

What is Biblical Baptism? By Pastor Chadd Hafer

Please read the following. Look up, reflect upon and/or discuss the verses. Pray that God will help us maintain a Biblical practice of baptism.

We are called 'Springwood Baptist Church'. But most of us would agree that the word 'Baptist' refers primarily to our denominational background. It does not suggest that baptism is the main aspect of our faith for which we want to be known. If we were looking for adjectives and verbs to proclaim what is most important to us we'd probably prefer words like 'Faith', 'Hope', 'Love', 'Grace', 'Truth' and 'Good News'. But, in an era of church history that is becoming increasingly mixed and even non-denominational, how important is our Baptist background and identity? The aim of this study is to separate the Biblical essence of baptism from the various church traditions that have inevitably become intertwined with this practice.

Probably the best place to commence a study of Biblical baptism is with John the Baptist's baptism of Jesus. John explained that his baptism was merely to prepare the way for Christ (E.g. Matthew 3:11)¹ After John's death, a clear distinction began to emerge between John's baptism and that of Christ's followers (see Acts 19:1 – 5). Following Christ's death and resurrection he commanded his disciples (some of whom had once followed John) "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matthew 28:19) This command is clearly what is behind our church's practice of baptism, and that of other evangelical churches throughout history and around the world.

However, it's important to point out that Christian baptism didn't just appear out of nowhere. Like the rest of the Christian faith, it was born out of the Jewish Scriptures. Unfortunately the Old Testament contains far more background on this subject than we can address in this study. But at least we need to be aware that, the Law of Moses in particular, contains references to various cleansing ceremonies that help to form the background to Christian baptism. Hundreds of years after Moses, King David's prayer for forgiveness after his sin with Bathsheba makes it clear that, like Christian baptism, these Jewish ceremonies were carried out in the hope that those who underwent them would receive spiritual cleansing and forgiveness. David prayed, "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." (Psalm 51:2, 7) [For a New Testament connection with the Old Testament practice of sprinkling with hyssop, see Hebrews 9:18 – 22, 10:19 – 22].

There are at least two good reasons for being aware of this Old Testament background. First of all, these ancient Jewish cleansing rituals had a variety of meanings and applications. Therefore, it shouldn't surprise us that Christian baptism, born out of these rituals, is not simply a one dimensional symbol of forgiveness. Some of the other themes connected with Christian baptism include: Repentance, renewal and receiving the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11, 16; Titus 3:5); Identifying with Christ's suffering, death and resurrection (Mark 10:35 – 39 and Romans 6:3 - 4); and unity with Christ and his Church (1 Corinthians 12:12 -13 and Galatians 3:26 - 29).

¹ (Matthew 3:13 – 17) Jesus' baptism didn't indicate his need for repentance. Rather it demonstrated his willingness to submit to God's will. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism.

Secondly, although New Testament baptism seems to have usually to been done by immersion, the Old Testament can help us understand the origins of other popular forms of Christian baptism such as sprinkling and pouring. However, the New Testament gives us very little prescriptive instructions about how baptism ceremonies should be conducted. But, it didn't take long for churches to start developing all sorts of rules and regulations in this regard. For example, a well-known first century Christian document called 'The Didache' [i.e. 'The Teaching'] states, "baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living [free flowing] water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit... you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before." But at least these instructions weren't overly legalistic and were open to various options.

However, along with these extra-biblical (traditional) practices, various superstitions have also arisen regarding baptism. One such example is the belief that, since all children are born into sin, baptism should be administered as soon as possible to infants to save them from hell in case they die before they are able to seek God's forgiveness. At the other end of the spectrum, some Christians have held that baptism should ideally be done on believers' deathbeds, to make sure that all their sins are washed away. But in the same way that the New Testament doesn't specify an ideal baptism ceremony, it also doesn't specify an ideal age when a person should be baptised. However, we do know that God intended for whole families of believers to be baptised, including children. The Apostle Peter states in his Pentecost sermon, "Repent and be baptized, 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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:38 – 39; See also Matthew 19:13 - 14). So on one hand our tradition of believer's baptism might seem more Biblical than infant baptism. However, the Scriptures don't specifically address the situation of what should happen with second generation believing children who grow up into the faith. Therefore, often Baptist believer's postpone their baptisms for a number of years, rather than following the New Testament practice where Belief and Baptism are simultaneous and immediate (E.g. Acts 2:41; 8:34 – 38; 10:47 – 48).

Conclusion: Ephesians 2:8 – 9 states, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." Clearly baptism is not a matter of religious merit, but a wonderful symbol of God's grace and love expressed through Jesus Christ. The reality of spiritual cleansing is done not by water but by the Holy Spirit. In light of this, baptism should be encouraged and remain prominent in our church as a testimony to God's grace. Springwood Baptist Church will continue to practice believers' baptism by immersion in accordance with our Biblical and Baptist background. However, in light of human sin and the gracious nature of our calling we must be ready to recognise that there is no perfect Christian system of baptism. Therefore it only seems right that we graciously and fully accept into our church professing believers who come to us from other Christian traditions.