

# **Believer's baptism sacrament or symbolic ordinance?**

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One of the distinguishing marks of the people of God called Baptists, across our 400 years of witness, has been our strong affirmation of believer's baptism, which is rooted in our high view of Christ's authority in Scripture. When Jesus commanded his followers to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19), the earliest believers clearly understood baptism to be an important expression of faithfulness to him. Baptists stand in this heritage.

Across the years, Baptists have published more about believer's baptism, the church and mission, than perhaps any other topic. Historically and theologically, Baptists have followed the apostolic practice of emphasizing the obligation to be baptized in obedience to the command of Jesus. We understand believer's baptism to be connected with the foundational biblical teachings about who God is, how salvation happens, the person and work of Christ, maturation in Christian faith, and the nature, composition and governance of the believer's church. For Baptists, believer's baptism is the distinctive act that both encapsulates the deepest meanings of, and relates to, all of these essential doctrines.

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In 17th century England, our earliest Baptist views were forged within a specific context. The English Church, like the Roman Catholic Church in this regard, still understood communion and baptism as sacramental rites (vehicles of salvation-grace). Infant baptism, for example, was an initiatory, regenerative act that assured salvation to the babe through the vows of the godparents on the child's behalf. After hearing these vows, the priest would

give thanks that the child was now “regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ’s Church” and pray that Almighty God would “incorporate him into thy holy Church.” The law of the land required all citizens to believe in this method of salvation and families to have their babies duly baptized. To refuse either to believe this notion, or to have one’s newborn baptized, was cause for arrest, fines or imprisonment, as early Baptists knew well.

Early Baptists did not believe in baptismal regeneration for many reasons. Infants were still incapable of vowing to follow Christ, and their “sureties,” or godparents, equally incapable of vowing such an eternally binding spiritual commitment for the babe. Baptists also resisted the stress placed upon the outward act to the extent that the act itself was made necessary for salvation. Neither did Baptists agree that both faith and baptism were necessary for salvation to occur. Baptists held that both faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ were required for true discipleship. At the same time, Baptists did not believe that the act of baptism was a symbol stripped of meaning, as did the early Quakers at the time, who discarded both water baptism and the Lord’s Supper as external rites having no “efficacy.” Instead, Baptists offered a carefully considered baptismal theology based upon their study of the New Testament.

Baptists believe the act of believer’s baptism is richly symbolic. The symbol itself portrays its most significant theological meaning, a sign of what has happened in a spiritual sense to the new believer, a vivid picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believer’s baptism by immersion portrays that the individual has spiritually participated in the death and burial of Christ and been raised to new life in Christ (Romans 6:3-4). Moreover, since salvation is a gift of God, not through any human contrivance (Ephesians 2:5, 8-9) and faith itself is a gift, believer’s baptism is the expression by which the believer affirms publicly what God alone has done. The believer identifies with Christ and commits to walk in obedience and unity with other believers in the ways of Christ. This vow is not taken lightly, for believer’s

baptism is a picture both of individuals and the community of faith joined together, corporately and spiritually, in Christ (Galatians 3:26-9).

Step by step, the Holy Spirit transforms the life of the believer from the inside out (speaking, guiding, convicting of sin and righteousness, interceding, gifting, fruit-bearing, empowering, unifying, and linking believers generationally and geographically for kingdom causes). The believer joins with others of the believer's church around the globe to introduce men and women to the kingdom of Christ. Since the church has a spiritual mission and is guided by Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, there is an essential connection between baptism and believers who are members of each local congregation. The true church is comprised of Christ-apprentices who worship, fellowship and walk together in the Spirit to accomplish the purposes of God. Believer's baptism identifies individuals and communities of faith both who are in Christ and in whom he abides.

Why is this reminder important now? In the past 200 years, millions of Christians have come to practice believer's baptism by immersion as part of their understanding of salvation, discipleship and the church. Particularly in mission contexts, believer's baptismal practices have become widely accepted and declared to be the most consistent practice with the ancient churches. Yet younger believers, Baptists among them, are asking fresh questions about whether symbolic church acts or ordinances are important at all. Some suggest removing believer's baptism as a prerequisite for church membership or wish to abandon the practice altogether.

In British Baptist life, several theologians across the past half-century have advocated that Baptists reconsider both the terms and meaning of sacramental acts. Ecumenical explorations of how faith develops have led some scholars to question old beliefs about baptism. Some propose that baptism is either the initiatory rite to inaugurate, or the signal of one's return to, the journey of faith. Still others emphasize the communal aspects of salvation and baptism, preferring to describe persons as being "in God"

rather than emphasizing that Christ, at the moment of faith, has come to indwell the life of a believer. Some of this thinking re-engages the sacramental notions of churchly acts and ordinances as “gateways to salvation.”

Wherever these newer questions and theologies probe the issues of salvation or Christ’s work or church life, implications for the meaning of baptism emerge. Baptism by sprinkling, for example, weakens or abolishes the symbolic death, burial, and resurrection reference. Another implication devolves from the notion that the act of baptism itself is able to convey salvation (without reference to either conscious faith in, or obedience to, Jesus Christ). This practice fills churches with members who believe they are in Christ by virtue of their baptism when they in fact may never have been truly converted. When the baptismal act itself is necessary to regeneration, then no hope of assurance of salvation-grace exists apart from the act. This reduces the grand work of Christ to a mechanical process performed by a human agent and calls into question the nature of saving-faith.

Global Baptists today wrestle to explain the meaning, even necessity, of baptism in our pluralistic cultures. Baptists today must be careful to explore biblically, understand fully, articulate clearly and hold closely the precious truths contained in the rich symbolic ordinance of baptism. The Baptists’ historical and theological understanding of believer’s baptism has encapsulated our deepest and most profound spiritual truths and demonstrated them to the world. At its core, believer’s baptism richly symbolizes both the unchanging gospel message of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the believer’s relationships in Christ—both individually and within his believing church.

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