

BAPTISM: WE'VE GOT IT RIGHT...AND WRONG



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W

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Preface

The postmodern age and the post-denominational age have far-reaching implications for today's churches. New books appear each month to help concerned and confused clergy and laypeople grapple with the issues generated by these cultural and theological forces.

Baptist churches must deal with the impact of these forces on their understanding and practice of baptism. Specifically, Baptist churches must address (1) the increasing failure of some lifelong Baptists to understand the significance of baptism, a situation I propose is fueled partly by the inadequate attention given to the preparation of candidates for baptism and to the baptism service itself; and (2) the increasing influx into Baptist churches of people from other denominational backgrounds and the issue this raises regarding their infant baptism and believer's baptism as practiced generally by Baptists.

A large quantity of literature has been written on baptism. Much of it seeks to find common ground among Christian denominations. Some of it provides a theological or historical review of baptism. Most of this literature is written by professors of theology to other professors of theology. It is the traditional written exchange between members of the academy in the form of books, theological journals, lectures, and dissertations.

None of this material reaches and impacts directly the local church. Little of it is accessible to most laypeople; the authors simply are writing to a different audience. I have not found a book that addresses baptism in a systematic way that helps Baptist laypeople explore the above issues in their local church setting *where the issues manifest themselves and where, in Baptist polity,¹ they must be addressed.*

I have written this book to provide a resource primarily to Baptist laypeople. An individual layperson can read this book and find it profitable. An adult Sunday school class or a special class for those interested in the topic can use this book as a study guide. A church's deacon body or other leadership group that needs to explore these matters will find this book a helpful guide for their deliberations. While this book is written to Baptists

and about Baptists, it will be helpful to people of other Christian traditions who “wonder about us.”

I avoid theological or Baptist “buzz words” to the extent possible, and when I use them, I define them in the text or in a note. Laypeople of all levels of Bible knowledge and Christian experience and of all denominational backgrounds will be able to read this book and discuss it in a group setting. In fact, a group will find their study most meaningful if some of the group members have backgrounds in other denominations. Some of them will have been rebaptized in order to become members of a Baptist church. Some may be active participants in the church but have not become church members because of the church’s baptism policy. Hearing the stories of these people will prove helpful. It will move the discussion from the abstract to the tangible—flesh-and-blood people who know and care for one another.

I have written in a first-person, conversational tone as if I were speaking to you and you were speaking to me. Of course, I couldn’t hear you as I did my research and pounded away on the keyboard. But I have envisioned your face before me and considered how you would feel and what you would say. I hope I have adequately considered your thoughts and feelings as I share mine with you.

I use inclusive language throughout this book but have not altered the language of biblical translations or of the people I quote to make their language conform to current definitions of inclusive language. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

This book explores five questions:

1. Why should Baptists rethink baptism? (chapter 1)
2. What does the Bible say about baptism? (chapters 2–4)
3. What does church history say about baptism? (chapters 5 and 6)
4. How can we bring renewed vitality to baptism? (chapters 7–10)
5. Should we rebaptize Christians from other denominations? (chapters 11–13)

You may be tempted to turn immediately to chapters 7–13, which address two baptism issues confronting today’s Baptist churches, perhaps under the assumption that you already know what the Bible says about baptism and that church history will be dry reading and have little relevance to the topic. I ask you—I beg you—to read the chapters in order, even if you

grew up in a denomination called Baptist. Most of us have never read as a unit the New Testament passages that deal with baptism. Many of us are unfamiliar with how baptism has evolved in church history. We're busy people, and we tend to discuss and make decisions about difficult issues without first taking time to gather and understand all the relevant facts. We can neither properly address contemporary issues related to baptism in chapters 7–13 nor understand the views of those coming to our churches from other denominations until we understand far better what baptism is and how and why its different practices have developed in the last two millennia. I am convinced your study of chapters 1–6 will prove enlightening.

I will make statements such as “Baptists believe” and “Baptists do such and such in this or that manner.” Baptists are a diverse people, and no statement from one person represents the views of all Baptists. Yet I must state what Baptists generally believe and practice in order to have meaningful dialogue with you. I think my statements of this nature will be generally true for most Baptist individuals and Baptist churches—but not all. I hope you will read them with that understanding, keeping in mind that what is not true today for your particular Baptist context may be true in the future. No single Baptist can speak authoritatively for other Baptists. But we can speak in love to one another with the goal of building up the Body of Christ. That is my goal in this book.

