

TALKING POINT #4

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES #2: BAPTISM & THE LORD'S SUPPER

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

From the beginning of the Christian Church, the practices of Baptism and the Lord's Supper have been at the heart of the corporate life of the Church. These two rituals are seen universally as foundational marks of the Church, commanded and commissioned by Christ Himself. Yet, there are few points of doctrine and practice over which there have been more divisions and disputes. These differences range from the meaning behind the practices, who should administer them and the effects once administered.

Depending on your Church background, you may have heard Baptism and the Lord's Supper called "sacraments" or "ordinances." While it may seem that this is just an issue of name-calling, it actually carries a more important distinction. "Sacrament" is used by those who attribute special grace to the practices themselves, while "ordinances" represent the view that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are outward practices that signify inward faith. As Baptists, we hold the second view. That is not to say that we don't believe Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not special moments in the life of the Church and individual Christians but we do not believe that just because the sacraments are administered to a person, they are automatic recipients of grace, nor do we believe one is forgiven simply by participating in the sacraments. But, enough for what we don't believe! Here's what Baptists believe on these two important subjects:

BAPTISM

Baptism is the initiatory rite of the Church, which is just another way of saying that it is what someone does when they first become a Christian and join a local Church. It is an outward expression of an inward decision of faith. It is a beautiful service where we express our trust in Christ's death and resurrection by identifying with him in the water. Accordingly, we baptise by immersion (where the person goes right under the water).

Consequently, it is only administered to believers who have professed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. We do not practise paedobaptism (infant baptism) because a baby cannot express faith. Rather than baptise children we have "child dedication" services, where we dedicate our children and ourselves to the Lord. Normally, baptisms will be conducted by a pastor or elder in acknowledgement of their leadership role. It is done only once, as a sign of our initial entrance into faith and serves as a reminder of God's presence with us in our life-long journey with Christ. Baptism is an amazing act when someone who has found salvation and new life in Christ's death and resurrection identifies with Christ in baptism.

LORD'S SUPPER

The Lord's Supper is called a whole array of different things – Mass, Eucharist, Communion and Lord's Supper. Mass and Eucharist tend to be used more by those who take the sacramental view while in Baptist Churches, you will usually hear it called Communion or Lord's Supper.

Where Baptism is a rite of initiation where one identifies with Christ and His Cross, the Lord's Supper is the ongoing celebration of that sacrifice. We believe communion is a "memorial feast" where we remember Christ, without any special grace attached. That is not to say that Christ does not bless His people during communion but we cannot assume just because we take communion that grace will be given. It is thus for believers who share in Christ's Cross to regularly celebrate our communion with Christ as our Lord and each other as the family of God. Communion will usually be conducted by the pastor or elder as the leader of the congregation under Christ and should be done regularly.

A COSTLY CHOICE

You may think that this is all just a boring argument amongst cloistered theologians. However, taking these stands was costly for the historical Baptists. When the first Baptists took a stand against the Roman Catholic Church and Established Church of England in the 16th Century, they were barred from holding any public office

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or military rank. They were ostracised for their convictions and some were martyred. Indeed, our very name "Baptists" was not one we invented. Rather, we were given that name by those who ridiculed the Church for baptising believers rather than babies. It was legally required for people to take Communion in a certain way and to baptise a certain way. Holding true to what they saw as the Biblical message, the first Baptists endured prison (such as John Bunyan) and death rather than compromise on faith!

In our modern age, when you can hold just about any position on any subject, it is unthinkable to us that taking the Baptist point of view would be so costly. But, it was this stand that led to modern principles such as "Freedom of Conscience," "Freedom of Religion" and "Separation of Church and State." Our modern free and democratic society owes a great debt to the first Dissenters (of which the early Baptists were a key part).

Baptists desire to be "radically conservative"! "That's an oxymoron," I hear you say. What this means is that we are conservative in that we always revert to Scripture as our rule of faith and practice and radical in that we put Scripture before any tradition or hierarchy that imposes otherwise. We owe a great deal to our forebears, not just for the adherence to Scripture but also the price they paid to earn us this liberty.

BUT IS IT BIBLICAL?

Just because a group is willing to take a radical stand on a point doesn't mean they're right. Being sincere is no good you're sincerely wrong! So, does our theology on Baptism and Communion measure up to Scripture?

First, regarding Baptism, Jesus Himself instituted it as something to be done on conversion (Matt 28:19) and the early Church practised it as the initiation into the Church (Acts 2:41). Additionally, it is clear from Scripture that Baptism was by immersion because the Greek word (βαπτίζω – baptizo) means "dip." Indeed, at Christ's baptism, he had to "come up out of the water" (Mk 1:10), which one hardly has to do if only being sprinkled!

Second, regarding Communion, we can see from Christ's words (Luke 22:10) that it was for remembrance and not imparting automatic forgiveness. Indeed, Paul makes this even clearer (1 Cor 11:24-26). It is clearly something that is done regularly (Acts 2:46) and by believers (1 Cor 11:27-29). It is therefore the ongoing celebration of fellow believers of the sacrifice of Christ that makes us brothers and sisters.

IMPLICATIONS

If this is what we believe, then there are some obvious implications:

- If you are a believer, you should be baptised. It is assumed that a believer will be baptised. There is no more an argument for an unbaptised believer than a believer who is not part of a local Church!
- We should join together to celebrate the Lord's Supper and continually meet together regularly. If Communion is a sign of our fellowship, then we should not forsake the meeting of believers (Heb 10:25) & especially when we gather for Communion. Christ doesn't just want us to "attend" a Church but "join" a Church – in mission, prayer, spirit, communion, financially, the Word, commitment.

CONCLUSION

We believe that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the only two ordinances given to the Church by Christ Himself. Other denominations may have other "sacraments" but these are the only two that have been given directly by Christ. Therefore, let's enjoy them, revel in them, encourage one another in them and promote them. There is no magical formula or special promise of grace but is it any surprise that when Christians proclaim the death and resurrection of our Lord in the Christ-given way, they experience a spiritual moment.

FURTHER TALKING POINT TOPICS

Next month, we'll look at our next Baptist distinctive – Congregational Government.