

BULLETIN

UNION UNIVERSITY

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In This Issue

ENGAGING: *When Is Baptism
Rebaptism?*

REVIEWING: *Reflecting on Baptism*

WORSHIPPING: *The Ordinance of
Baptism: A Unique Worship Event*

READING: *President Dockery's
Recommended Reading for 2004*

PREACHING: *Taking Baptism
Seriously*

EDITOR'S NOTE

BULLETIN

UNION UNIVERSITY

The Union University *Bulletin* is a bi-monthly publication designed to equip church leaders.

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When Is Baptism Rebaptism?

Harry L. Poe, Ph.D.
Charles Colson Professor of Faith and Culture

In the early 1990's I taught evangelism at Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Bethel is the only seminary of the Baptist General Conference, a small denomination that began as the Swedish Baptists. During those years a controversy arose over the necessity of believer's baptism by immersion for church membership. Several of the fast growing new church starts had ceased to require baptism of converts who had been christened as infants in other churches.

In Minnesota, approximately forty percent of the population has a Catholic background, forty percent has a Lutheran background, and the other twenty percent is made up of a number of small evangelical denominations. The new church starts, with their seeker sensitive and seeker driven worship styles, appealed to many secular people who might have been christened as infants but who had grown up with little or no church affiliation. The young pastors found that it was easier to get people to join their churches from other denominations if they did not have to be baptized. The issue was stated in terms of the problem of re-baptism.

In order to be re-baptized, it is necessary to be baptized in the first place. Several centuries ago the people who came to be called Baptists argued with the Church of England, the Presbyterians, and the Congregationalists over the mode and manner of baptism. When the scholars of 1611 translated the Bible into English, they handled baptism in an interesting way. Instead of translating the word into English, they left it as a Greek word. The Greek word *baptizo* means to "plunge under." The translators simply used an English sounding form of the Greek word instead of translating it, because the English Church had long since abandoned the New Testament practice. By an unusual twist, however, the official mode of christening in the Prayer Book of the Anglican communion is baptism (immersion). The Prayer Book goes on to state, however, that if the infant seems too frail, water may be poured on the candidate rather than dipping. Apparently, the Episcopalians have not had a healthy baby in 500 years!

When I was a seminary student, I happened to discuss the translation with some students from the nearby Presbyterian seminary who said, "Well, of

see **ENGAGING** on page 5



Reflecting on Baptism

Ray Van Neste, Ph.D.

Director of the R.C. Ryan Center for Biblical Studies

The topic of baptism has historically and understandably been an important topic among people who called themselves "Baptists." However, key issues such as this one often suffer from too many assumptions that "we all know what that means anyway." It is good for us to think carefully through the important doctrine and practice of baptism knowing that careful biblical thought will lead both to greater clarity and more vitality in practice. It will be my task to suggest some possible resources for stimulating your thinking.

When considering baptism, there are typically four key questions that arise:


- 1) Who should be baptized? Believers only or believers and their children?
- 2) How should one baptize? Immersion, pouring or sprinkling?
- 3) What does baptism do? Does it save, does it symbolize, etc.?
- 4) In practice, how can we do baptisms in a way that leads people to appreciate its significance?

All of these are important questions and deserving of thought. Probably most of those reading this column have settled answers to the first two questions. Still the questions often come up as we interact with the convictions of other believers. Fred Malone has recently written a thorough defense of the position that only believers should be baptized – one of the distinctives of Baptist doctrine. His book, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, has been described by Dr. Mohler, President of Southern Seminary, as "one of the most important books on baptism to appear in at least the last two hundred years." It is well argued and well written.

The third question, "What does baptism do?" is the essential question, providing the basis for the other three. When considering this question, it is useful to begin with the relevant chapters in the systematic theologies by Millard Erickson and Wayne Grudem, both conservative Baptist scholars. These men will summarize the key issues and

point you to the primary biblical texts. George Beasley-Murray, a prominent British Baptist of the recent past, wrote a key book entitled *Baptism in the New Testament* and one can now read a summary of some of his arguments in his article, "Baptism," in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid.

