

Rethinking Re-Baptism: What It Means to Be a Member

BY JIM SOMERVILLE

God loves us and wants us for his own. At some point we may be able to apprehend God's grace and accept it for the gift that it is. But these are two ends of a single continuum, and while some Christians focus on the giving of grace through infant baptism, others focus on the receiving of grace through believer's baptism.

I had been pastor of First Baptist Church in Richmond, VA, for exactly two days when I learned that we did not welcome members from other denominations, at least not without re-baptizing them. It was at the regular Tuesday morning staff meeting, when we were reviewing new members. I looked at the card one of them had filled out and saw a note penciled in the margin: "Needs to be baptized."

"What is this?" I asked.

The staff member who had penciled the note said, "Well, she is coming from a Methodist church."

"So?"

"So...it's our policy to baptize people who have not been immersed."

And that is how it started—a two-year campaign to change our membership policy so that committed Christians from other denominations could join First Baptist Church without having to be "re-baptized."

At least, that is what I called it.

But other people didn't. When I asked my predecessor why the church re-baptized Christians from other denominations he said, "Because they have not been baptized yet. They have only been sprinkled!" And that was

the first of several conversations about the Greek word *baptizo*, and how it means “to plunge under water, almost violently” (my predecessor was not the only one to point that out). But that was only half the argument. In addition to the *mode* of baptism there was the matter of *sequence*. “Believer’s baptism” as understood by most Baptists, was by *immersion* (mode) *after* a profession of faith (sequence). And as they understood it, believer’s baptism was what set Baptists apart from other kinds of Christians – Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians, for example – who (as they put it) “sprinkled a little water on a baby’s head and called that baptism.” And even if it were, they asked, “How could it be *believer’s* baptism? The child does not know its own name yet, much less the name of Jesus!”

While these arguments made good sense when we were talking about how Baptists make converts, they did not make sense when we were talking about Pam – an English woman who came to know Christ as a university student when she spent a summer working at an Anglican Church day camp. After getting to know some Christians and learning what they believed, she told the priest she wanted to be baptized, and after questioning her at some length to determine her sincerity, he scheduled her baptism for the following Sunday morning. During that service he poured water over her head in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – a time-honored mode of baptism known as *affusion*. Pam was so enthusiastic about her newfound faith that after graduation she went to the mission field in Africa, where she met and married an Anglican priest. The two of them moved to Richmond in the mid-1980’s and began to attend First Baptist. When Pam asked about joining the church, she was told that she would need to be baptized.

“But I have been baptized,” she replied.

“Have you been immersed?”

“Well, no....”

“Then you have not been baptized!”

Her baptism had come in the right sequence (after a profession of faith), but not in the right mode (by immersion), and for that reason she was denied membership. Rather, she was denied full membership. Pam was welcomed as a “Watchcare Member,” and informed that she could enjoy all the privileges of membership except: she could not vote in church business meetings, she could not serve on any decision-making committee, and she could not serve as a deacon or a trustee.¹ Again and again she was encouraged to be immersed by people who wanted to nominate her as a deacon, or a trustee, or a committee member. “Come on,” they urged, “what’s the big deal?” But for Pam it was a big deal: to be re-baptized would be to repudiate her previous baptism. She felt just as strongly about her experience of affusion as they felt about their experience of immersion, and it raised the question: How important is the mode?

Practically speaking, is there any real difference between being plunged under water and having water poured over you? If we were speaking practically, the answer would be no, but baptism is not a practical matter, it is a symbolic matter, and for Baptists the symbol of immersion is important. They refer to Romans 6:3-4 in which Paul says:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Baptism thus becomes a drama in which we identify with Christ by participating—symbolically—in his death, burial, and resurrection. And, practically speaking, immersion serves that purpose better than affusion. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, calls immersion a “better symbol” than the alternative, and adds, “Going under symbolizes the end of everything about your life that is less than human. Coming up again symbolizes the beginning in you of something strange and new and hopeful. You can breathe again.”²

But earlier in the same essay Buechner admits, “Baptism consists of getting dunked or sprinkled. Which technique is used matters about as much as whether you pray kneeling or standing on your head.”³ And although Paul

speaks of baptism as a symbol of death, burial, and resurrection in Romans 6, to the Corinthian Christians he describes it as a symbol of coming clean: “You were washed,” he says to those former wrongdoers, “you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 6:11). “If it is washing that we are talking about,”

Pam might ask, “can I not get just as clean by taking a shower as by taking a bath?” Well, yes, practically speaking, but when it comes to baptism we speak symbolically, and for Baptists the symbol of immersion is important. Even so, if we can recognize that Paul himself thought of baptism in more than one way, we might be able to comprehend why there is more than one mode of baptism among the many Christians of the world.⁴

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And this brings us to the matter of sequence. Is it critical that we believe *before* we are baptized? Or is it possible to do it the other way around? Pam had done it the “right” way, but there were other Watchcare members in the church who had grown up in Christian traditions where infants were baptized by sprinkling and later confirmed, usually around the age of twelve or thirteen. Kevin, for example, shared his story in a public forum, telling the church that when he was confirmed in the Methodist church of his childhood he had a powerful experience of God’s grace, and an almost palpable sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit.⁵ Like Pam, he did not want to repudiate that experience by being re-baptized. As the conversation continued at First Baptist Church, I began to think about a “continuum” of grace in which we recognize that even before a child is born – and before she has done one thing right or wrong – God loves her and wants her for his own. At some point – maybe around the age of twelve or thirteen – that child may be able to apprehend God’s grace, and accept it for the gift that it is. But these two things are simply the two ends of a single continuum, and while some Christians focus on the *giving* of grace through infant baptism, others focus on the *receiving* of grace through believer’s baptism.

In the end, I asked the deacons if we could change our membership policy to allow committed Christians from other traditions (those who had been both baptized and confirmed) to join the church without being re-baptized. The deacons formed a sub-committee that studied the matter for more than a year, eventually coming back with a recommendation to change the membership policy. That recommendation was discussed at length in two subsequent deacons’ meetings, but when it was put to a vote, 80% of those present voted in favor of it, shocking some of our members who feared we “wouldn’t be a Baptist church anymore.” Plans for a church-wide vote in late spring of 2010 were put on hold until the early fall, both to ensure good attendance at the meeting and to let tempers cool down a bit. Several public “listening sessions” were held during this time simply to let members say what they needed to say. And then, on September 19, 2010, after an hour of discussion in a packed sanctuary, the church voted to approve the change in our membership policy by a solid two-thirds majority.

We did not have a stampede of people coming down the aisle to join the church under our new policy as I might have hoped, but the very next week Kevin came forward to join the church as a full member, and a few weeks later Pam did the same. Neither of them was required to be immersed.

Both have turned out to be extraordinary members.

NOTES

1 In other words, a Watchcare member could participate in all church activities, even communion, but could not participate in decision-making.

2 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, revised and expanded edition (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993 [1973]), 6.

3 Ibid.

4 I have heard of Christians in the Sahara Desert baptizing new believers in sand because they did not have water. The *Didache*, also called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, in the late first century or early second century recommends baptizing in running water. "If this be not obtainable, then other water is allowed, cold rather than warm; if only a small amount is available, then pour water thrice upon the head." (Quoted in J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965], 103). Apparently the mode is not the main thing.

5 This was during the first of two "Holy Conversations" held at First Baptist Church to discuss the issue of baptism and church membership. I had simply asked those who had come to our church from other traditions to talk about their experience of becoming Christian. This was Kevin's response.



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