

Second Baptist Church Deacons
Baptism Task Force
REPORT and RECOMMENDATIONS

Approved by Deacons: March 12, 2017
Approved by Church Council: May 21, 2017
Presented to Church Conference: July 30, 2017



PART 1: REPORT

BACKGROUND

Recognizing the central role baptism plays in our personal and collective faith, and acknowledging the questions many in our church have regarding the place of baptism in our community of faith, the deacons of Second Baptist Church first undertook a study of the subject at their annual retreat in February, 2014. Central to the study was a presentation given by Mark Wingfield, Associate Pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, and a book by John Tyler called "Baptism – We've Got It Right and Wrong." The book study and discussion continued over a number of months and resulted in a consensus that everyone in the church needed a similar opportunity to explore this important subject in depth.

A task force of active deacons was appointed with the charge to create a deacon-led church-wide program for study and conversation. The task force was built to represent a cross section of the congregation including a diversity of ages and personal faith backgrounds. Members were Becky Gossett (Deacon chair during the initial study), Rolland Yoakum, Amy Duncan, Mark Hilton, Chris Sizemore, Debbie Lane, Blane Baker, and Greg Duncan (chair).

PROCESS – The Work of the Task Force

In our initial meetings, we identified three key questions we believed should be central to the dialogue:

1. What is the relationship between baptism and Christian faith (personal and public)?
2. What does Second Baptist church believe about baptism, and why?
3. What is the relationship between baptism and church membership?

We further identified characteristics that would be goals of the process. We committed to facilitating a deacon-led church-wide conversation about baptism that:

- Was accessible to all who wished to participate or to have a voice, valuing and encouraging expression of personal experiences.
- Raised questions, offered ample opportunity for exploration, moved toward consensus, and provided for resolution.
- Renewed individual and corporate enthusiasm for baptism as an essential part of the Christian faith.
- Generated a deeper understanding of the roles of baptism for the individual and for the faith community. (In relation to personal faith, church membership, discipleship, etc.)
- Resulted in better and more meaningful relationships across the demographics of our church.
- Provided an ongoing way for our church to articulate what we believe about baptism.

Among the activities we undertook as part of putting together this church-wide experience were sharing of our personal baptism stories, re-reading and discussing the Tyler book, studying related materials, and talking with other churches who had worked on similar conversations. It became apparent that a truly meaningful and comprehensive “conversation” would need to have multiple components to allow for differing levels of interest, expertise, experience, and even opinions represented by our diverse congregation.

Gradually, a framework began to emerge for a multi-faceted program that would span several weeks and provide a variety of opportunities for engagement and types of study/discussion. The project was given the title “BAPTISM: A Conversation | *Exploring Our Beliefs Together.*”

PROCESS – The Church-Wide Conversation

Seven key components made up the program offered to the congregation. Additionally, we made a webpage available to provide for additional details and interaction, as well as to post videos of the events for those who could not attend. With assistance from office staff we utilized all the church’s channels to promote the overall program and each component individually.

1. **Survey.** With assistance from the expert team responsible for the church’s ongoing survey project, we drafted important questions concerning baptism experiences and beliefs. These questions were included in a larger survey fielded in the spring of 2016, and allowed us not only to learn respondents’ thoughts, but also to gain insights from correlating the data with the demographics of the survey.
2. **Sunday lunch and speaker.** Dubbed “Let’s Start the Conversation” this event was a hosted all-church lunch on September 18th, 2016. It was scheduled following a morning worship service to encourage the greatest possible attendance. The speaker was Mark Wingfield, who had helped the deacons begin their own study of baptism. Mark’s charge was to provide context for the overall baptism conversations and to introduce the three key questions identified above. Approximately 100+ people participated.

3. **All-church Bible study.** We felt strongly that a conversation about baptism should include in-depth Bible study and so we tapped David May, Professor of New Testament at Central Seminary to develop a three-week curriculum on the subject. David delivered the first two weeks to a joint Bible study session (in lieu of individual classes) on September 25th and October 2nd, 2016. On the third week, Bible study classes met individually and were encouraged to use Dr. May's curriculum to complete the study. Approximately 80 people participated.
4. **All-church book study.** Knowing the value the deacons found in studying the Tyler book, we wanted a similar experience to be available to everyone as part of this process. Sherry McGlaughlin, Pastor of Blue Ridge Boulevard Christian Church and former minister of education at Second Baptist, led a three-week book study on Wednesday nights beginning on September 21st, 2016. The study was the primary adult offering on these weeks and approximately 50 people participated.
5. **Baptism stories.** The task force began each of our meetings with a different member sharing his or her personal baptism story. Hearing the variety in our own stories and the meaningfulness each person's baptism carried, we knew we wanted to replicate this experience as part of the offering to the whole church. We invited anyone to share a personal baptism story in 500 words or less. We also solicited baptism stories from people representing a variety of faith journeys. The stories were published online, in Sunday morning worship guides, and as handouts in other church meetings and gathering spaces.
6. **Reflection sessions.** An interesting part of building a program like this is not knowing how it will be received or what sorts of responses it might elicit. To provide for this unknown outcome we built in a series of "reflection" sessions to allow for unscripted conversations to take place. There was no agenda for these sessions, and the objective was simply to be sure the conversation was complete. Three sessions were offered on October 12th & 16th with approximately 20 people participating.
7. **Assessment.** Critical to any program such as this is the time and effort spent to determine its effectiveness and to articulate observations and possible actions. We asked the entire deacon body to assist the task force in this regard by not only participating, but also by helping us summarize the experiences. Subsequently, the task force has worked to put together this comprehensive report for the benefit of the deacon body, the congregation, and our staff.

