BAPTISM

What should we believe?

Contents

Introduction 3
The Baptist View 3
Believer's Baptism 3
Obedience to an Ordinance 4
Baptism as an Illustration 4
Entrance & Identification with the Church Community 5
Baptism & The Holy Spirit 7
The Roman Catholic View 8
Strengths of this Position 9
Weaknesses with this Position 9
Hills Bible Church's Response 9
The Reformed View (Covenant Baptism) 9
Strengths of this Position 10
Weaknesses with this Position 11
Hills Bible Church's Response 11
Conclusion 12

Introduction

Baptism is an important part of the Christian life. However, there are a variety of views on baptism among Christians. These differences are often among the largest distinguishing factors of a denomination (e.g. Baptists!) and so it is important to understand what different people believe and why.

The disagreements on baptism tend to focus around three aspects.
WHO should be baptised
HOW they should be baptised
WHAT baptism achieves

In this booklet we will cover our view first, before going on to look at a couple of alternative views – what good points they may have, but why we ultimately disagree and how we'd respond to someone in Hills Bible Church (HBC) who holds these views.

The Baptist View

Believer's Baptism

Hills Bible Church firmly believes that baptism is for believers – people who have made a confession of faith, have repented of their sins, and trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation. This is the traditional 'Baptist' position. It *could* include children, but for obvious reasons excludes infants.

Baptisms in the New Testament are always associated with conversion. Faith, belief, repentance, and the gift of the Holy Spirit are the markers in the NT of a genuine Christian. Every example of baptism in the NT is accompanied by at least one of these, as well as the preaching and understanding of the gospel. John the Baptist preached 'a baptism of

repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4). At the end of Peter's sermon at Pentecost, the people asked, "What shall we do?" and Peter replied, "*Repent and be baptised* every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38. Emphasis added. See also 8:12; 8:35-38; 10:44-48 and 18:8 for other examples of baptism being accompanied by one of these markers).

Obedience to an Ordinance

> *Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him… If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. John 14:21, 23*

Baptism is an expression of faith and a public declaration of your allegiance to Christ. It is one of two special commands (often called '**ordinances**' or 'sacraments') that Jesus gave to the church; things that are to be carried out as a church community until Christ returns again (the other is the Lord's Supper). Jesus gave the command for baptism in the Great Commission: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt 28:19). Baptising and being baptised is therefore a critical part of the discipleship journey of obedience, and by it we show our love for Christ.

Baptism as an Illustration

Baptism is a sign – an outward picture of an inward reality. It signifies and illustrates the truth of the gospel. The gospel of Christ is that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and rose on the third day (1 Cor 15:3-4). We too, when we repent and believe in God, die to our old selves, die

to sin, and rise in new life, being born again (John 3:3). In this way we are united with Christ and participate in His death and resurrection, by our own similar death and resurrection. Baptism is an illustration of this death and resurrection.

> *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*
> *Rom 6:3-4*

As we go down under the water in baptism, it symbolises death and being buried under the ground. Rising up out of the water symbolises the resurrection of Christ and our resurrection to a whole new life in Him. This is why we practise baptism by full immersion and not by sprinkling or pouring. The latter forms completely lose this vital symbolism.

Scripture also speaks many times about holiness as being 'washed' or 'made clean' (e.g. Titus 3:5). Baptism in water again symbolises this washing and cleansing from sin that happens when we are saved. Remember that in both these cases, baptism is only an *illustration*. It is not the *means* by which we actually obtain new life or cleansing from sin. Rather, it is an outward picture of the inward, spiritual reality that has already taken place.

