

Baptism: The Meaning, the Recipients, and the Mode

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The Meaning of Baptism

Have you ever really considered the meaning and purpose of baptism? Have you ever wondered why believers, and the children of believers, are to be baptised?

Let's begin with what baptism is not.

If parents want their child baptised because they hope thereby to ensure their child's eternal salvation, the minister must explain that baptism in no way secures the salvation of the one baptised. There is no virtue in the water used in baptism, or in the formula (that is, the words spoken) as the rite is performed, or in the person who administers the baptism, to secure any change in the child himself or in God's attitude toward the child. Baptism is not a magical charm to keep a child from going to hell. It does not secure salvation for him, nor does the absence of baptism prevent his salvation.

Let's move on now to what baptism is.

Here are two terms -- "water baptism" and "Spirit baptism" -- which mark an important distinction. By "water baptism," we are speaking of nothing more than the outward ceremony itself, the act of sprinkling water on someone in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet, if this water baptism does not actually save anyone, as we have seen, why do we do it? We baptise people, not because of what water baptism does but because of what it symbolizes. Water baptism is an outward ceremony that symbolizes "Spirit baptism," which is regeneration, that work of the Holy Spirit on someone's heart whereby he is said to be 'born again.' Spirit baptism is that inner cleansing, or quickening, which everybody needs. This, then, is the real thing, of which water baptism is only a symbol. This is not meant to imply that there are two baptisms; there is but one baptism (Eph. 4:5) which has two distinguishable parts, and these two parts are not necessarily together.

When we baptise a believer (someone who is born again, and has made a public profession of his faith in Jesus Christ), we merely confer upon him the outward sign of the inner cleansing which he has already received. When we baptise the child of a believer, on the other hand, we confer upon him the same outward sign, yes, but we understand that this child has not yet received the inner cleansing he needs for salvation. It is even possible that the child will never receive this cleansing, or quickening, yet we baptise him anyway on account of the promise that it seals to him, that if he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ he will be saved. Gen. 17:7,8; Acts 2:38,39; John 3:36; Acts 16:31. Note that this is a conditional promise, that the condition must be met (and will be met in the elect of God) for salvation to be bestowed. Please note, too, that there is no hint here

of what is known as presumptive regeneration – children cannot make it to heaven on the coattails of their parents, but must trust in Christ, as their parents do, in order to be saved.

Sadly, there are many children of believers who never come to faith in Jesus Christ. Their baptism tells them that this is what they need to do, to flee to Christ, and, if they do not, it will continue to haunt them for all eternity as to what they might have had if only they had done so. There are many other children of believers, however, who happily do seek and find refuge in Christ, and, when they do, their baptism assures them, as believers, that they will be kept by the power of God through faith to the very end, that nothing will be able to separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus their Lord.

Immersionists often tell us that water baptism is not meant to portray the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, so much, but rather the work of Christ. They say that baptism is the symbol of the believer being buried with Christ, and in support of this view they quote Rom. 6:3,4 and Col. 2:12. We must reject this view, however, and we do so for the following reasons:

1. The baptism referred to in these verses is very clearly Spirit baptism, not water baptism. To say that by the application of water we are baptised into the death of Christ, that we are thus saved, is sacramentalism. Once we see that this is regeneration, on the other hand, what Paul is really telling us here comes to light. By the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit we are made partakers of Christ's death.
2. The word for 'buried' in these verses is not a precise translation. The Greek word, for which we have no English equivalent, speaks of nothing more than the effective disposal of the body, and it does not matter how that may be done. The most common way to dispose of dead bodies until a few years ago was to bury them, hence the believer is said to be 'buried' with Christ in these passages. The whole point is this, that, if we are regenerated, we are crucified with Christ – 'dead and buried', as it were – and our legal status before God has changed in that He has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light, and has brought us out of Satan's domain into the kingdom of His own dear Son.
3. There are many passages of the Bible which clearly relate water baptism to Spirit baptism – that is, to the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration (see Matt. 3:11,16; Acts 2:38; 11:15,16; 19:1-6; etc.)

The Recipients of Baptism

If you have ever wondered about the meaning of baptism, you have probably also wondered about who should receive it.

Baptism is for believers.

There can be no question that, among adults, only believers should receive the outward sign of the inner cleansing. For unbelievers to be baptised would be to make a mockery of this holy sacrament. At Pentecost, Peter said, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...” (Acts 2:38). Notice, Peter stressed their need for repentance first, they would have to be converted, and only after that would the ceremony of water baptism have any significance.