What can you expect to gain from your reading? I believe you will

- know in a much more holistic way what the New Testament and church history say about baptism and how and why the different branches of the church, including the Baptist branch, have arrived at different understandings and practices;
- be enabled to assess your local church environment and determine if the two contemporary issues addressed in chapters 7–10 are on your church's doorstep or already in the sanctuary; and if so,
- be enabled to determine how best to address the issues and make decisions about them with your fellow church members in a manner that brings honor to Jesus Christ and his gospel.

One final word to you before we begin, borrowing Paul's words in his letter to the Christians at Philippi:

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel

from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among [us] will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (Phil 1:3-6)

John R. Tyler
Lent 2003

NOTE

¹ The term *Baptist polity* refers to how Baptist churches govern themselves. One of the historic Baptist principles, or distinctives, is *church freedom*. Baptists exercise a congregational form of democratic governance. Each church governs itself, and every member has an equal vote. There is no external, hierarchical authority that can impose its will upon a church (although a church can acquiesce to an external person or entity that desires to impose its will upon the church and thereby relinquish part of its Baptist identity). Walter B. Shurden defines *church freedom* as “the historic Baptist affirmation that local churches are free, under the Lordship of Christ, to determine their membership and leadership, to order their worship and work, to ordain whom they perceive as gifted for ministry, male and female, and to participate in the larger Body of Christ, of whose unity and mission Baptists are proudly a part” (*The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* [Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993], 33).

WHY SHOULD
BAPTISTS **rethink**
baptism?

Things Aren't What They Used to Be

1

The times, they are a'changin'.

—Bob Dylan

“When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. . . . You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

—Jesus (Luke 12:54-56)

We Baptists need to rethink our understanding and practice of baptism. You might think it unnecessary or even blasphemous to rethink the rite from which our denominational name is derived. But we live in a post-denominational age and a postmodern age that profoundly impact today's church and society. These two theological and cultural forces require today's Baptists to rethink their understanding and practice of baptism.

We Live in a Post-Denominational Age

Many people born and raised in a particular denomination no longer stay within it throughout their lives. Some raised as Methodists will become Baptists. Some raised as Baptists will become Presbyterians, then Methodists, and then perhaps Baptists again.

There no longer is an unquestioned, lifelong allegiance to the Christian denomination of one's childhood, a tacit assurance that one who grew up a Baptist will always be a Baptist. You need only look at the history of your own Baptist congregation to realize that many members who grew up in it now worship in Methodist or Presbyterian or nondenominational churches.

The primary reason for denominational switches in the past was marriage to a person raised in a different denomination. Wanting their household to be part of the same church family, a Baptist husband and Presbyterian wife reached an agreement on whether they would be members of a Baptist or a Presbyterian church. Sometimes they decided it would be better to become members of a church in a denomination new to both of them. Other reasons surfaced in the last decades of the twentieth century.

We Live in a Postmodern Age¹

We are a mobile people. Mobility fosters a pioneering spirit and encourages the exploration of new options. Some Baptists decide to explore non-Baptist churches when they move to a new area. Sometimes they are forced to because there are no Baptist churches nearby, or those nearby are different from their Baptist experience. People sometimes find at their new location that they are more at home in a church of another denomination than they are in a Baptist church.

Mostly, it is the emergence of the consumer mind-set that has fostered the desire to explore new church options. People now tend to shop for a church, seeking the one that will best meet their needs as they define them. Once their needs change, or once they think their church no longer meets their needs, they go shopping for another church. Obligations as a member of a faith family to one's spiritual brothers and sisters often are not a major consideration.

Of course, not only are people leaving Baptist churches in this manner, but people with non-Baptist backgrounds are entering Baptist churches for the same reasons. This inward flow is germane to our topic. These people often come with no more knowledge and understanding of the Baptist tradition than lifelong Baptists have of, say, the Episcopal tradition.

A Diversity of Understanding

Some of us can remember the days when a Baptist church's membership was comprised almost exclusively of those whose entire Christian lives had been lived within the Baptist tradition. (This denominational homogeneity was also true of other denominations.) Thus, most Baptist church members had at least a limited knowledge and understanding of the Baptist tradition, and

many had a deep grasp of it. They were committed to it too—for good reasons, bad reasons, or no reasons they could verbalize.

