

Baptism at Moyock Baptist

An Explanation and Discussion

Baptist Traditions

Most Baptist churches require that candidates for membership, transferring from Christian denominations that do not practice baptism by immersion, be re-baptized as a condition of joining the church.

Our church, like a growing number of Baptist congregations (though still the minority), believes that baptism is about becoming a Christian, and not about changing from one kind of Christian to another. For this reason, we do not require re-baptism by immersion for those who wish to join by transferring from other denominations.

Biblical Background

As incredible as it seems, the Bible gives no direct instruction on the subject of baptism. Nowhere does a New Testament author address the issue: “This is what baptism is, and what it means, and how to do it.”

On the contrary, the form and meaning of baptism were assumed by New Testament believers and authors, and no direct instruction on the subject was required or offered.

What we have, instead, are stories about baptism, which vary widely in their detail, and allusions to baptism, in the course of discussions about other issues.

The gospels describe the baptism of Jesus at the hand of his cousin, John. The Book of Acts narrates a whole series of baptisms. In the New Testament letters, baptism is referenced or alluded to in a variety of passages (mostly by Paul), generally as part of other discussions or arguments.

Handling this biblical material requires careful discernment. With regard to the stories, we need to remember that not every story in the Bible is to be emulated. Moreover, just because something is narrated in a story doesn't mean it was the universal practice in biblical times, nor that the practice is required in every detail.

With regard to the letters, we often do not know the full context to which a letter was addressed. In any case, deducing what a letter writer understood about baptism from his use of baptism as an illustration in an argument about something else is a process that requires careful study.

Nevertheless, from the biblical evidence, we can, with reasonable certainty, make three statements regarding the biblical understanding of baptism.

- 1. Baptism depicts the burial and resurrection of Christ, celebrates the new birth of the believer, and is related to the reception of the Holy Spirit and to membership in the body of Christ.**
- 2. The form of baptism most likely to have been practiced was immersion in water.**
- 3. Baptism was administered upon one's profession of faith, and marked the beginning of the Christian life.**

Our Current Dilemma

The question before us is this: What are we to do with individuals who present themselves for church membership, who were baptized in a mode that we do not recognize, and yet, possess an indisputable and long-standing faith in Christ?

The traditional policy is to require such individuals to be re-baptized. Some have done so, and have found that experience to be very meaningful spiritually. Others have done so as a matter of simple acquiescence to our rules.

Still others have refused to be re-baptized, on the premise that, if baptism does mark the beginning of the Christian life, submitting to baptism would be an admission that, previously, they had not really been Christians.

A Historical Note

If you had asked a Baptist of the 18th or 19th century to respond, his answer would have been, “Yes, you're right. All this time you've been a Methodist (or Presbyterian or Episcopalian or whatever), you've not been a genuine Christian. You need to be baptized because, only now are you entering a genuine relationship with Jesus.”

That's what our forefathers believed. Do we?

Denominational Identity

One response has been to tie baptism to our denominational identity. “We're not saying that you've never been a Christian. But if you want to be a Baptist, then you have to be baptized by immersion.”

Such a response violates both Scripture and Baptist history.

It violates Scripture because it assigns a meaning to baptism that is alien to the Bible. The Bible knows nothing of denominations. One is either a Christian, or one is not. There is “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5) which marks the difference. The Bible simply does not teach that different kinds of congregations can use baptism as a means of differentiating themselves from other sorts of genuine Christians.

It violates Baptist history because the first Baptists never set out to form a denomination, a concept they had no experience with. All they were trying to do was live out the teachings of the New Testament, in an era when the Bible was first being published in English and the established Church of England was seen as corrupt and unbiblical. They weren't really trying to be Baptists; they only wanted to be New Testament Christians.

Timing Matters

Suppose a couple was married by a justice of the peace. Fourteen years later, they decide to have a church wedding. No matter how they dress, what music they choose, or how correctly the preacher conducts the service, the ceremony simply can't mean what weddings are supposed to mean. A wedding celebrates the beginning of a marriage, and you can't “start” what you've already been doing for fourteen years.

Likewise, with baptism, timing matters. Baptism cannot mean what it's supposed to

mean if it is not conducted in the context of conversion, marking the beginning of the Christian life.

Another Observation About Weddings

Weddings raise another interesting point. If you say that someone's wedding isn't valid, you're saying they aren't really married. You can't recognize someone as really married unless you're willing to honor their wedding.

Likewise with baptism. To say that someone's baptism is invalid is to assert that they aren't really Christian. And, conversely, if we say that someone is a genuine Christian, we have to recognize their baptism as genuine also.

That's not to say that we'd do baptism the same way, any more than we'd all do weddings the same. It's just that, if the underlying reality (the marriage, one's faith) is real, then the ritual which celebrates its beginning (the wedding, baptism) is real as well.

Form and Meaning

We are left, then, with a conflict between the form of baptism and the meaning of baptism.

The biblical form of baptism is immersion, which powerfully symbolizes death and resurrection.

The meaning of baptism is conversion. Baptism is not just a ritual through which we declare our faith. It is the ritual through which we declare our *coming to faith*.

The traditional response has been to insist on the form of baptism, at the expense of its meaning. Candidates from other denominations must be baptized by immersion (form), but we don't want to say that they haven't really been Christians to this point (meaning).

Our church policy reverses this. We insist, first, that the biblical meaning of baptism be observed: conversion. If conversion is not in view, then baptism is not called for. If conversion was celebrated, then the baptism which recognized it is valid, regardless of its form.

The Lord's Supper

Interestingly, we already do this with regard to the other church ordinance, the Lord's Supper.

We conduct communion very differently from the New Testament believers. We use leavened bread: they did not. We use grape juice; they used real wine. We use individual cups; they used a common cup.

And yet, we assert that the meaning of communion, the memory of the Lord's body and blood, is still valid, in spite of the variation in form.

Open Communion, Open Membership

Our practice of open communion welcomes all believers to the Lord's Table. In so doing, we acknowledge their faith as real and genuine, and that we share a fellowship in Christ with them.

Our congregation has a baptismal policy that matches our communion policy. It calls for us to accept the baptism of our brothers and sisters as readily as we accept their faith.

Our Practice of Baptism

We believe that baptism by immersion is best; that is is the most authentic expression of the New Testament rite. Immersion clearly depicts the death and resurrection of Christ which is the central story of the gospel.

And, we believe that baptism is only appropriate to celebrate the candidate's conversion experience.

We offer baptism to anyone who desires to indicate the beginning of a genuine relationship with Christ. This is true even of those who have been previously baptized, whether by immersion or otherwise.

We do not baptize infants, who are incapable of making a life commitment to Christ for themselves.

Nor do we offer individuals a choice as to the kind of baptism they desire. The only exception to this principle is when medical issues prevent an individual from being safely baptized by immersion.

And, because baptism is a public witness of faith, all baptismal services are conducted as part of the public worship services of the church. Baptisms are not conducted as private, family services.

A Final Note

We cannot change the personal histories of those who would seek to unite with our fellowship, just because those histories are different from our own. We cannot go back in time and have them relive their coming to faith in Christ, so that we can observe the ritual of baptism as we would have done.

Our policy is not the traditional Baptist position, and it is not the majority view in Baptist churches. It is, however, biblical to its very core.

Every baptism we conduct will conform to Scripture, both in form and meaning. It will be conducted by immersion, and it will celebrate the beginning of the candidate's Christian life.