Once we have wrestled with the New Testament discussion of baptism, we will be left wondering how something regarded so significantly has become so mundane in our churches. The answer is probably that in response to those who have made too much of baptism we have often made too little of it. Helpful in this line of thinking are three essays found within other books. Stephen Wellum, Associate Professor of Christian Theology at Southern Seminary, has written an essay entitled, "The Means of Grace: Baptism" in *The Compromised Church*, edited by John Armstrong. Wellum argues that there is a significant problem in the church of undervaluing baptism. He then lays out an argument for the meaning and significance of baptism, arguing primarily that we need to recover the value of this practice which Christ Himself instituted. Second, John Piper's *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* contains an essay entitled, "Brothers, Let Us Magnify the Meaning of Baptism." Here Piper urges fellow pastors to hold up the importance and value of a biblical view of believers baptism. Lastly, Don Whitney, in his typical manner of being profound and practical, has written a chapter entitled, "Why Seek Baptism in the Church?" in his book, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*. Here in a very readable manner, Whitney lays out arguments for the importance and meaning of baptism. This essay is helpful not only in thinking through the issue for oneself but also, as the title suggests, in speaking to those in our churches today who fail to see the need for baptism.

Hopefully some of these tools may be useful to you as you seek to teach your congregation why the Lord Jesus commanded us to follow this practice and how we can appropriately celebrate the truths represented in it. 



The Ordinance of Baptism: A Unique Worship Event

Richard Joiner, Ph.D.

Chair, Music Department and Professor of Music

As a young child I can remember worshiping with my mother and sister at First Baptist Church, Natchez, MS, and using the sermon time to let my eyes wander over the nooks and crannies of that enchanting old Gothic structure. How I wished to physically explore those shadowy corners! The area that harbored the most attraction for me was the baptismal structure, high above the pulpit and choir loft. There, dimly lit from behind, was a lovely stained glass window containing a pastoral scene of the river Jordan, curling around a quiet pasture on a sunny day. How special it was for me to realize some years later that the people who entered this pool were new believers, and that their presence there symbolized a life-changing encounter. How special it was for me, when at eight years of age, I no longer thought of the colorful window as a mystical scene, but a place where I could prove to the world my love for Jesus!

As Baptists, we seem to struggle with making baptism a very special worship event for our new converts. I have encountered churches that keep their baptismal pools filled, ready for immediate immersion of new believers. Others may either end their services with baptism after singing and preaching are done, or begin with baptism, before other items of worship take place. In either case, we run the danger of the ordinance being identified as an addition to the service, rather than an integral part of a well-coordinated worship event.

How shall we escape such misled connotations of this significant ordinance? On occasion, perhaps we could build a service around the immersion event. The baptism of believers who have made a public confession in the last couple of months could then be featured as the crowning moment of a theme-rich worship service.

A complete service of baptism could be structured in lots of ways. Scriptures dealing with our Lord's baptism (i.e., Luke 3:1-3, 21-23, 4:14-22), gospel accounts of John's baptism contrasted with Jesus's forecast of baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8), or Paul's prayers for believers (i.e., I Thessalonians 3:12-13) would logically belong in such a service. Prayers of blessing for

the strengthening of the candidates would be important. Scriptures and prayers could be the responsibility of Sunday School teachers, deacons, or family members who had been instrumental in the believer's salvation experience.

Musically, the *Baptist Hymnal* only lists four hymns that specifically address baptism: "Baptized in Water;" "Come Holy Spirit, Dove Divine;" "Jesus, Our Lord and King;" "When We Walk with the Lord." All four warrant the time it will take to learn and employ them in a baptismal service. However, other hymns that mention salvation, faith, the Christian walk, and the Christian witness would also be more than appropriate. Here are just a few:

The Salvation Experience: "Lord, I Want to be a Christian;" "Open Our Eyes, Lord;" "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed;" "Grace Greater than Our Sin;" "I Lay My Sins on Jesus;" "O Happy Day that Fixed My Choice;" "To God be the Glory."