It is not unusual now for a significant percentage of additions to a Baptist church to come from non-Baptist backgrounds, at least in metropolitan areas that experience rapid growth or professional turnover. Thus, there is a far greater diversity of Christian experience and understanding in a Baptist congregation than there was several decades ago. We no longer can take for granted that most of the people sitting in the pews know and understand the Baptist way of being church. Many within today's Baptist congregations do not know and appreciate Baptist principles unless we make an explicit effort to teach them and to live them.

Most of these people come with beliefs or suppositions about baptism—its what, why, who, and how—formed in their prior Christian experience. These beliefs and experiences often differ from Baptist ones.

Some Baptist churches have come to grips with these shifts in our culture. They have begun to grapple with important questions. How can we teach the Baptist understanding of baptism to the increasingly diverse group of Christians who now worship in our church? How should we deal with Christians who seek to become active and faithful members of our church, yet look at us with bewilderment and spiritual concern when told that they must be rebaptized? Whether we believe we are asking them to be baptized for the first time with a biblical baptism or to be rebaptized is a matter we shall pursue later. The point now is that most of these people have no doubt what we are asking of them: to be rebaptized, to be baptized again, to be baptized a second time.

Many who seek fellowship in a Baptist church are confused when the pastor tells them that they must be rebaptized to become a member. More importantly, the statement hurts them, for they believe we are casting disparagement upon their baptism in which they have placed great spiritual meaning for many years. They believe we consider their baptism invalid.

Religious Rules vs. People

In such conversations, our belief about baptism is placed beside Christian people who seek to live out their Christian faith in a Baptist church. We feel a tension, the same tension found in the four Gospels where we often see a strongly-held, clearly defined belief bumping up against a person. It seemed that one had to be embraced to the exclusion of the other. It was either/or,

not both/and. Some people in the Gospel stories thought people should yield the right-of-way to religious rules. Others thought rules should yield the right-of-way to people.

A key difference between Jesus and the religious authorities of his day was how he placed people first and religious rules, which he always considered important, second. Every time a religious rule impeded what was best for a person, Jesus set aside the rule so that the needed good could be done for the needy person. Healing on the Sabbath is one example.

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this. (Lk 14:1-6)

When challenged in another situation involving Sabbath laws, Jesus said, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mk 2:27).

Matthew's Gospel reports a lengthy tirade by Jesus against the Pharisees' placement of heavy religious burdens on others (Mt 23:1-39). One part of this passage reads,

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin,² and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!" (Mt 23:23-24)

Is Baptism All That Important?

There is another issue that requires us to rethink baptism. It has to do with those raised in Baptist churches—in our own house. A Baptist pastor shared with me a conversation he'd had with his twelve-year-old son, Bill (not his real name), regarding a profession of faith, baptism, and church membership.

Bill—a preacher's kid or PK—attended two worship services each Sunday, a Sunday school class, and a Wednesday night missions education class. These experiences were supplemented with choir, handbells, and

missions trips—the whole nine yards of Baptist church life. Bill knew the Baptist understanding of a profession of faith, baptism, and church membership. He was fairly knowledgeable of what the Bible said about baptism.

Bill told his dad that he was ready to make a profession of faith but that he didn't want to be baptized. His father explained again the biblical view of baptism, with particular attention to the why of it. But Bill responded, "What's the difference whether I'm baptized or not?"

Bill realized that he couldn't be a member of the church without baptism, but he didn't see membership as very important. After all, once he became a member, what could he do that he wasn't doing already? His father mentioned several things, like voting in a business meeting or serving as an adult on a church committee, or as a Sunday school teacher, or as a deacon. Being eligible to serve in these capacities now or in the future was no incentive to Bill for baptism. Bill said that baptism looked like a clumsy, get-all-wet-in-front-of-everyone experience with no commensurate benefit, and that he had decided there was no compelling reason to go through with it.

This reluctance and sometimes refusal to be baptized because the candidate sees little or no significance to the rite seems to be a growing phenomenon in some parts of contemporary Baptist life, especially among teenagers.

Who or What Has Final Authority?

