

Sermon Starter

Value 2: Community

Big Idea

Although Baptists share a lot of things in common with other churches they have a radical view of baptism, a radical view of the Lord's supper and radical church structure.

If you didn't realise it, you are in a Baptist Church. Now for some of you, that is highly significant. You grew up in a Baptist Church, or you chose to join a Baptist Church and so you went looking for a Baptist Church in your area, and that was the one you were going to go to.

But for others of you, the fact that this Church is called a *Baptist* church does not have a great deal of significance for you. It just happened this was the nearest church, or it was one of several that you tried and it was the one you settled on as the best, and the fact that it is a Baptist church was neither here nor there. But Church denominations are a bit like brand names. There are different brands of churches just as there are different brands of many products. And each brand has certain characteristics which make it different from the others. And you choose a certain brand because that brand has the particular characteristics which you want. For example, I choose to eat at Hungry Jacks, because the burgers are better at Hungry Jacks. I wear Nike sportswear because I "Just Do It." I wear Levis because "I fit the Legend." ☺

Each brand has its own characteristics. In the same way, each denomination, each brand of Church has its own distinctive features. So what are the distinctive features of the Baptist denomination?

You might note that the Reformation was triggered by Christians who began to take the Bible seriously. With the advent of translations apart from Latin and the printing press, suddenly those apart from the priests and monks were able to read the Scriptures for themselves for the first time in centuries. For a thousand years before the Bible could only be read through the filter of the church.

And it was when people started taking the Bible seriously again that a thing called the reformation began. And the Anabaptists, and the Baptists who followed them, were considered the lunatic fringe of the reformation movement. They were, in a term coined by British Baptist Paul Beasley-Murray, radical believers. Radical comes from the Latin word, *radix* which means root. And so a radical is one who gets back to the fundamentals. One who gets back to the roots of a movement and adheres strongly to them. And as Australian Baptists we like to think that we continue to stand in the tradition. In particular we do three radical things.

We have a radical view of baptism.

Believer's baptism by full immersion has created some real misunderstandings and comedy over the years. Take these cartoons for example.

However, despite the Baptist name, believer's baptism by immersion is not the key distinctive of Baptist churches. It was their serious, radical, approach to the Bible which led the Anabaptists, and we who follow in their spirit, to review the practice of baptism in the Church.

You see, throughout Europe at that time, the Church and government worked hand in hand. When a child was born they were baptised in the local church as quickly as possible. The church acted as the register of

births and deaths and so the state had an interest in seeing all the children baptised so it could keep a tab on who was who and collect their taxes.

Further, if a child died before he or she was baptised they believed the child went to hell. The words spoken by the priest and the sprinkling of water was, in itself, adequate to make the child a member of the church for life and guaranteed their eternal life.

But when the Anabaptists read their new Bibles they discovered something. They decided the practice of baptising children did not square with the Scriptures, and so they stopped it.

In a world where everybody who was born or lived in a certain geographical area was considered a Christian because they had been baptised, the Anabaptists discovered from the Scripture that being a Christian was not dependent on being baptised or where you were born but depended on a personal faith decision.

You see, at the heart of the Anabaptist and Baptist understanding of baptism is really a theology of conversion.

The Anabaptists realised that in order to be a Christian you had to be converted. You had to be converted from sin and death and rebellion against God, to repentance and life and trust in God. They discovered from the Bible that there was a transaction that had to take place. There was an event which had to occur between God and the individual, in order for them to become a Christian.

And it was their understanding of conversion, and that their understanding that the Church should be composed of converted Christians, not those who thought they were Christians just because they had been baptised as children, which resulted in Anabaptists and Baptists developing their distinctive form of baptism.

Over against the great state churches of Europe, Baptists developed a radical model of the church. They developed churches composed only of those who had been converted and where that conversion was expressed by water baptism as the means of entry. Their radical view of baptism marked the entry to their radical church. They saw that biblical baptism mirrored or symbolised the process of Christian conversion.

Firstly, they saw baptism was a declaration of unity with Christ. Romans 6:3-4: "... don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? {4} We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

Paul said that when we became Christians we were baptised into the death of Jesus. That has two consequences. Firstly, as we share his death, so we also share his resurrection. By identifying with his death, we also identify with his life.

But there is another consequence. Dying with Jesus means we die to our old selfish life and begin a new life.

And those conversion consequences, dying to self and identifying with the death and resurrection of Jesus, are symbolised by full immersion water baptism. It is this understanding of conversion which demands total immersion.

It has been suggested that a better symbol of conversion would be a coffin. That rather than baptising new Christians in water we should have a coffin at the front of the church. And if someone had become a Christian they would climb in the coffin and the pastor would declare, "Such and such is dead, say your goodbyes" and then slam the lid shut. He would then open the coffin and say, "Welcome a new person, one whom Christ lives in and rules."

