**A Study of Believer’s Baptism**
for Prospective Members of the International Baptist Church of Cologne

**Introduction**

Baptism by immersion as a confession of one’s personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord is a key distinctive of the people of God known as Baptists. Every individual considering becoming a Christian should understand the role of baptism as a part of their confession of faith in Christ. This pamphlet is intended to address the basics of the teaching of the New Testament and then how this teaching has been understood over the centuries by the people called Baptists around the world.

You should carefully read this material, study the scripture references very carefully, check out the [hyperlinks](#) to internet discussions of a much more detailed nature, and then prayerfully come to a personal decision about seeking baptism in our church.

**The Teaching of the New Testament**

When John the Baptist suddenly appeared on the scene at the beginning of the Christian era, he was requiring those who repented of their sins to be baptized by immersion in water (Matthew 3:1). Jesus himself submitted to John’s baptism (Matthew 3:17), and later commissioned his disciples to baptize all who as new disciples confessed faith in Him (cf. Matthew 28:19). Where did this practice originate? And what was its role in early Christian practice? How does all this apply to believers today?

**Language of Baptism:**

A group of Greek words are typically translated as “baptize,” “baptism,” or “baptizer” in the English New Testament. The verb ‘to baptize’ comes from the Greek NT word βαπτίζω and means ‘to immerse something underneath.’ The noun βαπτισμα means ‘baptism,’ and the personal noun βαπτιστής mean ‘baptizer.’ Although often debated among Christian groups today, the practice and clearest meaning of these terms suggest that people were baptized in early Christianity by being immersed underneath water. Because no such ritual was practiced by the Israelites during the OT era, the terminology is only found in the New Testament.

**Emerging Concept of Baptism**

The roots of Christian baptism lay somewhat obscure in the ancient past. Although no such practice of baptism existed in the OT, the Israelite Law did make extensive use of water based rituals of purification and cleansing. This tradition seems to have played some formative role in the later practice of Jewish proselyte baptism that emerged during the Jewish Diaspora after the end of the OT era. During the 400 year period between the Old and New Testaments, growing numbers of non-Jews were attracted to the high moral standards taught by Jews through their religion based on the OT Law. From every indication available in ancient sources, the practice of baptizing these Gentile converts arose as a symbol of their purification from their previous non-Jewish way of living, considered to be sinful and pagan. It evidently was bundled together with the more important requirements of circumcision and a formal commitment to obey the Torah of God. The evidence points toward this as a common practice but not as a universally adhered to pattern among the various groups of Jews. Thus baptism was a practice for non-Jews converting to Judaism, and served as a formal indication of their conversion to Judaism.

At the beginning of the Christian era, we first see John the Baptist demanding baptism from Jews who publicly confessed and repented from their sins. John’s practice added to proselyte baptism a still stronger emphasis on repentance, a firm background of moral teaching (Luke 3:3, 10-14, 33), and initiation into a community (“John’s disciples” preparing for Messiah’s advent (Luke 3:16-17). At the end of Matthew’s gospel (Mt. 28:16-20), Jesus commissioned his disciples to baptize those who became disciples:

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In early Christianity, baptism emerges as one of two “ordinances” that was practiced: the Lord’s Supper and baptism. New converts to Christianity were baptized upon the confession of Christ as Lord as an initial activity of becoming a Christian. R.E.O. White well summarizes the practice as recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts:

Luke’s account of apostolic baptism assumes the rite’s original association with repentance and remission (Acts 2:38), with washing away sin (22:16), and with admission to the religious community. But his emphasis falls on baptism’s new features. Though the gospel era dates from the baptism John preached (1:22; 10:37), Christian baptism, as conferring the Holy Spirit, is contrasted with John’s (attributed to John in each Gospel, to Jesus at Acts 1:5; 11:16). This is emphasized at 18:25 and 19:1-7, and leads to rebaptism with water and the (exceptional) laying on of hands, before the Spirit is conferred. On the other hand, that Cornelius and his friends have received the Spirit becomes Peter’s justification for their subsequent baptism (10:47; 11:17; cf. 8:14-17). No formal pattern of initiation is yet evident: Order varies with circumstances and preparation. But the association of water baptism with Spirit possession gave rise to the curious phrase “baptism in/with Holy Spirit.”
The position of the apostle Paul on baptism is consistent with that found elsewhere in the NT. Again, White provides a helpful summation of the main aspects found in the writings of Paul inside the New Testament:7

Thus, Paul, baptized within three days of his dramatic conversion, was evidently familiar with the need, despite the Pharisees’ hostility toward it (John 1:24-25). He gives it surprising prominence among essentials that unite the church (Eph 4:4; the Church is not included). He administered, or authorized, baptism throughout his missions, yet would not boast of baptizing anyone he had not visited (Rome, Colossae).