Things were different when I grew up. I have a vivid memory of my childhood profession of faith and baptism. It never occurred to me when I made my profession of faith to say that I didn't want to be baptized because it had no value or wasn't worth the effort. You might think I grew up in a time when most children didn't question authority. I confess that I recognized my church as having authority. Although I would never have worded it this way then, I understood in a child's way that my church was a "clay jar" in which the gospel of Christ was transmitted (see 2 Cor 4:5-7). My church and all other churches were Christ-designated stewards of the good news.

I wanted to be a Christian, and I wanted to be a part of Christ's church, which meant to me Central Baptist Church that met at 1600 Maple Street. I wanted to be baptized because it was a way I could show what had happened to me through the power of God when I made a profession of faith. As a child, I was certainly not turning from and being forgiven for a well-worn life of sin. After all, I had been raised all my short life in the church by Christian

parents. My major sins were spells of incessant squirming and talking in the pew. But I knew, to the extent that I was able to know, that I wanted a born-again life (John 3:3), a life that would be lived the way God intended it to be lived—dedicated to Jesus as Lord and Savior, a member of his church, and bound for life everlasting. It wasn't so much what I was turning away from as what I was embracing for my future.

I knew the Great Commission by heart (as expressed in the King James Version at that time, of course):

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.” (Matt 28:19-20)

As I listened to the Baptist pastor tell of his conversation with his son, I thought, *What is different for Bill than it was for me?* I wondered on what authority Bill based his decision. Here's where the shift to postmodernism comes into play.

I recognized the authority of the Bible and the authority the church that is the steward of the gospel. The New Testament clearly stated that converts were to be baptized. In fact, every convert mentioned in the New Testament was reported to have been baptized; I was aware of no exceptions. Baptism had been a rite of entry into the church from the beginning. This was authoritative for me. Of course, I didn't completely understand it all, but my final authority was not my own understanding; my authority was the position of the New Testament and the church . . . and what I knew to be the expectations of my parents.

Understand that I have never thought we should swallow everything the church says hook, line, and sinker simply because the church says it. It is dangerous to assume blindly that what is conventional is God-given. However, it is also dangerous to assume blindly that what is God-given is not manifest in the conventional.

I suggest that we ponder Thomas Jefferson's words in the *Declaration of Independence* before deciding that any long-held position of the church is invalid: “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.” To paraphrase and reapply: Prudence will dictate that Christians should not hastily abandon positions and traditions developed over time by the church comprised of God's people to whom the Holy Spirit has spoken through the ages. If one is to abandon or

alter a position of the church, then one should do so only after the most serious study, prayer, and discussion in as broad a community of believers as possible, with the Bible as written guide and the Holy Spirit as living guide.

This counsel applies directly to the topic of this book! We Baptists should alter our baptismal beliefs or practices only after the most careful and humble consideration. Likewise, we should expect those coming to us from other Christian denominations to alter their beliefs on baptism only on the same basis.

I'm sure Bill believed the Bible and the church had spiritual authority, but he apparently did not see them as having final authority. Instead, he trumped their authority with his own self-derived authority. Bill's view that baptism was a clumsy, get-all-wet-in-front-of-everyone experience with no commensurate benefit was the determining authority for him. Based on this, Bill simply decided that there was no reason to go through the trauma (as he perceived it).

Nothing could be more postmodern. One is reminded of the statement in the Old Testament book of Judges: "In those days there was no king [final authority] in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 17:6).

How does one find middle ground between two inappropriate extremes: a blind obedience to earthly religious authority and a blind dismissal of it? Perhaps the previous tilt to the former has produced the current tilt to the latter.

Our First Task: Exploring What the Bible and Church History Say about Baptism

I am a lifelong Baptist, and I have never experienced an in-depth study of baptism in a Baptist church. I can recall Sunday school lessons on Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian official and of Paul's great statement on baptism in Romans 6. Still, I've never experienced an in-depth, systematic study of the topic. I've never heard a word in church about the development of baptismal theology and practice throughout church history, at least the history that antedates the Anabaptist movement in the early sixteenth century. I suspect your experience is like mine.

We will explore in chapters 2–6 what the Bible and church history say about baptism. We will be ill-equipped to explore two contemporary issues

related to baptism in later chapters without a firm scriptural and historical foundation to inform our thinking and discussion.