PART 2: RECOMMENDATIONS

We have distilled our data and observations into four recommendations that we believe to be representative of our church regarding baptism. Not all require change. Even as societal views of church evolve and our own attendance grows in diversity, it appears that the significance of baptism can and should remain strong. It seems neither necessary nor appropriate to lessen the importance our church places on believer's baptism by immersion. Quite the contrary. At the same time, the application of a specific type of baptism as a qualification for membership no longer appears to be consistent with our church's view of general Baptist principles or of membership.

1. Believer's baptism by immersion is part of our Baptist heritage and should remain our singular practice at Second Baptist Church.

Summary: Anyone making a profession of faith at Second Baptist should follow the full example of Jesus and be baptized by immersion. This should be the only form of baptism offered at our church because it is consistent with our heritage as Baptists, our understanding of scripture, and our constitution. Though the act of baptism doesn't provide salvation, it is an act of scriptural obedience.

Action: No specification action is required since this recommendation does not represent a change. However, it would seem appropriate that one or more qualified persons be asked to author a corresponding statement that could be placed on the church's website and provided to individuals who seek more information about the church's beliefs and practices regarding baptism. Ideally, such a statement would be in the broader context of an explanation of the historic Baptist principles to which our church subscribes.

2. Baptism by immersion should be separated from the definition or requirement of membership at Second Baptist Church.

Summary: Church membership as we know it is a practical matter of the modern church. It is important and should hold legitimate responsibilities and value (see recommendation #4). Based on Philippians 2:11, it should be open to all those who "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Those joining by new profession of faith should be baptized by immersion as is the practice of our church (see recommendation #1). Those coming by statement of membership in another Christian church should affirm their profession of faith and the present meaningfulness of their baptismal experience. Recognizing that baptism on its own is not salvific, nor is it an initiation act, a second baptism, while being made available, should not be a requirement.

Just as our communion table is open to all those who profess belief in Jesus, so too should be our membership. We should neither deny the validity of an individual's Christian experience, nor deny membership based on that experience, particularly given the wide variety of approaches to baptism throughout the centuries of Christianity. In short, we should clearly place more importance on the repentance of sin and faith in Christ than on a mode of baptism.

Action: Section V, paragraph 1 of the Constitution must be changed to reflect this recommendation. We recommend that the pastor, with input from this task force, draft appropriate language for a revised membership policy, and that the church council propose such changes for church vote.

3. The experience of baptism at Second Baptist Church should be strengthened and enhanced.

Summary: By design, the ordinance of baptism is both intensely personal and highly public. In both regards additional work is warranted to ensure that each candidate for baptism at Second Baptist

Church has a deeply meaningful experience and that each baptism that takes place is significant for those who witness it.

Action: While no specific change is required, we recommend that the ministerial staff undertake an intentional review of the experience of baptism (both individual and corporate) with the goal of finding ways to strengthen and enhance it for all.

4. The value of membership at Second Baptist Church should be better defined and communicated to clearly articulate expectations, responsibilities and benefits.

Summary: Becoming a member of a local church seems to hold decreasing importance in the view of many attenders. The line between associating with a church and being an official member of that church is blurred, if not practically gone. If membership can be separated from hurdles of qualification (see recommendation #2), the decision to join with Second Baptist Church can be given new meaning and definition.

Action: On its own, this recommendation does not require a specific change. However, we suggest that the pastor appoint a small, staff-led team to study how to make membership at Second Baptist Church more valuable and significant.

CLOSING

In fulfillment of our appointment to the Deacon Task Force on Baptism, we are providing this summary and recommendations to the church body for discussion and action. We are each grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important process which speaks to issues at the very core of our Christian faith. It has been meaningful to us as individuals and has strengthened our sense of place at Second Baptist Church.

Respectfully,

Becky Gossett	Rolland Yoakum
Amy Duncan	Mark Hilton
Chris Sizemore	Debbie Lane
Blane Baker	Greg Duncan (chair)