

THE NEXT STEP

Congratulations! You have come to new life in Christ. The very next step you have to take is to be baptised. In the New Testament baptism is part of the conversion process: repentance, faith, the gift of the Spirit, baptism and church membership all belong together. So there is no good reason for delaying your baptism after you have trusted Jesus for your salvation. From a New Testament viewpoint true commitment to Jesus will show itself in baptism.

As Baptists we are convinced that the Bible has to be our ultimate authority both for what we believe and for how we live. So let's look at what the New Testament says about baptism.

WHY BE BAPTISED?

Jesus commands us

The first reason for baptism is to be found in the Great Commission. Jesus, as he was about to ascend to his Father, said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matt 28:18-20). It is the Lord Jesus who commands his followers to be baptised. What right have you or I to disobey?

So baptism is not dependent upon feelings but rather is, in the first place, an act of obedience. Are you truly a disciple of Jesus? If so, you will want to keep his commandments. Jesus said, "You are my friends if you do what I command" (John 15:14).

Jesus sets an example

The command of Jesus is reinforced by his own example in being baptised himself (Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22). True, John the Baptist did not want to baptise him. But Jesus said "let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." (Matt 3:15). The same will be true of your baptism. In being baptised you will be doing what "God requires".

There is, of course, a difference between your baptism and the baptism of Jesus. Jesus did not submit to baptism with a view to washing his sins away. Rather in baptism he took his first step to the cross by identifying himself with us in our sinfulness. In contrast, when you are baptised you will be identifying yourself with Jesus in his sinlessness. However, like Jesus you will be submitting yourself to the will of God as you "do what God requires" and, just as Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his ministry, so too your baptism will mark the beginning of your service for God.

The early church practised it

The first Christians took seriously this command of Jesus to baptise. We see this in the Day of Pentecost. Luke tells us that, "When the people heard Peter's sermon they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 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!" (Acts 2:37-38)

Part of the process of becoming a Christian is being baptised. Look carefully through Acts and you will find a whole host of references to baptism. The Ethiopian official was led to Christ and baptised by Philip (Acts 8:26-40); Paul was baptised by Ananias after meeting Jesus on the Damascus road (Acts 9: 1-19); Lydia, the business woman (Acts 16:11-15) and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25-34) were baptised by Paul. It is quite clear that baptism was an integral part of church life. Indeed, in those days it looks as if there was no such thing as an un-baptised Christian.

WHAT DOES BAPTISM SIGNIFY?

A declaration or union with Christ

Baptism is a dramatic way of declaring your solidarity with Jesus! The only prop needed is a large quantity of water – a baptistery will do, although in New Testament times (and still in warm climates overseas) rivers, lakes and ponds were used. The spectators (in church terms, the congregation) are asked to imagine that this water is a watery grave. So, when you go under water, you will identify yourself with Jesus who died and was buried, as for one split second you will disappear, like Jesus, off the face of the earth. (In most Baptist churches as you are baptised you will be taken backwards into the horizontal position of a coffin!) Then, like Christ, you will symbolically rise from death. In baptism then you will in effect be saying, “Yes, Lord, you died for me”. “Yes, Lord, you rose for me.”

Paul puts it this way: “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” (Rom 6:3-4; also Col 2:12).

An act of revolution

To be united with Christ in baptism is more than a dramatic statement of belief. From Paul’s description of the newly baptised as rising to “live a new life” (Rom 6:4), it is clear that there are ethical implications too. As you go under the water, you will be declaring your resolve to die to your old way of living and, as you rise from the water, you will be declaring your resolve to follow Christ’s pattern of living. Baptism marks the moment of your public surrender to Christ, when you turn from sin and renounce evil, and when you publicly make Jesus Lord of your life and of your lifestyle. The implications for your attitude to work and to money, to sex and to relationships, are enormous. It is no exaggeration to describe baptism as a revolutionary act.

A sign of cleansing

Another consequence of giving yourself to Jesus and committing yourself to him “for keeps” is that you are forgiven. The baptistery does not just symbolise a great watery grave; it is also a ‘bath’, in which you wash away your sin. “Get up and be baptised’, said Ananias to Paul, “and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). Paul himself later describes baptism as “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” (Tit 3:5. Also Eph 5:25, 26; Heb 10:22). Of course, it is not the actual water that washes away sins, but rather our faith in Christ expressed in baptism. As Peter put it, it is “baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God.” (1 Pet 3:21). Only the “blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). Baptism is the sign of this inner cleansing.

A sign of the Spirit’s presence

Another thing that happens when you give yourself to Jesus is that God through his Spirit comes to live in you and so becomes the source of your new life, a life marked by a new power, a new peace and a new joy (Acts 1:8; Rom 14:17). Baptism is the sign of this presence. It is because of this that Paul can speak of baptism as baptism in the Holy Spirit: “for we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor 12:13).

