

Why I Am a Baptist  
March, 22, 2015

Many years ago, my wife and two sons were camping in part of Virginia. My sons and I were checking in at the campground office and the girl there asked me my name as I signed the guest book. And I told her Robin Shifflett. She got this grave look on her face and asked me where I was from? I said, Maryland. And she looked a little less grave. She said that the Shiffletts in her part of the state did not have a very good reputation. She wanted to make sure those Shiffletts weren't going to be in the campground.

This two part sermon series is about a couple of words that don't have a good reputation with some people. Last week I spoke about the word evangelical explaining its meaning and why I use it to describe myself. This week I'm going to continue that process with the word Baptist. Like the word evangelical, the word Baptist has a bad reputation for some people. For example the Westboro Baptist Church has made an extremely negative name for itself over the last dozen years. It besmirched the name of Baptists all over America. But some people already had a prejudice against the name Baptist before Westboro came on the scene.

At the same time other people have had wonderful experiences in Baptist churches. When they move to a new place they intentionally look for a Baptist church.

One of the funny things today are the Baptist churches that don't use the name Baptist, and people start attending and join and after a few years discover they are going to a Baptist church. They are shocked. They can't believe they are in a Baptist church because it is so different from what they expected a Baptist church to be.

Like the words evangelical and Baptist, there are many words in English that came from another language. The words Baptist, baptism, and baptize came from the Greek language. Much of the English language came from somewhere else. I found this quote online.

*“English; A language that lurks in dark alleys, beats up other languages, and rifles through their pockets for spare vocabulary.”*  
*(Bumper Sticker)*

English has borrowed words from Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Indian, German, and many more. We take other people's words and make them our own. Though we usually modify the pronunciation to suit us. We slur the sounds to make them more American. People from the largest city in Maryland probably grew up saying Balmore rather than Baltimore. I attended seminary in Kentucky and found out quickly that Louisville, is not pronounced that way. Nor was it pronounced Lou-i-ville. Instead, they pronounced it Lou-a-vull. We take words from other places and make them our own.

One of my pet peeves are words in our English translations of the Bible that have not been translated. Some of you have heard this before. Baptist is one of those words. Some of the misunderstandings of Christians today involve these words that have not been translated.

The words baptize and baptism derive from the Greek word, **baptidzo**. This word means "to immerse or dip" into something, usually water, but not always.

**Baptidzo was not a religious or technical word, but over time became both.**

Baptidzo was not a religious term. It was used in everyday life for all kinds of things. It was the same word you would use if you were telling the kids to clean the dishes by putting them completely in the water, not just running some water over them. When you buy chicken nuggets they ask if you want some dipping sauce. In ancient Greek they called it baptidzo sauce.

Jesus commanded His apostles to immerse new followers. And they did so. And when they started preaching the good news to people who did not speak Greek, instead of translating the word baptidzo, they kept using the Greek word. Instead of using the word "immerse" in the new language, they carried over the Greek word into the new language. That is how the words baptism and baptize 1500 years later were being used in English.

**Because the word was not translated, its meaning changed.**

Once Christianity became legal, and then later became the official religion of the state, everyone was considered to be a Christian. So gradually preachers quit preaching the necessity for personal conversion. It was assumed that everyone would become Christians kind of automatically, so they started sprinkling babies with water and calling this baptism. By the year 1500 almost everyone was being sprinkled with water as babies.

**The translation of the Bible into modern languages changed everything.**

For over 1000 years the Bible was only in Latin and the people of Italy, France, Germany, and England could not read it. Only the official church officials knew Latin. But when it was finally translated into these various languages, people could now see what the word baptism truly meant and how it was used. They started preaching the good news again that all people needed to be converted to Christianity by personal choice. And as men and women started making that choice, they were being baptized as adults.

**Who were the Baptists? Baptist was a nickname given to them.**

Those new preachers of the good news realized that the time to baptize someone was after they became a believer, not before. This fit the pattern of what Jesus commanded.

**Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)** Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Note the order. First convert them, and then immerse them, not the other way around. So these 16th century preachers started re-baptizing people. This is what other people called it. Other people nicknamed these new churches as Anabaptists or re-baptizers. Ana means again. They were baptizing these adults again, so they named them Anabaptists. Later the nickname was shortened to Baptist and the name stuck.

Today, Baptists are not the only descendents of those first Anabaptists. But we are the ones who carry the name.

So one change in these new churches was that they baptized people as new adult believers. The second change was to insist on immersion as the mode of baptism. They insisted on this because that is what the word means.

**Acts 8:30-38 (NIV)** Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

There was no reason to go down into the water to sprinkle or pour some water on the man. The only reason to do down into the water was to immerse him. That is what Philip did. They went down into the water. And Philip immersed him.

This is obvious if we read the end of the passage again and translate all the words.

**Acts 8:36-38** ... the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be immersed?" ... Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip immersed him.

Baptists baptize by immersion because that is what the word means. In-other-words, we immerse by immersion because we are immersers.

Now I do not believe that Philip snuck up from behind and jump on the eunuch's back, dunking him in the water. Nor did he swim underneath and grab his leg out from under him pulling him down into the water. They weren't swimming. They were not playing in the water. This thing they were doing was something more than just getting wet from head to toe. It was immersion, but more, it was a ritual immersion. It had religious significance. They both understood it as such. Even though there was no special religious or technical term for it.

Philip immersed him. I could say baptized him. Except that today, if I simply said baptized, you would not know exactly what he did. If you are familiar with other Christian traditions, you might think that Philip sprinkled water on him. You might think Philip

poured some water over his head. Baptist do not generally recognize those things as baptism because they aren't immersion.

I believe they went down into the water so that he might immerse him in the water as a religious ritual action. He wasn't just immersed. He was immersed into the name of Jesus. He believed what Philipp told him about Jesus, and put his faith in Jesus as his Savior and Lord.

### **Why wasn't the word baptidzo translated into the King James Bible?**

When King James authorized a translation of the Bible into English he did so to combat the other English translations that people were using. He wanted his translation to reflect the Church of England. He did not want the common people to know what these un-translated words really meant. Otherwise they would not want to be a part of the Church of England.

So the king instructed the translators of to use the German word "church", instead of the English translation of the Greek word for "assembled people". He had them use the Greek word "deacon" instead of the translation, "servant". He wanted bishop, not elder, pastor, not shepherd, and baptism, not immersion. King James made sure the words that the Church of England used were used in his authorized version of the Bible. His motives were not good. Then he set out to gather all the other English translations and burn them. He did not totally succeed. But for many years the only legal translation of the Bible in England was the King James.

I am one of those who believe the correct action is total immersion. I also believe that a person must be a believer before I, we, immerse them. Perhaps I should quit using the word baptism altogether, I do not know. But I take seriously whether or not a person is professing a saving faith in Jesus before I immerse him or her into the name of Jesus. More than one child has come to me wanting to be immersed who did not understand what it means to be a sinner, much less that Jesus is Savior and Lord. Just saying the words does not mean they understand with their mind or agree in their hearts.

There are other Christian teachings that are common among Baptists, but the origin of our name has to do with baptism. **Today, there are 62 national Baptist groups in America, and 206 worldwide.**

In a way, I did not choose to be a Baptist. My parents were Baptists. I was called by God to become a pastor before I ever went to seminary and learned much about Baptists or other Christian groups. And you might say that once I finished seminary, it would have been difficult and costly to change groups. But I would have done so, as others have before me, if God had led me to do so. While God put me in a Baptist church, I agree with what most Baptists believe.

While I am not encouraging you to become a Baptist because I am, or because your parents were, I do encourage you to learn of the major issues that separate the different Christian denominations.

This religious ritual immersion in water in the name of Jesus was new. It was a public demonstration of your decision to believe Jesus and serve Him. Why? Because He died for your sins.