So, too, Paul assumes the original method of immersion (Rom 6) and the accompanying confession of Christ’s lordship (Rom 10:9-13), which in 1 Corinthians 1:12-13; 6:19-20, and Galatians 3:27-28 clearly implies belonging to Christ. But he adds the idea of being “sealed” with the purchaser’s mark, as property awaiting collection (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 4:30). This “good confession” (1 Tim 6:12) made at baptism responses to Paul’s gospel of a suffering and risen Lord, presented through the gracious initiative of God and offered to faith, trust, and obedience. Paul insists that none are saved by their own good works, not even by the good work of baptism, but only by faith in Christ (Rom 3:20; 4:4-5; Gal 3:2, 11; Eph 2:8).

Paul retained, too, the original interpretation of baptism as entrance to the religious community: “We were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13). Some think that Paul means this by the phrase “baptized into” (Ga 3:27). They understand his description of the Christian as “in Christ” as an ecclesiological formula—the believer is baptized into “the whole Christ,” of which the risen Lord is head and the church is the body. Others interpret “in Christ” as a more individual, mystical relationship. Doubtless Paul would affirm that a true baptism introduced the convert to both privileges.

In the centuries after the apostolic era, the first Christian century, the understanding of baptism experienced profound re-definition, as did most of Christian doctrine. When the prevailing Greek philosophy of the time was merged with the teachings of the New Testament, baptism took on a very different meaning. It gradually came to be viewed as cleansing an infant child of “original sin” and was a ritual done by sprinkling water over the infant a short time after birth. Not until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s did careful study of the New Testament produce objections to this practice of infant baptism by the Roman Catholic Church in the west and the Orthodox Church in the east. And it wasn’t the reformers such as Luther, Calvin and Zwingli who made the objections. Much of their understanding of the NT simply continued the prevailing practices of the Roman Catholic Church. The strident call to return to biblical principles of baptism were first heard by the radical reformers, often called Anabaptists.8

History of the Practice of Baptism by Baptists

The history of Baptist understanding and practice of baptism has its roots in the Radical Reformation of the middle to late sixteenth century. Geoffrey Wainwright has provided a helpful summary of this era:9

The entire structure of Christendom, whether in its Catholic or in its Protestant forms, was called into question by the more radical reformers. Their intended return to primitive Christianity included baptism only on personal profession of faith. (They were able to restore initial catechesis to its prebaptismal place.) Called Anabaptists by others, they claimed not to be rebaptizing but to be administering the first authentic baptism to people who had received the rite in infancy. From continental Europe and from Britain, “believer-baptists” spread to North America, where they have thrived (→ Baptists; Mennonites). While a position of baptism solely on personal profession of faith has sometimes been accused by magisterial Protestantism of perennial → Pelagianism and modern → individualism, a number of otherwise unlikely 20th-century theologians have shown sympathy with it (e.g., K. Barth, E. Brunner, E. Jüngel, J. Moltmann).

Although at times differing over whether sprinkling or immersion is the correct mode of baptizing, Baptists since the early 1600s have seldom ever differed over the contention that the NT teaches baptism as a symbolic action affirming one’s confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. As such it stands as a prerequisite for membership in a local congregation of Baptist believers. Since the local congregation exclusively controls its membership, rather than a pastor or a denominational organization. Baptism thus stands as a “church ordinance” to be administered by ordained ministers only through authorization of the church body itself.

Conclusions

What can be concluded about baptism from both the teachings of the Bible and from Baptist history? At minimal, the following ideas can be reached:

1. Baptism is a symbolic expression of faith commitment to Christ, participated in only by those confessing personal faith in Christ. As a symbol of faith, baptism pictures the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It also depicts the same for the believer. As such it contains no saving power, but instead reflects the divine cleansing of sins by the believer.

2. The biblical way of baptizing is through immersion in water through the administration of an ordained minister of the gospel. The administration of baptism is under the exclusive control of a local congregation of believers who grant authorization to an ordained minister, usually their pastor, to baptize.