Faith and Assurance: "Ask Ye What Great Thing I Know;" "I Know Whom I Have Believed;" "My Faith Looks Up to Thee;" "My Faith has Found a Resting Place;" "'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus."

The Christian Walk: "Be Thou My Vision;" "Jesus Calls Us;" "Come, All Christians, Be Committed;" "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus;" "Take My Life, Lead Me, Lord;" "Living for Jesus."

The Christian Witness: "I Love to Tell the Story;" "I Will Sing of My Redeemer;" "I'll Tell the World that I'm a Christian;" "Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It;" "Set My Soul Afire."

Spoken responses by the congregation are always affirming. Worship leaders can structure their own. *The Book of Common Prayer* provides a time-honored model:

Father in heaven,
at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan
you proclaimed him your beloved Son
and anointed him with the Holy Spirit.
Grant that all who are baptized into his name
may keep the covenant they have made,
and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior,

President Dockery's Recommended Reading for 2004

Holman Christian Standard Bible (Holman)

The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament, edited by Daniel G. Reid (InterVarsity)

Alexander Hamilton, by Ron Chernow (Penguin)

Who are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity, by Samuel Huntington, (Simon & Schuster)

Getting Marriage Right, by David P. Gushee, (Baker)

Christianity in the Academy, by Harry L. Poe (Baker)

One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus, by J. I. Packer and Thomas Oden (InterVarsity)

Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology, edited by Richard J. Mouw and Mark A. Noll (Eerdmans)

On Kingdom Business: Transforming Missions Through Entrepreneurial Strategies, edited by Tetsunao Yamamori and Kenneth A. Eldred (Crossway)

Doubts about Darwin: A History of Intelligent Design, by Thomas Woodward (Baker)

Going Public with Your Faith: Becoming a Spiritual Influence at Work, by William Carr Peel and Walt Larimore (Zondervan)

For the Glory of God, by Rodney Stark (Princeton University Press)

Serious Times, by James Emery White (InterVarsity)

Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept, by James W. Sire (InterVarsity)

Hard America: Soft America: Competition vs. Coddling and the Battle for the Nation's Future, by Michael Barone (Crown Forum)

The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys, by Mark A. Noll (InterVarsity)

From Cells to Souls – and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature, edited by Malcolm Jeeves (Eerdmans)

Faith and Learning on the Edge: A Bold New Look at Religion in Higher Education, by David Claerbaut (Zondervan)

The Many Faces of Evil, by John S. Feinberg (Crossway)

Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C. S. Lewis, by Will Vaus (InterVarsity)

Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds Between Faith and Biology, by Darrell Falk (InterVarsity)

Bonhoeffer as Martyr, by Craig J. Slane (Brazos)

The Expansion of Christianity, by Timothy Yates (InterVarsity)

The Making and Unmaking of Technological Society, by Murray Jardine (Brazos)

Scripture on the Silver Screen, by Adele Reinhartz (Westminster/John Knox)

Taking Baptism Seriously



Todd E. Brady, M.Div.
Minister to the University

Has the modern church lost its understanding of the significance of baptism? If so, this might be the fault of no one but herself. Often relegated to parts of worship services where noisy chatter reigns among unheard announcements or rushed among a service's final moments as parishioners pack up to head out to the local eatery, baptism is deemed by many as a mere obligatory ordinance which reluctantly has to be squeezed into a worship service. People in the pews may observe the ritual and hear the preacher's words from the waters but could be misunderstanding the symbolic picture before them unless there is clear and regular teaching concerning baptism's meaning, significance and purpose. Could it be that scenes from movies like *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are shaping the church's understanding of baptism more than today's pulpits?