Entrance & Identification with the Church Community

> *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. 1 Cor 12:12-13*

Baptism is also a means of *identification*. It is a public declaration that you have put your faith in Christ, that the death and resurrection which baptism symbolises is true of yourself. Being baptised, as this passage in 1 Corinthians says, is an entrance into the body, into the church. It is an identification with the wider, global body of Christ. And it is also an entrance into a local body. The context in 1 Cor 12 regards how the body of Christ is comprised of a great variety of people, but they are unified in Christ – everyone receiving the same baptism is a picture of that unity. Note that it is baptism with the Holy Spirit, when one is saved (see next section), that actually connects you to the church spiritually. But the church has God-given authority to affirm a person's salvation (Matt 18:18-20), and water baptism is one of the means by which the church does this. From the perspective of the person being baptised, it is also a declaration of association to the local church that is baptising them, and a declaration of submission to that church.

This is why HBC requires covenant members to be baptised. Membership, among other things, is a commitment to the local body, a declaration that you are a Christian, that you are a part of this body of Christ, and are willing to submit to its leadership. In this way, it is similar to the declaration and commitment made in baptism. Therefore, if one is not willing to be baptised, it raises serious questions over their claim to be living in obedience to Christ, and their submission to Him and the church. Covenant membership is demarcated to those who are saved, of which baptism is a tangible sign. That said, baptism is as much an entrance into the global church as it is into the local church, so HBC affirms and accepts into membership those who have been appropriately baptised in a different congregation.

This idea of baptism as an initiation into the church community is heavily emphasised in the Reformed (Covenantal) position, which will be looked at in more detail later. For now, it suffices to say that in

baptising infants, they over-state the effect of baptism as an entrance into the church, while in practice denying that the true church is comprised solely of believers.

Baptism & The Holy Spirit

> *John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Luke 3:16*

There are two types of baptism in Scripture: baptism with water, and baptism with the Holy Spirit. The two are related, but should not be confused. Baptism with the Holy Spirit is an act of God, and happens at the moment of conversion, when the Holy Spirit indwells a person, sealing them for salvation (Eph 1:13). Water baptism is an act of the church, according to the authority given to it by God. Water baptism follows baptism with the Holy Spirit, as a sign, seal, and affirmation of what has come before. For example, when Peter saw the clear evidence of the Holy Spirit in the Gentiles, his next action was to command them to be baptised (Acts 10:44-48). This is the reason why HBC prefers not to baptise very young children, but rather to wait until they are of sufficient age and maturity (approx. 12 years old), that evidence can be seen of the genuineness of their faith, through the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

There are many other occasions where water baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit are associated in Scripture. However, it should be noted that this association is *temporal*, not *causal*. That is, they happen at similar times, but baptism is not the cause of the receiving of the Spirit. Baptism is the *result* of the Spirit already being received. Baptism is not required for salvation, nor is it required for the receipt of the Holy Spirit. Contrary to some Pentecostal teaching, the Spirit is not given

through the act of water baptism. Rather, the gift of the Spirit proves the legitimacy of the separate water baptism. In any case, throughout the book of Acts, the gift of the Spirit and baptism generally occur at much the same time, and both are part of becoming a Christian.

The Roman Catholic View

Roman Catholics baptise those entering into the Catholic Church by sprinkling, which includes babies. It is their belief that once the person (child) is baptised they are immediately placed into a position of grace whereby they are fit for heaven. This status is maintained until they commit either venial or mortal sins, after which they need to follow the process of confession and penance. All going well this process will take them back to their post-baptism status. Baptism for the Catholic Church is the first, and most important, sacrament for salvation. This view is shared by some Anglicans and Methodists. This view is described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which says:

Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission. (CCC 1213)

The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation... Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed... The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude. (CCC 1257)

By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin. (CCC 1263)

Strengths of this Position

There is little to commend this position except the understanding that baptism is very important.

Weaknesses with this Position

This view has some major flaws. Firstly, the Bible is clear, salvation comes by grace through faith alone (e.g., Eph 2:4-9; Rom 3:28; 2 Tim 1:9). Baptism cannot aid in this. Secondly, if baptism is necessary for salvation, then what do we make of the criminal on the cross next to Jesus, who was assured of his salvation despite never being baptised (Luke 23:43)? Finally, given that the Bible insists that conscious faith in Jesus is necessary to be regenerated and saved (Rom 3:22; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9), how is a baby who is baptised, and does not have the mental faculty of consciousness, experience this reality?

