

Why be baptised?

- Because Jesus has commanded it – Matthew 28:19

¹⁹ [Jesus said,] “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus commanded his disciples that those who believed were to be baptised. If being a Christian is about following Jesus’ teaching and obeying his commands, then baptism is an act of loving obedience to Jesus.

- Because Jesus was baptised – Matthew 3:13-17 (see page 1)

Becoming a Christian means wanted to become more like Jesus and seeing him as our example. Since Jesus was baptised, we ought to follow his example.

- Because it is a great way to ‘go public’ with your new found faith – Matthew 10:32

³² “Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.”

Being baptised as a believer (especially by full immersion) is such an ‘unusual’ thing to do that you’d only choose to do it publicly because you want the world to know that you have decided to become a Christian and are going to live God’s way from now on. Being baptised can be a really great way for others who aren’t yet Christians to see that you are serious about your new faith and can lead to them asking some great questions about becoming a Christian themselves.

- Because baptism is a ‘means of grace’ – a sacrament

Baptism isn’t just a great way to tell the world that you’re a Christian – when you’re baptised, something spiritual is happening. By his Holy Spirit, God promises to be with us and to fill us so that we have the strength to live for him. Some people describe an amazing experience of God being with them when they are baptised; others just feel a sense of peace, love and God’s grace.¹ Baptism, along with Communion, are special occasions when God promises to meet with us in this way – they are therefore a ‘means of God’s grace’.

- Because baptism is good for the church

It is fantastic for those who are already a part of the church to see others coming to faith, being baptised and beginning the journey of following Jesus. Some might have prayed for you, some might have ‘walked through life’ with you but everyone will be overjoyed that you have decided to live life God’s way from now on!

¹ The dictionary defines ‘grace’ as

a. *the freely given, unmerited favour and love of God.*

b. *the influence or Spirit of God operating in humans to regenerate or strengthen them.*

Just before you are baptised, you'll be given the opportunity to 'tell the story' of how and why you came to faith and decided to become a Christian. You'll also be asked some questions, probably something like the following;

Do you believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

(You answer) I do

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour

I do

Do you turn from sin, renounce evil and intend to follow Christ?

I do

Will you live within the fellowship of the church and will you serve Jesus Christ in the world?

I will

It is a good idea to have a think about these questions when you begin to consider getting baptised and maybe chat through any queries you have about them (or any other aspect of baptism) with the church's minister. I am more than happy to meet up sometime, chat on the phone, or have a conversation by email. My contact details are;

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ⁱ This session is based on

Wright, N.G. 'Believers' Baptism, in *Baptist Basics* (Didcot: BUGB, 2009)