In an entertainment-saturated culture which seems to be setting up shop under steeples across the country, today's preachers have an excellent opportunity to call parishioners beyond ecclesiastical consumerism, guiding them toward a Scriptural understanding of biblical community. For this to take

place, pulpit leaders must be good stewards and administrators of the ordinance of baptism. In keeping with Paul's instruction to "*not be hasty in the laying on of hands*,"¹ the church would also be well-served to not be hasty in the immersion of contemporary aisle-walkers.

The modern misunderstanding about this important practice will be clarified through faithful, biblical pastoral leadership. Congregants will understand and appreciate the ordinance of baptism when it is prioritized among church leaders. Most importantly, Scriptural preaching and teaching concerning baptism will result in a church who observes baptism with understanding, integrity and faithfulness to God. It is essential for church members to recognize that baptism is a God-ordained ordinance—commanded clearly in Scripture, practiced only by believers, and observed symbolically among others.

Baptism is Commanded Clearly in Scripture

A preschooler watched as the preacher descended into baptismal waters during a morning worship service. Without a moment's hesitation, she looked up at her mother,


ENGAGING . . . continued from page 1

course, every Greek scholar knows that *baptizo* means that the early church immersed new believers, but christening infants is so much more dignified than dunking teenagers and adults!" In fact, the Episcopal cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City has a massive stone baptistery brought from a medieval church where adults had been immersed. The ancient church in Ravenna, Italy still contains its massive baptistery where barbarian invaders had been immersed in the closing days of Roman imperial power. To this day, the Eastern Orthodox Church, which precedes the Roman Church in antiquity, continues to immerse infants rather than sprinkling them, because Greek has never ceased to be used by the Eastern Church and they never forgot what *baptizo* means.

Baptizing someone who was christened as a baby is not a matter of re-baptism because they were never baptized to begin with. But there are situations in which re-baptism can pose a problem. Until the Second Great Awakening (circa. 1790-1810), the Baptists were the only ones practicing believer's baptism (immersion). During the Kentucky Revival, however, a group of Presbyterians became convinced of the error of Calvinism and its view of infant christening. They adopted congregational government and believer's baptism, like the Baptists, but they did not identify with the Baptists. Instead, they established themselves as the Christian Church. By the end of the nineteenth century, a growing number of groups would split from the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans. Most of these groups, like the Assemblies of God, Church of God,

Nazarenes, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Pentecostal Holiness, practice believer's baptism.

When the Landmark movement began among Southern Baptists, the Christian Church was entwined with the Churches of Christ who hold to a strong sacramental understanding of baptism so that Baptists could say that they alone preserved the New Testament practice of baptism. Today, however, many other groups have recovered the biblical mode and manner of baptism so that much of the Landmark exclusiveness no longer holds with respect to baptism.

Southern Baptists can expect that the controversy over baptism will appear within our ranks in the coming years. Our scandal of rebaptism has to do with the number of our own members that we re-baptize in place of the old practice of rededication. For many people, baptism is merely a pragmatic issue that may stand in the way of the growth of a congregation. Many churches have shifted baptism to Sunday nights so it will not take time away from the morning service. In many parts of the world, however, identifying with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is as dangerous now as it was when first practiced in the Jordan River. People are killed for publicly following Christ in baptism as they profess their faith in him. My Presbyterian friends are quite right about baptism: there is nothing dignified about it. In baptism we take on humiliation only to discover that we have also taken on something much more. 

WORSHIPPING . . . continued from page 3

who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
One God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

In actual practice, a baptismal service could be arranged according to the aforementioned categories, with hymns, scriptures and testimonies to match. What follows is only one idea. It is hoped that it will stimulate structures that may reflect the personality and practice of the local church:

Organ or Piano Prelude to Worship

Hymn of Praise: "How Firm a Foundation"

Invocation

Pastor's Welcome and Description of the Baptismal Event

The Lord's Baptism: Luke 3:1-3, 21-23, 4:14-22

The Service of Baptism: [Pastor's Description of Baptism as the symbol of the act of repentance and believing, the role of faith and trust, the Christian walk, and the call to witness.]