Our Second Task: Exploring How to Bring Renewed Vitality to Baptism

An increasing number of people are reluctant to be baptized because they do not understand the relevance of baptism for the Christian life. Although many of these people “give in” and are baptized, they enter the water grudgingly rather than willingly, or with the wrong understanding of baptism’s significance and relevance for the Christian life. (Should we baptize people with this lack of desire and understanding?) The postmodern mind-set is part of the problem, but Baptists have contributed to the problem by sometimes unintentionally trivializing baptism. In doing so, we have inadvertently taught people that baptism is not important, that it is something we squeeze into a worship service between two hymns. We need to pause and reflect upon what baptism is and why it is significant.

There are steps we can and should take to make baptism more meaningful in the life of the individual and the church. We will explore in chapters 7 through 10 ways we can better prepare the candidates and ways we can revitalize the baptism service.

Our Third Task: Exploring the Rebaptism of Christians from Other Denominations

Christian people from other denominations are attending Baptist churches in increasing numbers. They like what they see and want to be a full part of the faith community. Then the matter of baptism comes up, usually in the pastor’s office. Their membership in the church often hinges on whether or not they will agree to be rebaptized.

What should a Baptist church do when faced with this situation? How can we address this situation in a way that is faithful to the spirit and intentions of Jesus as revealed in the biblical revelation and in our contemporary experience interpreted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

We will explore this issue in chapters 11 through 13.

How We Will Proceed

The late Vince Lombardi was the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers professional football team. The Super Bowl trophy is named after him. He called his players to a special team meeting one Monday morning after a disastrous loss the previous day. He told them they had played poorly for several weeks. He confessed that he'd been trying to fix things with complicated twists to the offensive and defensive formations, but to no avail. He told them what they needed was a good refresher course on the basics. Then Coach Lombardi held up a pigskin and said, "Gentlemen, this is a football."

In this book, we will return to the basics of baptism. We will review what the New Testament says about baptism. We will review what church history says about baptism, a history that has shaped all Christians, including Baptists. We will give special attention to the development of infant baptism and to the rebellion against it by the radical reformers known as Anabaptists and Baptists. We will concentrate our attention on those areas that will help us explore productively how to revitalize our practice of baptism and to rethink baptism as it relates to Baptist church membership.

I ask you to set aside to the best of your ability your current beliefs, positions, and even bias about baptism. Assume that you know nothing about it. Agree to embark on a journey to build from scratch an understanding of baptism—its why, what, who, and how. You will emerge from this study with your current views reinforced, enlarged, or perhaps changed.

Finally, three tips for a profitable study:

1. Be open to the words of Holy Scripture that you will read. Be open to the Holy Spirit's guidance as you read these words and interpret them for eternal truth and contemporary application. Pray for discernment.
2. Be open to others who may study this book with you. You cannot delegate to another the determination of what you should believe. However, it is imperative that you listen to your Christian brothers and sisters who are being led by the Holy Spirit. Be open to the words quoted in this book that were spoken and written by Christians who have gone on to their heavenly reward. They, like we who are living, have brought much insight to the faith; they, like we, have made mistakes.
3. Finally, allow your mind to guide your heart, and allow your heart to guide your mind.

If you are reading and discussing this book in a group setting, a group covenant is printed in the Appendix (see “Group Covenant”) that may be copied and given to each group member to sign. This is one way to agree up front what each group member can expect of the group and what the group can expect of each group member. Of course, you may write a different covenant that will provide similar guidance for the group or forgo the covenant altogether.

NOTES

¹ For excellent and readable books on postmodernism, see *A Primer on Postmodernism* by Stanley J. Grenz (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996) and *An 8-Track Church in a CD World* by Robert N. Nash Jr. (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1997).

² Mint, dill, and cummin were herbs of the Israelite kitchen garden and, therefore, very small crops, sometimes not much more than one plant each for the typical household. You can see how meticulously legal one would have to be to tithe (give a tenth of) such a crop. This legalistic worldview was characteristic of the Pharisees.

Questions for Individual Reflection or Group Discussion

1. Think of people who have come to your Baptist church from other denominations. Why did they come? What issues, if any, has their coming created for them? for your church?
2. Do you know people who have been like Bill, the Baptist pastor's son, who saw no compelling reason to be baptized upon a profession of faith? Why did they feel this way? Did they change their mind, "give in," or maintain their position? What has been the result for them? for your church?
3. What questions do you have about baptism as practiced in your Baptist church or by a church of another denomination?
4. What do you hope to get out of reading this book and, if in a study group, the group discussions (based on what you've read thus far)?