

BAPTISTS & BAPTISM

PUBLIC

Baptism is both a simple act... and a profound one. Andy Goodliff traces how Baptists have understood baptism

Baptists *and* baptism go together. It's in our name. It wasn't a name we chose, but a label we were given, and not politely. It was an accusation. It was used in less than positive terms. It was one that we came to embrace and accept though. Baptists are those who baptise believers.

BELIEVERS' BAPTISM – THE WHO, AND WHY THIS WAS A POLITICAL ACT

We should say that Baptists hold more than just a conviction about baptism (for example, we equally hold convictions about religious liberty for the individual and the local church), but baptism holds a special place. Our understanding of believers' baptism is an integral part of what we believe the Bible teaches. Baptists, baptism *and* the Bible go together. It was reading the Bible and with fresh eyes that led John Smyth and Thomas Helwys and others to the conclusion that baptism was joined to the confession of faith and so infant baptism could not, in their eyes, be a true baptism.

These early 'baptists' wanted to reform the Church. While steps had been made in that direction during the 16th century, it was felt by some they had not gone far enough. This trajectory of reform, in the light of how they were reading the Bible, saw Smyth, Helwys and others turn the world upside down.

At the beginning of the 17th century, when Baptists emerged, every child born was expected to be baptised as an infant. This was the law of the Church and the law of the State, joined as they were together. Try and imagine that. As today we have a legal requirement to register a birth, so in Christian Europe there was a convention parents baptised their children in their parish church. Therefore, to reject infant baptism was a deeply political

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act, which put you at odds with society. The Baptist view that baptism was for believers made them 'social subversives.'¹ What would it mean to consider baptism in these terms today?

It is important to note that as Baptists developed their views on baptism, there were some who did not insist on believers' baptism, and held an open view, not discriminating against in terms of membership. These included John Bunyan in the 17th century, Daniel Turner in the 18th century, and into the 19th century, the likes of Robert Hall, who argued for an open communion table. Many Baptists today, while still holding to believers' baptism as the clearest and best reading of what the Bible teaches, would also recognise and practise a hospitality towards those whose journey of faith has been different, but no less *faith-filled*. Baptists have always had ecumenists in their number.

HOW TO BAPTISE?

If Baptists began arguing for *who* should be baptised, they also argued about how they should be baptised. It is almost certain that John Smyth, baptising himself and then others in the exiled Amsterdam congregation in 1609, poured water from a bowl over the head. Later Baptists would come to understand the NT Greek word 'baptise' to mean 'immerse' and claim that the only valid baptism was one of full immersion. This became the norm. It made better sense of verses like Romans 6:3.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Who, why, and a third question, *what* is baptism? This perhaps has been the most vexed in our tradition: is baptism an ordinance (obedience to the command of Christ) or is baptism a sacrament (a reception of grace and the presence of God)? Baptists can be found on both sides. The Second London Confession of the Particular Baptists (1677) has language of 'ordinance', but the Orthodox Creed of the General Baptists (1678) includes 'ordinance' and 'sacrament'.

Those stressing an ordinance, wanting to avoid anything that might be considered 'catholic', held the view that baptism is a *symbol* of something that has already taken place in the believer. Those holding a more sacramental view contend that baptism is not merely a human act, but also a divine one, that something *special* and *unique* takes place between God and the person in the water — in the words of one

scholar a 'rendezvous of grace for faith.'² Again, today many Baptists would see baptism as both ordinance and sacrament, where grace and faith, Spirit and water, are all involved in what takes place.

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM

It has been said that while Baptists have spent a lot of energy on the *who*, *how* and *what* questions of baptism, they have given less attention to the *meaning* — the theological significance — of baptism. Helwys speaks of baptism 'as the outward manifestation of dying unto sin, and walking in newness of life.' The Second London Confession describes baptism as 'a sign' of fellowship with Christ, of the remission of sins and walking in newness of life.³

In the 20th century Baptists began to think more deeply about baptism.⁴ This took place in an emerging ecumenical Christian world, which encouraged a mutual learning



experience. In the last 30 years, Baptists have written about baptism and biblical meanings of water,⁵ baptism as a sacrament,⁶ baptism as political,⁷ baptism and birth,⁸ baptism as indwelling Christ's story,⁹ baptism as participation in God,¹⁰ and baptism as a dying and rising.¹¹

This is not an exhaustive list, because baptism itself, like the Lord's Supper, is something that is abundant in meaning. Baptism is both a simple act and a profound one.

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- 1 David Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries* (2018), 48.
- 2 George Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1962), 273.
- 3 *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining in Amsterdam* (1611).
- 4 For a detailed study see Anthony R Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in the Twentieth Century* (2000).
- 5 Paul Fiddes, 'Baptism and Creation' in *Reflections on the Water* (1996)
- 6 Chris Ellis, 'Baptism and the Sacramental Freedom of God' in *Reflections on the Water* (1996)
- 7 Brian Haymes, 'Baptism as a Political Act' in *Reflections on the Water* (1996)
- 8 Ruth Gouldbourne, 'Story-telling, Sacraments and Sexuality' in *Questions of Identity* (2011)
- 9 John Colwell, *Living the Christian Story* (2001).
- 10 Hazel Sherman, 'Baptized – in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' in *Reflections on the Water* (1996)
- 11 Sally Nelson, 'The Water Buries Like a Tomb' in *Gathering Disciples* (2017)

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