Baptism is for the children of believers.

Notice, too, however, that Peter did not end his sermon at v.38, but at v.39, “For the promise is to you and to your children...” At this point, it is important to remember to whom Peter was preaching. It was Pentecost, remember, so he was preaching only to Jews and Jewish proselytes. While many people may think that the promise referred to in v.39 is only for children when they grow up and become believers themselves, certainly Peter and the crowd before him on this day would not have taken that interpretation of his words.

The Jewish understanding of salvation from the Old Testament was that God saves His chosen people according to His everlasting covenant, and that in the administration of this covenant the children (all the males) were to be circumcised, for they, too, came under the Lord's special care and protection. Those children may or may not have been saved in time to come, but as children of believers they entered into a covenantal relationship with the Lord when they were born and were thus shown many temporal mercies for their parents' sake.

In becoming Christians, now, these Jews are naturally concerned about their children; they want to know if they will stand in that same covenantal relationship with the Lord which the children of believers had always enjoyed. Peter assures them, “For the promise is to you and to your children.” To the Jewish mind, nothing could be clearer. If he had meant that those children do not stand any more in that covenantal relationship with the Lord, he surely would have added, “For the promise is to you, but, from now on, it will not be to your children until they grow up”!

The unity of Holy Scripture: Nothing changes in the administration of God covenant without His telling us about it, so that His last word on the subject is still binding.

Immersionists tell us that the New Testament says nothing at all about infant baptism, and, as we may then assume, infant baptism was never practised in the early Church. They call that the “argument from silence”. As a matter of fact, as we have seen above, the argument from silence does not oppose infant baptism but supports it. If there is no mention of infant baptism in the New Testament, one way or the other, we may safely assume that children today share the same covenant blessings as children in Old Testament times. God has not told us of His taking these benefits away, so they must still be there! An added benefit we have today, in fact, is that females, while they have

always been included in the covenant, may now also receive the sign of the covenant and be baptised (see Acts 16:15).

But, is the New Testament really silent on the question of infant baptism? I think not. Take, for example, the five household baptisms which are specifically mentioned. Can we really be certain that there were no young children in any of those houses? Surely, the burden of responsibility rests on the immersionists to prove that. And what about 1 Cor. 7:14? “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now are they holy.” What could that verse possibly mean except that the children of at least one believing parent stand in covenantal relationship with the Lord in the New Testament as they did in the Old Testament?

It should be made very clear that baptism in the New Testament has replaced circumcision as a sign of God's covenant in the Old Testament. Just as infants of believers were to be circumcised in Old Testament times, in other words, so infants of believers are to be baptised now. This fact may not be altogether clear at first, until we realize that circumcision was the symbol of regeneration before the time of Christ (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4), and that baptism has been the symbol of that same great work of God ever since (Col. 2:11,12). Look, for instance, at that passage in Col. 2, “In Him (Christ) you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands (i.e. of the heart), by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, (or 'Christian circumcision', as it may also be translated – and what is that?) buried with Him in baptism, (in Spirit baptism, again the one made without hands, or of the heart) in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

To conclude this section of our study, let me quote Origen, one of the early church fathers, from his Epistle to the Romans. He wrote, “The Church has received the tradition from the apostles to give baptism to little children.” Origen, remember, was born less than 100 years after the death of the last apostle, and, though he did not speak with the authority of an apostle writing under inspiration of God, nevertheless, his is a very early testimony to infant baptism from post-apostolic times.

The Mode of Baptism

How should the sacrament of water baptism be received? Should it be by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling?

The classical meaning of the Greek word BAPTIZO is “to immerse”. On that basis, say the immersionists, we know that the only valid means of baptising anyone is by immersion. Case closed. The question arises, however, does the word baptizo mean only

to immerse, or can it mean other things as well? It is surely of value to note that there is not a single case in all the New Testament where the word must be translated with the idea of immersion, yet there are several cases where it cannot be translated that way. What is important, therefore, is not the classical meaning of the word, what Socrates and Plato might have meant by it, but how it was understood by the biblical writers – that is, in the Greek of the common man.

Let us consider a few examples.

