Baptist Basics

BAPTISTS TOGETHER

3 Believers' Baptism

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Baptists derive their name from the very visible practice of believers' baptism. Baptism involves the total immersion of a person into water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit on their own profession of faith. Unlike some other Christian denominations, Baptists do not baptise infants but only those who are of an age to make a clear declaration of their own free will. By means of baptism, a person declares their desire to turn from a life without God to one which is lived for God through Jesus Christ. Christian faith is not something that anybody can choose for any one other than themselves. A person does not become a Christian because they are born in a certain country with a Christian heritage. Neither do they do so because this is what their parents or others would wish. Each person needs to be 'born again' on their own account (John 3:3) because they have intentionally turned from a godless life to a life in God. They have done this because they have come to believe for themselves that the Christian faith is true, that their lives are falling short of what they should be, and that Jesus Christ is the one through whom they can receive forgiveness from God and a new life in God's Spirit. Believers' baptism makes all of this clear and so is a challenging symbol of Christian discipleship.

A sign of a new beginning

Baptism marks a new start. It is intended to take place near to a person's first commitment to Christ and as part of the process by which they pass from the world of unbelief to the life of faith. People of all ages and mental

ability are welcome to be baptised as soon as they are able to make a clear personal decision. Becoming a Christian is described in various ways, for instance as being 'born again', 'saved', 'coming to faith', 'being converted', 'making a commitment to Christ', 'accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour' or 'becoming a disciple'. There is one Christ but there are many ways of coming to Christ, as people's stories will quickly reveal. Although for many people there will be a crucial moment of decision in which they cross consciously over the line into faith, for everybody there is a journey taking place which includes various elements. It may take a shorter or longer time according to circumstance but should lead to a firm commitment to follow Christ. When people asked the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost how they might respond to his message about Christ, he replied, 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38). This serves as a pattern for baptism and it can be seen that there are three agents at work:

- **what we do.** In the process of becoming Christians we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus Christ. To do this we need to have heard and understood enough about Christ to make some response to him: we do not believe in a vacuum but in response to the message which is communicated to us. We are called to turn from our sin, our self-centredness and wrongdoing, and to believe in Jesus Christ as the one who can save us from ourselves and our sinful condition.

- **what the church does.** The church responds to our faith by baptising us. In this way it accepts the sincerity of our confession of faith. Invariably when people are baptised they are asked to proclaim 'Jesus is Lord!', which is the fundamental Christian statement of faith (1 Corinthians 12:3). By submitting to baptism, which has of necessity to be performed by somebody else, we demonstrate that we need power outside ourselves to save us. We are incapable of doing this for ourselves. To accept our own powerlessness is part of believing that in Jesus Christ we have a Saviour. It also points us to our need for the Christian community to support us in our faith and this shows that baptism and belonging to the Christian community are inseparable.

- **what God does.** God grants the gift of the Holy Spirit to renew our inner life and to work in us the spiritual power to live holy and godly lives. This is how we can say, 'So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is not to suggest that God only comes into this process at the end and all the rest we do in our own strength. Rather, God has been there from the beginning, awakening us to our need and enabling us to respond. The response we make in faith is therefore itself a gift from God, and this is only possible because God is already working in us.

Baptism in the name of Father, Son and Spirit

In Matthew 28:19 Jesus' last words to his disciples are recorded as, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. Baptism should take place, then, in the name of the God. This means both that the person doing the baptising is acting on behalf of God, and also that through baptism we enter into the life of God, Father, Son and Spirit. Using the name of the Trinity is essential for making baptism a truly Christian baptism. It is more important for instance than the amount of water used or the exact way of baptising. The early church also used to baptise people 'in the name of Jesus Christ', but in time this seems to have given way to the use of the Triune name. It is important to note, that to be baptised was also to become a member of the church, the new community of those who shared in and reflected the fellowship in love of Father, Son and Spirit.

The meaning of baptism

Baptism is a dramatic and symbolic act and it is rich in meaning. It speaks of the following spiritual realities:

- **Being born:** In John 3:5-6 Jesus speaks of the need to be 'born of water and the spirit' in order to see the kingdom of God. Being 'born of water' can be seen as a reference to natural birth. Jesus would therefore be saying that just as we are born physically, so we need to be born spiritually: both births are necessary for fullness of life. Being a Christian is about entering into and then living a life which is brought about through the Holy Spirit and makes us alive towards

God. Baptism demonstrates this new birth into a spiritual life through Jesus Christ.