However, a tank of water illustrates the reality of conversion adequately. However, there is another aspect of conversion which is symbolised by baptism.

Baptism by immersion also symbolises the cleansing from sin which accompanies conversion. Paul recounts that after he was converted and he was given back his sight that he was told in Acts 22:16: "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

There are several other places in the Bible, even the OT, where immersion in water is used to convey the reality of being washed clean from sin and guilt and being made pure in the sight of God.

The irony is that sometimes you meet people who say they that they want to delay their baptism on the ground that they have sin in their lives and are not good enough for God; as if baptism is some sort of sign of Christian maturity. The reverse is the case. In baptism we acknowledge that we are not good enough - that we stand in need of God's cleansing power. Baptism is for sinners - repentant sinners, sure, but sinners all the same.

However, baptism conveys something else about conversion as well.

Baptism is a confession of faith. Romans 10:9-10: "That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. {10} For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

There are two aspects to the conversion process. In order to express our saving faith, we trust in our heart, and we declare with our mouths. This and other verses indicate that both are needed to be saved.

And baptism is the moment where converts unequivocally declare that they are fair dinkum about their faith. Indeed, many think that their baptism is first and foremost an act of witness. To this end, people being baptised are encouraged to invite their friends and relatives to see it. Further, most Baptist churches give people who are being baptised the opportunity to give their testimonies of God's saving power in their lives. It is their public confession of faith.

The fourth aspect of conversion symbolised by baptism is entry into the universal church. 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

When we became Christians we not only became identified with Christ, but also to his people, the church. When we became Christians we not only became committed to Christ, but also to his people, the church. We simply do not have a choice in the matter. To be a Christian, to be converted, automatically means that you were baptised *by* the one Holy Spirit *into* the one Body of Christ.

To think that we can be a Christian in isolation is to misunderstand what our conversion means. To be baptised into Christ and then not be a part of his church is an impossibility.

When the Anabaptists, and then the Baptists, studied their Bibles about baptism, like we just did, they realised what a tragedy it was to baptise children.

They realised that believer's baptism by immersion was just so full of meaning that it should be a crucial part of each Christian's conversion. When they saw what it stood for they saw that baptism was a tremendous privilege which they were missing out on.

And so they baptised themselves again. In their anger the church authorities, who considered they were scorning their state sanctioned infant baptism, labelled them the Ana-baptists - the re-baptisers, and set about persecuting them for their radical beliefs.

The Anabaptists paid a terrible price for their practise of believer's baptism by immersion, including being tied up and thrown into lakes to drown. But they won something back for us. They won us back the privilege of being baptised as believers.

Believer's baptism is a glorious God appointed rendezvous. It is a moment in eternity when the full saving power of God is publicly declared in the life of the convert. It is a moment of cosmic significance.

And to think that some people don't want to be baptised.

But not only do we have a radical view of baptism, we have a radical meal to share as well.

For some there is great confusion about what the Lord's table means. There is a scene in the movie, "Lawrence of Arabia," where TE Lawrence is travelling with an Arab on a train. They are talking about religion when out of the blue the Arab says - "I do not like Christians - they are cannibals." "Cannibals?" asks Lawrence in amazement, "What makes you think Christians are cannibals?" The Arab replied, "Well, I was once told, that every week they eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus."

There is even confusion about the name: Is it the Eucharist, Communion, the Lord's Table, the breaking of bread or the Lord's supper?

Along with baptism, the Lord's table is one of the more unusual and radical things we do. It is radical, in that it we try to do exactly how the Bible says to do it, and we seek to understand it strictly in terms of what the Bible says.

By the 16th century a great deal of ceremony and superstition had come to be associated with what had become known as the sacrament of the Eucharist. It had reached the point where the cup was no longer offered and the bread had become a wafer. They believed that if an ordained priest said the right words, the wafer actually became the body of Christ and that every Christian had to consume that wafer in order to maintain their salvation.

This made excommunication, or banning from the Church, very serious. By excommunicating someone it meant that person could not receive the Eucharist. And since most believed that meant they would lose their salvation, the church had a major weapon to keep its people in order.

But when the Anabaptists and some of the other reformers read their Bibles they discovered that was not what the Lord's table was all about. They saw that conversion was necessary for salvation, not the Eucharist. But they found the Lord's Table had a different, but just as powerful role to play in the life of a Radical Christian.

Firstly, Baptists believe the Lord's Table is a memorial meal. As Paul said 1 Corinthians 11:23-25: "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, {24} and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." {25} In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.""