The Salvation Experience:

Hymn: "Grace Greater than Our Sin"

Scripture: John 3:16-21

Testimony [by a church member, describing their own salvation experience]

Faith and Assurance:

Hymn: "I Know Whom I Have Believed"

Scripture: II Timothy 1:8-12

Testimony [by a church member whose life has contained trials that necessitated such faith.]

The Christian Walk:

Hymn: "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus"

Scripture: Matthew 4:18-22; I

Corinthians 4:15-16

Testimony [by a church member whose lifestyle has long been a model for others]

The Christian Witness:

Hymn: "I Love to Tell the Story"

Scripture: Matthew 28:18-20

Solo: "I'll Tell the World"

Testimony [by a Sunday School teacher or friend who was involved in the salvation experience of one of the baptismal candidates]

The Ordinance of Baptism for Christians:

Introduction of the Candidate(s)
The Confession of the Candidate's Faith
The Act of Baptism

The Church's Commitment to New Believers:

(Read in unison)

As a body of baptized believers, we who have responded to Christ's grace commit ourselves to your affirmation and support.

We promise that we will remain prayerful for your growth, your understanding of the gospel, and for the deepening of your faith.

As Christ's Church, we promise to be engaged in teaching, loving, and living before you the life of the faithful.

We welcome you as fellow believers, and we are grateful for the magnificent picture of death, burial, and resurrection which you have placed before us through your baptismal experience.

May God bless and keep you as you live as a child of God before the world.


Hymn of Celebration: "To God be the Glory"

Benediction and Blessing for Those Who

Now Walk the Christian Way

Affirmation of New Believers [The congregation

welcomes and affirms those baptized in an informal gathering at the front of the sanctuary, or in a reception in the church Fellowship Hall.]

While perusing a recent magazine issue last week, I happened upon an old photograph of a river baptism from the early part of the 20th century. These days, river baptisms are probably remembered by a diminishing number of Christians. I would venture to say, however, that those who had such baptisms probably never forgot them. For 21st century believers, perhaps we can recover the uniqueness of the baptismal experience. Perhaps we can provide a service of baptism that is meaningful and memorable for both new believer and church members in attendance. Ultimately, we would hope that the faith walk of all present would be strengthened through a well-planned service that re-enacts the new beginnings that we have in Christ Jesus. 

and with childlike simplicity and understanding, said for all to hear—"Water time!" Needless to say, this little one's grasp of what was taking place was far from being theologically developed. At that moment, however, without realizing it, she was experiencing the church's obedience to Scripture's command to practice baptism.

Marching orders concerning baptism were delivered by none other than Jesus Christ in the Great Commission. He said, "*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. . .*"² Those who came to faith at Pentecost were commanded by Peter, "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.*"³

Together with the Lord's Supper, the church is to be faithful in the ongoing practice of baptism as commanded by Scripture. Whether or not such an ordinance "flows" with the music or "fits" within a service, the church has a mandate to observe it with deserving priority. In addition, as Southern Baptist leaders regularly call for increased priority on baptisms, the church is to be ever mindful that faithfulness to this practice must not be rooted in denominational loyalty, but in biblical authority.

Baptism is Practiced Only by Believers

Baptism is not for everyone. John L. Dagg stated "Those only are proper subjects of baptism who repent of sin and believe in Christ."⁴ While an emphasis on missions and evangelism has been characteristic of Baptists for centuries,

the understanding of "believers' baptism" has been the most significant doctrinal marker of our denominational heritage.

Scripture teaches that baptism is only for believers. The approximate 3,000 who were baptized at Pentecost were believers in Christ. In Samaria, as Peter preached the good news, those who came to believe were baptized. When one encounters baptism in Acts, it is always of believers.⁵

Often, young adults enter the waters a second time to ensure that their baptism is "in order." After careful Bible study and personal introspection, these individuals often realize that perhaps they were not actually believers when they were first baptized. While church leaders should be thankful for the newfound confidence that these believers find, it should provide pause concerning the processes by which "new believers" are accepted for baptism.