One area where Baptists differ with each other is whether baptism is more than a mere sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence. Texts like Acts 2:38 and Titus 3:5 suggest that he is indeed active in and through the rite of baptism. Baptism from this perspective is a believer’s personal Pentecost. On the other hand, the story of the Roman soldier Cornelius (Acts 10) is a salutary reminder that God’s Spirit is not bound by any ceremony. Suffice it to say; down through the centuries Baptists have found that God has indeed blessed the act of obedience by a fresh infilling with his Spirit. So as you are being baptised look to God and expect him to bless you anew with his Spirit – you will not be disappointed.

A confession of faith

When Paul wrote to the church at Rome “if you confess with your mouth “Jesus is Lord”, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9), he may well have had the act of baptism in mind. For baptism is the great moment of nailing your colours to the mast and declaring that you belong to Christ and to his people. Don't be ashamed of making “your good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim 6:12). Make sure you invite all your friends, neighbours and relatives. Experience has shown time and again that the very act of baptism forms a tremendous sounding board for the gospel.

A rite of initiation

Baptism is the normal way of entry into the church. Look at 1 Corinthians 12:13: “We were all baptised by one Spirit into one body.” When we are baptised we identify ourselves not only with Jesus who died and rose that we might have life, but also with the people of God. Similar thinking underlies Galatians 3:26, 27, where Paul's mention of faith leads him on to baptism which, in turn, leads him on to speak of the church in which we are “all one in Christ Jesus”. Baptism is God's way for you to join the church. This is one reason why in most, Baptist churches baptism and church membership are closely linked. Through baptism we become a member of Christ's church. We give concrete expression to this fact by becoming a member of our local Baptist church. Baptism is not for spiritual gypsies.

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK COMING FROM ANOTHER CHURCH TRADITION

What if I were ‘baptised’ as a child?

Many people who turn to Christ have already been ‘baptised’ as a small child. Perhaps you are one of them. Should you now be baptised as a believer? Baptists believe in liberty of conscience but even so equally believe that a baptism without faith is not the baptism of the Bible. Look again at Acts 8:37. The one thing which would have prevented the Ethiopian official from baptism was his lack of faith.

What if I have been confirmed?

If at your confirmation service you meaningfully confirmed the promise made on your behalf by your godparents, we rejoice. But the same argument still applies. The New Testament knows only one baptism – the ‘one baptism’ in which by ‘faith’ Jesus is confessed as ‘Lord’ (Ephesians 4:5). Some Baptist churches will be willing to welcome you on your profession of faith. In so doing, however, they are not implying that your infant baptism is New Testament baptism.

Is infant baptism found in the book of Acts?

Baptists maintain that infant baptism is not found in the New Testament – not even when Luke tells us that somebody and their family were baptised (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor 1:16). For us today a family normally means father, mother and two children: but in the first century it was considerably extended and included not just the immediate family, but relatives and servants.

Careful reading of Acts 16:30-34 shows that if “all the family included young children, then the young children not only listened to Paul and Silas preaching at midnight but also believed in God! It is a dangerous practice to read a doctrine into the silences of scripture – especially when elsewhere scripture is quite clear. Personal faith is the one indispensable aspect of baptism. If you lived in the Gobi desert, your pastor might be compelled to lose the symbolism of baptism by immersion and instead pour water on you in the name of the triune God. But while we can manage on less water, we can't do without genuine faith.

SOME PRACTICAL QUESTIONS

How old do I have to be to be baptised?

If personal faith is the necessary condition the age is not important. Baptists do not practise 'adult' baptism; they practise 'believers' baptism. For that reason Baptists have avoided trying to set a minimum age. The time to be baptised is the time when you "turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." (Acts 20:21). Most Baptist churches work on that principle. If your church has an age limit for baptism and you are under that age, yet believe you should be baptised, speak to your pastor who will be able to help you.

Do I have to give a testimony?

In many Baptist churches it is customary for baptismal candidates to give personal testimonies to God's work in their own lives. For, although baptism itself is a confession of faith, it is often helpful for non-Christians if those being baptised elaborate on this confession and tell of what Christ means to them. Sometimes baptismal candidates find it easier to witness to their faith if they are interviewed in the service by the pastor. No church would want to make the public giving of such a testimony a necessary condition for baptism – in New Testament terms the actual baptism is the act of witness. On the other hand, there is much to be said for candidates making the most of this special opportunity.

What about the laying on of hands?

Many churches are bringing back an old Baptist practice of accompanying baptism with the laying on of hands, either in the baptistery itself immediately after baptism, or a little later when the candidates have had time to change into dry clothes. As hands are laid on those who have been baptised the Spirit is asked to come and fill them afresh and empower them for witness and service. This custom has its roots in the New Testament, where we find the apostles laid hands on their new converts with a view to their receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15, 17; 9:17; 19:6).

What is there to keep me from being baptised?

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