The core of the Lord's supper is remembrance. When you read what Jesus said, as the reformers did, you see that what he is doing is not bringing salvation, but showing the disciples how to remember what he was about to do. The Lord's supper is not the means of salvation, it is a reminder of the means of salvation.

The reality is that we forget things. Really important things. I forgot my mother's birthday once. Once. But Jesus realised that our salvation and the means by which it is achieved is too important to forget. And so he started this little practice so that we will not remember what he has done. The RSLs are good at this. Every night at 7:00pm they turn the music and the pokies off and everybody observes a minute's silence to remember those who have died in war. The silence ends with the announcement "Lest we forget." And a good way to finish the Lord's supper would be the same: "Lest we forget."

But Baptists also believe it is an opportunity to meet the risen Lord. Just as baptism is a God appointed rendezvous, so is the Lord's table. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:16: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?"

It is not just a memorial like the moment's silence on Anzac Day. It is something we participate in. The word translated 'participation' is *koinonia* - to share or be a part of.

The Lord's Table is a place of meeting for us with our risen saviour. As we participate, He affirms once again his love for us and the forgiveness he has purchased at such cost. As we encounter his grace he heals our wounds. As we share his table He prompts us to thankful love, he deepens our commitment.

Of course, it is not Christ who draws near to us. Jesus dwells in our hearts. He is completely present to us all the time already. He is not present in the bread or wine as such. It is not him who draws near to us at his table - but we who draw near to him. As we reach for the bread and the cup, we reach out to our saviour, who is always waiting, ready with arms outstretched to meet us.

Third, Baptists believe the Lord's table is an expression of fellowship. 1 Corinthians 10:17: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."

As Jesus broke the one loaf and distributed it to his disciples, and as he shared the one cup amongst them he was showing them in picture form that they together shared in him one new life of unity. We are saved by being in Christ, and so we are all one body.

The early Baptists recognised that the Lord's table was a community thing - it was something to be shared together. They would greet each other and have a collection for the poor in the Church. There was a great sense of fellowship and sharing around the table.

Hence Paul's emphasis on correct relationships before participating in the Lord's table: 1 Corinthians 11:28-30: "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. {29} For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. {30} That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."

Obviously, if you want to kill the guy in the next row, you are not really ready to enjoy the communal aspects of sharing in the Lord's table. If you want to punch him out, you are not recognising him as a fellow part of the Body of Christ. You are not accepting the unity which exists between you. And so you bring suffering on yourself.

Finally, the Lord's table is an opportunity for rededication. If the Lord's table is meaningful, then it will end in renewed dedication - it will spur us onwards in our service of Christ. An OT passage beautifully describes the process:

Psalm 116:12-14: "How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me? {13} I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. {14} I will fulfil my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people."

Although Baptists have traditionally not used the word 'sacrament' of the Lord's supper, it is useful to recognise that the word *sacramentum* was used to describe a lawyer's oath of loyalty to the emperor. And in this sense the Lord's table can be sacramental as we remember the saviour and renew the baptismal vows we made to the Lord who loved us and died for us.

As with baptism, the Lord's table is a great privilege. It is a gift from our Lord. Knowing how he made us, he designed certain things for us to do which he knew would be a powerful source in our lives. He instituted the Lord's table:

- so we would remember and be thankful,
- so that we would draw near and encounter him,
- so that we would recognise our part of the community of faith and
- so we could rededicate our lives to him.

Simple but brilliant.

The third thing that Baptists have is a radical structure

As the early Baptists cut themselves off from the mainline state church, they began to ask the question, "So how then should we structure our new churches?"

And as was typically the case, they turned to the Bible in order to discover how the Church should be structured.

The state church of the day had two distinctive structural features which the early Baptists rejected.

The first was the way it made decisions. The church of the day was a complex hierarchy. There was a pyramid of authority reaching upwards from the local priests, through the bishops, Archbishops, Canons and Cardinals and finally at the top of the tree was the Pope. The ultimate authority resided in the Pope, who delegated his authority down through the structure to the ordinary Church member, who had virtually no say at all.

The second aspect of the church structure of the day which the early Baptists rejected was the way ministry was done. Ministry was the thing done by the priest. He was the holy and ordained one, he was the one who had the magic words, he did the ministry at the front of the Church with the baptisms and the wafers, and the people in the church, and well their job was just to go along for the ride.

The priests were the mediators between God and the people and the people could only reach God through the priest.

However, when the Anabaptists and their followers turned to their Bibles they discovered four concepts which lead them to their new radical church structure.

Firstly, they discovered the Lordship of Christ. They read in Colossians 1:18: "And [Christ] is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

And as they read this passage and others they saw that Jesus took an active, dynamic role in the leadership of the Church. He hadn't started it and walked away. He hadn't said to the disciples, "Ok guys, it is all your show now, run the church while I am away." No, Jesus is the CEO of the Church and he is still in his office. So the first principle of Church structure is that Christ is the CEO and so the structure and decision making processes have to be built around that reality.

