

Baptism as an Outward and Visible sign of an Inward Transformation

Our Baptist heritage claims two ecclesial practices of baptism and communion as ordained (commanded and modeled) by Jesus during his earthly ministry. Both ordinances are communal experiences that strengthen the faith and witness of believers. Baptists historically have been reticent to use the term “sacrament” (vehicles of God’s special grace given for salvation) as assuredly, God bestows his grace and favor upon his people in numerous ways and experiences not limited to certain practices; all the while acknowledging participants can certainly realize a sacramental experience through their or another’s baptism and in the communal breaking of bread.

Believer’s baptism gives public testimony to one’s desire to put to death that which enslaves and to find new and abundant life in service to God. Immersion is the preferred mode of practice for its visual representation of dying to self and resurrection to new life in Christ. Though the practice of baptism has roots in Jewish initiation rites as well as ritual cleansing (the Mikveh¹), it served in the life of Jesus as the inauguration of his active ministry as well as his affirmation of the work of John in calling Israel to repentance. Jesus humbled himself, though he needed neither cleansing, repentance nor initiation into the family of God. His act was pleasing to his Father and affirmed by the ascension of the Holy Spirit in the form of a Dove, the presence of the Holy Trinity. We thus declare Jesus as our Lord by obedience (from the Hebrew *obed*, “to listen”) through the waters of baptism at an age of understanding as guided by the Holy Spirit.

Our tradition does not view baptism as a substitute for male circumcision, which identified one as belonging to Israel nor is it practiced as a means to cleanse original sin. Parents are offered the opportunity to dedicate their child to God as a commitment to rear their child within the community of faith. As one matures and owns their personal faith in Jesus, they are encouraged to make a public confession of that faith, proclaiming Jesus as Savior and Lord of their life through immersion in the waters of baptism. Those baptized then become members into what is known as the *regenerate*² Church, which can be represented by membership into the local church, according to the local church practice.

Churches affiliated with the CBWC affirm these historic understandings. Individual churches may vary on practice. For example, one of our churches allows a verbal public confession of faith in place of immersion in the case of those who have experienced infant baptism or adult baptism by another mode such as sprinkling or pouring. Others encourage those who come from other faith traditions to experience believer’s baptism by immersion as an affirmation of their faith and calling and to be an encouragement to the community of believers present, being so visually rich in meaning and expression. Baptism is not meant to be a form of exclusion but as an opportunity to “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have”³.

¹ The word *Mikveh* literally means ‘a gathering, pooling or flowing’ and was most often used in reference to water. The practices of *Mikveh* were widely used for a variety of purposes for ritual cleansing.

² Saved, baptized church membership is historically one of the 8 Baptist distinctives. The church is made up of those who have confessed faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior and demonstrated that commitment in the waters of baptism.

³ | Peter 3: 15