- **Being washed:** Inevitably, the drama of baptism can also be seen as taking a bath. Titus 3:5 refers to the 'washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit'. New birth carries the idea of being washed clean from the polluting effects of the sinful life. Through his sacrifice on the cross, Christ brings about a cleansing of sin and enables us to break free from its guilt and shame. Our consciences are then put at rest and we can be assured of forgiveness.

- **Being buried and raised:** Baptism is also like being buried in a grave and then raised to a new life beyond death. Paul puts it like this: 'Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life' (Romans 6:3-4). Baptism therefore marks the end of one life and the beginning of a new one.

- **Being immersed in the Holy Spirit:** When a person is baptised, they are usually fully immersed in water. There are other ways of baptising, such as the pouring of water over the head symbolising the anointing of the Spirit, but total immersion captures the idea of being plunged into the realm of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit brings spiritual life and also enables us to live for God in God's strength. Being in the realm of the Spirit, we have new resources that enable us to live holy lives, to serve God effectively and to think the thoughts of God (Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

Why be baptised?

Baptism is therefore the way in which Christians declare that they have turned to God and placed their faith in Christ with the intention of living as Christian disciples. Those who want to follow Christ should be baptised for a number of reasons.

First of all, *because Jesus has commanded it*. This is clear in Matthew 28:19 where Jesus told his disciples to go into the world and teach people about himself. Those who believed were to be baptised. If being a Christian means calling Jesus, Lord, one of the first steps is to be baptised as he commanded. This is an act of loving obedience.

Secondly, *because to do so is to follow Jesus' example*. Jesus himself was baptised by John the Baptist at the beginning of his ministry. At that time the Spirit came upon him to enable him to fulfil his mission as the Messiah (Matthew 3:13-17). When we follow Jesus in baptism we enter his own mission to the world with the assurance that the Spirit who rested on him will also rest on us.

Thirdly, *because it is the best way to confess Christ publicly*. For any person who wishes to declare their loyalty to Christ, the best way is through baptism, which from the beginning has been the Christian way of making a stand for Christ. The first Christians were baptised on the day of Pentecost and so should we be today. Jesus stressed the importance of being willing to confess loyalty to him in front others (Matthew 10:32). The willingness to be baptised can be a very powerful witness to others and is often the means by which they are first drawn to Christ themselves.

Fourthly, *because baptism is a means of grace*. Baptism is a powerful symbol. It is given extra depth because it is a means of grace, that is to say, the Holy Spirit uses it to convey spiritual blessing and benefit through it. The realities that baptism symbolises, such as new life, cleansing, death to sin and immersion in the Spirit, are deepened and renewed in the lives of believers through baptism. Baptism is never therefore a mere symbol, it is a spiritually powerful act.

Fifthly, *because baptism is good for the church*. It is not only those who are baptised who benefit from it. The whole church is blessed when baptisms

take place in its midst and the faith is passed on to others. Through baptism the power of Christ to transform lives is proclaimed afresh.

Believers' baptism and infant baptism

What do Baptists think about infant baptism? They are not persuaded that infant baptism is truly based upon the teaching of the New Testament and they believe that it makes baptism into something that it is done to us rather than something we choose to do. In the process, it loses some aspects that are essential for baptism to be baptism, as we regard it. Baptism has meaning when it can be said to be 'an appeal to God for a good conscience' (1 Peter 3:21). Infants are not capable of this, nor of the repentance and faith which are necessary before baptism can be meaningfully performed. It is true that the Confirmation is designed in infant baptism circles, to supply the element of personal response that infant baptism lacks. For this reason, many Baptist churches are happy to accept this pattern of initiation into the Christian faith (infant baptism + confirmation) as the equivalent of believers' baptism, provided there is every sign of personal faith in Christ and discipleship. Churches that welcome such fellow Christians into church membership have what is known as 'open membership' and comprise many of the congregations in the Baptist Union of Great Britain. The desire here is to accept that people travel to Christ through different journeys and that respect should be given to people when they believe in good conscience before God, that they are properly baptised.

The initiating sign

Because of its expected place at the beginning of the Christian life, baptism is sometimes called the 'initiating sign'. It belongs to the process of responses and events that mark the early stages of being a Christian. It is meant to be like an anchor giving stability to the inner choice to be a Christian. It is also meant to lead into a firm commitment to the local church that we call church 'membership'. Baptism is a joyful step to take that can provide a good foundation for the whole of life (Hebrews 6:1-2).

Baptist Basics

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