Hills Bible Church's Response

HBC would not be comfortable accepting into membership someone who holds to this understanding of baptism. We believe that it is seriously flawed and confuses one of the most critical doctrines we believe – how a person gets made right with God. We would attempt to persuade anyone holding to this view of baptism of its serious error and guide them to a biblical understanding of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and we would seek to have them baptised by immersion on profession of saving faith.

The Reformed View (Covenant Baptism)

The historical Reformed view of baptism is known as Covenant Baptism. This view is held by the Presbyterian Church and some Anglicans and is also conducted by sprinkling or pouring water. While

this view, like the Catholic Church, encourages the baptism of infants, it rejects the idea of baptismal regeneration. Instead, those who hold to this view believe strongly in God's covenant of grace that extends across both Old and New Testaments. In the OT, circumcision was the inaugurating act of a person's entrance into the covenant family and blessings of God. To them, baptism is the NT equivalent. Scriptures such as Acts 2:39 ("this promise is for you and for your children…") and 1 Cor 10:1-3 suggest that baptism should not be withheld from infants.

Their position is represented in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which includes the following paragraphs:

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ… to be unto [the person being baptised] a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life.

Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.

Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptised.

Although it is a great sin to despise or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed to it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it: or, that all that are baptised are undoubtedly regenerated.

Strengths of this Position

Contrary to the Roman Catholic position, we respect that the Reformed view is more carefully built from an understanding of the infallibility of Scripture and represents an attempt to synthesise the over-arching

story of the Bible. Within this view there is a strong desire to trace the consistency of God's dealings with people across the OT and NT. This view rightly rejects baptismal regeneration. It is acknowledged that the NT never speaks against infant baptism and that there may be instances where children were baptised, though this is not certain (e.g., Acts 16:15).

Weaknesses with this Position

While this second alternative view of baptism has far more to commend it than the first one, it still has some critical flaws with it. Firstly, the NT formula seems, at every turn, to be "repent and be baptised" (e.g., Acts 2:38; Matt 3:11), and not "baptise and then repent". This view essentially divorces baptism from the experience of conversion, with which it is so closely associated throughout the New Testament. Secondly, while there is continuity between the Old and New Testaments (e.g., the way of salvation is and has always been, through the OT and NT, grace through faith), there is nevertheless real discontinuity at the same time. To become a member of the OT covenant community, one simply needed to be born a Jew, while to become a member of the NT covenant community, one needed to be born again by the Holy Spirit. In other words, if circumcision was given to those born into the OT covenant community, baptism should be given only to those who have been born again. Finally, we would see the mode of baptism being advocated by this view (pouring or sprinkling) to be deficient in communicating what baptism is supposed to represent – dying and rising with Christ, which only full immersion really manages to communicate visually (Rom 6:1-4).

Hills Bible Church's Response

We would respectfully engage with someone holding to this view, being wary of calling it "serious error," unlike the first position, and

hope to persuade them towards believer's baptism by immersion. However, so as not to make it harder to become a member of HBC than it is to enter heaven, we would allow someone who holds this view by Biblical conviction to become a Covenant Member. If you are in this position, please speak to one of the pastors or elders.

Conclusion

Baptism is a vitally important part in the life of the believer and the church. It is an ordinance of Christ, and an expression of our love for Him. Baptism closely follows conversion, and thus is accompanied by signs of conversion, such as repentance, faith, open confession, and the receipt of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is to be done by full immersion in water, as a sign and symbol of Christ's death and resurrection, and how believers spiritually share in that death and resurrection through dying to sin and rising to newness of life in Christ.

And Peter said to them,

"Repent and be baptised every one of you

in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,

and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit".

(Acts 2:38)

HILLS BIBLE CHURCH