

A Study of Believer's Baptism¹ 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 Testament²

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 3:1-12](#)). Jesus himself submitted to John's baptism ([Matthew 3:13-17](#)), and later commissioned his disciples to baptize all who as new disciples confessed faith in Him (cf. [Matthew 28:16-20](#)). 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 Tes-

¹Written by Prof. Dr. Lorin L. Cranford for use with prospective members preparing for baptism at the International Baptist Church in Cologne Germany. All rights reserved. This pamphlet, *Believer's Baptism*, is the first in a series on *The Basics of Church Membership*.

²A helpful, more detailed discussion of the biblical language and ancient practice of baptism can be found by the British Baptist New Testament scholar R.E.O. White under "Baptize, Baptism," in the online [Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology](#)

tament. The verb 'to baptize' comes from the Greek [NT word](#) βαπτίζω and means 'to immerse something underneath.' The [noun](#) βάπτισμα 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.³ 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 obscured 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.⁴

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

³A [concordance search](#) of the root word "bapti*" in the NRSV reveals some 89 instances of the words 'baptize,' 'baptism,' and 'baptizer' in the New Testament. The word group is not found in the Old Testament.

⁴Ritual cleansings of the body were well established in Torah (e.g., Exod. 29:4; 30:17-21; 40:30-33; Lev. 17:15-16; Deut. 21:6), as throughout the ancient Near East. Naaman was told to wash seven times in the Jordan to be healed (2 Kgs. 5:10). Later, lustration played a central role at Qumran. Foot-washing was used by Jesus as an example of his humility and of the need for submission and servanthood by his followers (John 13:2-20)." (from David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 147.)

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)."⁵

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:⁶

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

⁵from White, [ibid.](#)

⁶from White, [ibid.](#)



Spirit” (Mark 1:8; Acts 1:5).

In nine instances Luke represents baptism as the expected response to hearing and receiving the gospel. In four of these, kinsmen, close friends, or a household hear and respond; at 16:14-15 and 18:8 it is not stated that the household believed.

This response was to the gospel of Jesus, Son of God and Savior, who was crucified, rose again, forgives sins, bestows the Spirit, and will come again as Judge, all summarized succinctly but clearly in baptism in or into the name of Jesus as Christ, Lord, Son of God (8:37). “In the name” implied Jesus’ authority for the rite; “into the name” (8:16; 19:5) indicated passing into Jesus’ ownership, as one “redeemed.” James 2:7 suggests an invocation of Jesus (to be present?); elsewhere, the irrevocable public confession of Christ as Lord (Rom 10:9-13; 14:9; Php 2:11) marks the decisive commitment of the baptized to all the privileges and obligations of Christian life. Such baptismal confession became the germ of later creeds; the trinitarian formulation in Matthew 28:18-20 may well represent an early stage in credal development.

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 Eucharist is not included). He administered, or authorized, baptism throughout his missions, yet would not boast of baptizing anyone and resented baptism being made a badge of partisanship (1 Cor 1:13-17). And he assumes that baptism is understood in churches 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 3:29, 5:24 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 responds 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 Christ” (Ga 3:27). They understand

⁷from White, *ibid.*

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 the [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

⁸The Protestant Reformers inherited a split pattern of infant baptism and later catechesis/confirmation and Communion. They largely got rid of the more “material” features — apart from the water — of the medieval rites of initiation. Lutherans and Anglicans retained the proxy profession of faith by sponsors on behalf of infants, while Calvinists appealed rather to the analogy with circumcision and did not call for the family to “speak for” the child. All the magisterial Reformers emphasized catechism for children at the age of understanding, but it was the Anglicans who retained the strongest form of confirmation as both a personal profession of faith and an imposition of episcopal hands with prayer for the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit. The Roman Catholic Church continued to baptize predominantly infants, with confirmation and First Communion following at a distance and in a sequence that varied with varying pastoral reasoning over the generations and according to geography.

(From Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leiden, Netherlands: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 1999-2003), 1:188. S.V., “Baptism” by Geoffrey Wainwright.

⁹Geoffery Wainwright. *ibid.*

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. Jünger, 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.