Are such "new believers" actually believers? Couched within the confines of a three-stanza invitation, a rushed two-minute counseling session replete with pastoral embraces, grandfatherly nods and soft whispers is entirely inadequate for determining whether or not a person is a qualified candidate for baptism. Could the church's eagerness for the stirring of baptismal waters be the impetus behind what seems to be an indiscriminate acceptance of those who come forward at the end of the service? In many cases, the local Rotary Club or the YMCA has more expectations for membership than does the local church. While year-end annual reports filed in Baptist associational offices might

boast of burgeoning baptisms, they might also reflect the growing number of non-believing church members present in today's congregations.

Church leaders who rush nonbelievers into the waters of baptism provide a great disservice. In addition to assuming that baptism guarantees their immediate church membership, baptized unbelievers often think that such an observance subsequently secures their eternal salvation. Unless a church is devoted solely to the teaching and practice of believers' baptism, pastors and leaders will one day owe an explanation (and apology) to those who genuinely considered themselves Heaven bound.


Baptism is Observed Symbolically among Others

The two parts Hydrogen, one part Oxygen in which a person might be immersed has absolutely no saving power. The believer's baptism provides a symbolic picture of his identification with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Anyone who watches a believer being baptized is watching a symbolic event. Just as a red light at an intersection is symbolic of the command to stop, baptism is the symbol which communicates a person's repentance from sin, identification with Christ, and divine regeneration to new life. Baptism cannot save. It is merely a symbolic testimony of the salvation which God has already worked in that person's life. For that reason, when a believer stands in the baptismal waters before others, he is proclaiming his faith in

Christ's death, burial and resurrection and his commitment to walk in newness of life.

The church's rite of baptism is a powerful witness to the believers in her midst as well as any unbelievers who might be present. Rather than jettisoning symbolic observances for the sake of making everyone more comfortable, preachers have a wonderful opportunity to raise the church's understanding and appreciation of this important event.

What if pastors insisted on and carefully taught the centrality of believers' baptism in the life of the church? Would church leaders be as hasty in baptizing those who come forward in worship services? Might church members observe the ordinance with greater reverence? Would baptism be a more significant and meaningful experience for everyone? When believing individuals take seriously the Bible's teaching concerning baptism, churches will change the way they approach this important practice. As this occurs, fewer unbelievers will be present on membership rolls, and those unbelievers who do experience the church's serious observance of baptism will indeed be intrigued by and drawn toward the faith which the baptized hold so dear. 

1. 1 Timothy 5:22
2. Matthew 28:19
3. Acts 2:38
4. John L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order*, A Treatise on Church Order, vol. 2 (Harrison, VA: Gano Books, 1990), 68.
5. Acts 2:41; 8:12; 10:44-46; 16:14-15; 16:32-33.

Union University TBC Dinner

***5:00 pm
Tuesday, November 9, 2004
Governor's Inn
Sevierville, TN***

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



Greetings from Union University! I trust all is well with you and your ministry. As we begin this fall, I Peter 2:9 provides wonderful affirmation and encouragement to the Body of Christ. It reads, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." May we all pursue with passion the

fullness of His call on our lives and may our obedience bring much honor to our Father's name.

This issue of the *Bulletin* is focused on a conversation about baptism. As we all know, baptism is a primary act of obedience when being birthed into the family of God. Thankfully, God has called each of us to be baptized as a public testimony of His transformational work in our lives. Baptism provides a beautiful picture of God's work. It not only encourages the Body as an affirmation that the Spirit of God is at work, it provides a witness to a watching world of the love of Christ and the glorious impact

of responding in faith to His invitation to Life. Hopefully, we will all be challenged through this issue of the *Bulletin* to think biblically about this ordinance and to share the Gospel message faithfully so as to experience this meaningful event in the life of the Church often.

God is so gracious to allow you and me to serve as His instruments to lead and equip His Church.

For His Glory,

Charles A. Fowler, Ph.D.
Senior Vice President for University Relations