

What Baptists believe about... Believer's Baptism

Many pastors face this dilemma: Someone wants to join the church, but they haven't been baptized by immersion. They grew up in another tradition. At some point, they made a commitment to Christ. They may have been christened or sprinkled or even baptized along the way, but with a different understanding its meaning. Now they want to join a Baptist church.

"Can't I just join the church?"

I asked that question myself as an adult who wanted to join a Baptist church. I had been christened in another denomination, and while I didn't remember the event, my family had told me it happened. I thought that was adequate, although my salvation experience came some years later.

As the story was told, it was my second birthday. The minister sprinkled me and said all the appropriate words, to which I responded, "Mama, that man put water on my head."

And in all honesty, that's all I understood of baptism at the time it happened. It was my parents' pledge to raise me in a God-honoring household with the hope that I would receive Christ later on. But nothing changed in me that day.

Years later, a Baptist pastor explained the concept of "believer's baptism." That happens when the person makes his or her own decision to follow Christ and to make a public declaration with the public act of baptism. It's a testimony that Jesus has saved them, a commitment that no one else—however well-meaning at the time—can make for someone else. Not even a parent on behalf of a child.

"But I was sprinkled as an adult. Isn't that good enough?"

No, sorry, and we hope you won't be offended, but the "mode" of baptism is important too.

The mode refers to how the water is used, and what it symbolizes.

Let's be clear: baptism itself does not save. There is no magic in the water. Salvation occurs when the person professes faith in Jesus as their savior. They ask for forgiveness of their sin once and for all—on the basis of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross when his blood covered the sins of all who will believe. At that moment, God's Holy Spirit moves in, forgives sin, and gives the new believer eternal life. It's called regeneration. The dead is made alive.

A few denominations believe regeneration happens in the water; Baptists do not. Regeneration happens when we express belief in Jesus as our personal Savior. Baptism comes afterward, hence, believer's baptism. I am a believer, therefore I get baptized.

What happens in the water is that the believer makes a public witness that identifies him or her with Jesus' death and resurrection, and identifies with Christ's Body, the church. That's why the "mode" is important, specifically immersion—going under the water.

Some denominations sprinkle the water, to represent cleansing from sin. Some churches pour the water, to represent the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Baptists baptize by immersion, going under the water, to represent burial and resurrection.

At the time of Jesus' earthly life, the Jews already had a baptism ceremony. It involved a pool carved in rock, and was part of non-Jews (Gentiles) joining God's Jewish family. Then there was John the Baptist's ministry, baptizing people in the river to demonstrate their repentance from sin and turning to God. John even baptized Jesus this way. Then in Jesus' final instructions in the Great Commission, he ordered the baptism of new believers.

Matthew 28:18-19 says: "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."

The Greek word here is from *baptidzo*, meaning "to immerse." Our English word "baptize" is a borrowed word. It still means "to immerse."

So, baptism is the immersion of a believer in a way that represents the burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This resurrection to new life is the same thing that happens to the believer spiritually; and it is identification with Christ and his Body, the Church.

This kind of baptism can happen in tank inside the church building, in a swimming pool, in a river, or in a horse trough. But **when** it happens (for someone who is a believer) and **how** it happens (by immersion) are important for Baptists. We are called "Baptists" for a reason.

One more note: We are "living members" of Christ's Body.

Baptists believe in "regenerate church membership." The church isn't a club. You can't just sign up, like the Rotary Club or the gym. Everyone who is officially a member of a local Baptist congregation should be a born-again believer, alive in Christ. To become part of the Body of Christ, the pastors, elders, or deacons should be reasonably sure the person is an actual believer—not just a well-intentioned person who wants to join the club.

R. S. Norman, in his book *The Baptist Way*, wrote, "To identify with Christ is to identify with his people. A believer cannot be united with the head of the body without simultaneously being united with the body." The result is a church body whose members have all been regenerated by the Holy Spirit when they accepted Jesus as Savior. And that's what makes us "living members" of his body, and brothers and sisters too!

--Prepared for Lincoln Avenue Baptist Church by Eric Reed