1. Mark 7:4. “When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing (baptizo) of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.” Between meals, would the Pharisees be constantly dipping their couches under water? Surely, not! The ceremonial cleansing referred to here is that of Numbers 19:18, “A clean person shall take hyssop and dip it in the water, sprinkle it on the tent, on all the vessels, on the persons who were there...”
2. Luke 11:38. “When the Pharisee saw it, he marvelled that He (Jesus) had not first washed (baptizo) before dinner.” Again, was Jesus expected to submerge Himself in water, getting completely wet from head to foot, before every meal? Surely, not! This washing was for the hands only (see Mark 7:3), which was not for sanitary purposes, but was a ceremonial cleansing involving the same ceremonial sprinkling mentioned above. It should be noted that this kind of sprinkling is mentioned 54 times in the Bible. If this was how all baptisms were done in the Old Testament, and if no new mode is introduced, why should they not be done this same way in the New Testament?
3. Hebrews 9:10. “...foods and drinks, various washings (baptizo), and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.” What various baptisms are these? The apostle continues in the same chapter to explain what baptisms he is talking about from Old Testament times.

“First, he speaks of 'the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean' (v.13); and the reference is, of course, to the sprinkling of the water of purification described in Numbers 19. Later in the chapter he speaks of how Moses 'took the blood of calves and of goats, with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book, and all the people' (v.19). Still, again, he describes an Old Testament baptism thus: 'Moreover he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle, and the vessels of the ministry' (v.21). Nothing could be clearer than the fact that the 'diverse baptisms' of verse 10 were the sprinklings of the blood and water found so frequently in the Old Testament.” (Rayburn, *What About Baptism?*, pp.28,29)

This should be quite enough to show that what the writers of the Bible meant by baptizo was something other than just immersion. In fact, the entire weight of evidence favours sprinkling, or even pouring, over immersion – though I do not mean to imply that immersion is thereby wrong.

The question is often asked, 'Why not be baptised the same way that Jesus was baptised?' This question assumes, of course, that Jesus was baptised by immersion. Clearly, though,

He was not. And right here we need to make two things perfectly plain.

First, Jesus' baptism was not a Christian (or New Testament) baptism; it was, rather, an Old Testament baptism. Christian baptism is for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). What sins did Jesus have to remit? Obviously, none. Moreover, it should be pointed out that none of the baptisms which John the Baptist administered were Christian baptisms. Even those who were sinners (unlike Jesus), and were baptised by John, had to be baptised again when Jesus instituted Christian baptism (see Acts 19:1-6). Well, then, if Jesus was baptised, but not for the remission of sins, what was it for? It was to “fulfil all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). To understand this, we have to remember that Jesus Christ is our great High Priest, and we have to go back to the Old Testament to see how priests were sanctified (set apart) to holy office.

“God had ordained that priests were to be set aside in a special way at a special age. The Levites were the priestly tribe. You will see in Numbers 4:3, 23, 30 and 35, that thirty years was the age of the separating and sanctifying of the Levites for their priestly work. Christ came to be baptised of John when He was thirty. Then in Numbers 8:7 you will find that the Lord's further directions to Moses with regard to the setting aside of the Levites: 'And thus shalt thou do unto them to cleanse them: Sprinkle water of purifying upon them.' Undoubtedly, it was this righteous commandment of the Lord that was fulfilled in the baptism of Christ.” (Rayburn, p.31)

This sets the baptism of Jesus in a very different context from what we often hear, and may too often assume, does it not? It is also a good reminder to us that we must not attempt to read the New Testament as something that stands on its own. It is the fulfilment of the Old Testament Scriptures, and so we need to study it as such. (See Matt. 5:17,18.)

Second, there is nothing in the account of Jesus' baptism to suggest that He was immersed. We read that He “came up immediately from the water” (Matt. 3:16). This describes how He left the riverbank, however, not how He was baptised. Had He been sprinkled, poured upon, or immersed in the actual baptism itself, the language describing His leaving the edge of the water would have been exactly the same. Consider also the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. There, in v.38, we read that both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water – that is, they stepped into it – and he baptised him. There is nothing in that verse to imply immersion. Look also at v.39, “Now when they came up out of the water...” The Greek word APO is here translated “out of”, but it also means and is more frequently translated “from”. If we were to give here the more usual translation, we would read that they came up *from* the water. Once again, as in the case of Jesus, this describes only their leaving the stream, not the manner in which Philip baptised the eunuch.

In conclusion, this paper is not intended to engage the immersionist in debate. It is intended, rather, to open up all the Scriptures to the end that everyone, like the Bereans (Acts 17:10-12), might search the Scriptures to find out whether these things are so. For a more detailed account of baptism, and to see how as a sacrament it is a sign and seal of

God's covenant, please see my article entitled *The Covenant of Grace* (Faith and Practice: A Journal of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Spring 1995).