The second thing the early Baptists discovered was a concept called the 'priesthood of all believers.'

Addressing the Church members, Peter said in 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God."

The message of the NT is the equality of all believers in the sight of God. All were equally sinners, and all are equally saved by the blood of Jesus. Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

There is no need for an intermediary between us and God. No human is any better, any more holy in the sight of God, so nobody has the right to act on behalf of anybody else. We are all redeemed. We are all priests. We all have equal access to God. Each of us has the HS and the Bible. And so, when it comes to hearing the will of God, each of us is able to make a contribution.

The third concept they discovered built on the two I have just mentioned. It was the church meeting. As the early Baptists looked at the Church in the NT they saw that the whole church would gather on occasions to discuss issues and make decisions.

And, more importantly, those meetings of the church had the authority to manage the affairs of the local church. There are no denominations or general organisations in the NT. There was no central decision making body. No hierarchy.

In contrast to decision-making by one or more individuals in a place of authority, each local church made its own decisions, under the Lordship of Christ, through a meeting of members.

For example, look at Acts 15. An important decision needed to be made. We read in Acts 15:4: "When they [Paul and Barnabas] came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them." Then in Acts 15:12: "The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them."

And so, in Baptist Churches, the ultimate decision making body has been the Church Meeting, seeking to identify and apply the will of God.

Some people are attracted to Baptist Churches because they seem democratic. But a Church should not be a democracy. It is not decision making by popular vote. It is not government by the people for the people. That is democracy.

The Church is not a democracy, it is a Theocracy. It is government by God for God, through the instrument of the Church Meeting. When a vote is taken and some vote 'yes' and some vote 'no' that is an indication of failure. A divided vote indicates that some, either the minority or the majority, are not understanding the will of God.

But the early Baptists discovered another concept as well, equally important as the Church Meeting.

Finally, they re-discovered the role of appointed Local Church leaders. Throughout the NT we see the role of elders and deacons as leaders of the local Church. For example, in Acts 15:6: "The apostles and elders met to consider this question." From this discussion, the leaders brought a recommendation to the Church to consider.

And that is the model of the NT Church. The elders and deacons - the leaders of the Church - meeting as a group and making decisions, and then interacting with the larger Church meeting, together seeking to understand and apply the will of Jesus.

The picture is neither the Church Meeting making all the decisions, or the leaders making all the decisions. There is this built in tension, both the leaders and the members trying to understand what to do in a given situation.

And so, the radical believers now had their own radical church structure to further their radical new faith. Just as the early Baptists won back the Bible, and Baptism and the Lord's Table from the priests and the hierarchy, so they won back their local Church. No longer did their church belong to the priest or the government or the denomination - it was their church. They were responsible for it. They sought God's direction for it. It was theirs.

And I think we take that a little bit for granted.

I meet Christians who like to be part of a local church but hold back from full membership. Because Baptist churches control their own finances and property they need to formalise their membership a bit so that somebody cannot just wander in off the street and misappropriate the finances. But this little bit of formality seems to be enough to frighten off many post-modern Christians.

In the early days of the Anabaptist and Baptist movements, the members of these churches were thought to be extremist.

People asked them, "why can't you just go along with the flow? Why do you have to make such a big deal about these issues?" And the answer was, the Baptists had rediscovered their Bible, and nothing could ever be the same again. It was their ultimate authority. It set the foundation for their lives and churches. It was radical. And it made them radical believers. Even to the point of death. What a great tradition we stand in. Let's celebrate it and embrace it.

Suggested further resource:

Beasley-Murray, Paul. *Radical Believers: The Baptist Way of Being Church*. Swindon, England: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992.

Bible Study Questions

1. How did you first get involved with a Baptist Church?
2. What aspects of Baptist Churches do you value the most?
3. Would you go to a Church of a different denomination? Why or why not?
4. What is your understanding of the reasons behind infant baptism?
Read Romans 6:3-4
5. In what ways does full immersion baptism reflect the experience of conversion?
Read 1 Corinthians 12:13
6. Why is it useful to have a single method of marking entry into the Church?
Read Acts 22:16
7. Are there any reasons why a newly converted Christian should put off being baptised?
8. Do you go to Church Member's Meetings - why or why not?
Read Acts 15:1-22
9. What was the nature of the problem the Church was facing? Do we see a similar sort of problem nowadays?
10. What process of Church government is revealed in verses 4-6 and then :22?
11. What is the difference between a democracy and a Theocracy?
12. How can you tell a Church is operating as a democracy?
13. What are the strengths of the Baptist style of Church structure? Weaknesses?

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