

WHO SHOULD BE BAPTIZED?

Introduction

One of the most visible differences between different churches is how each practices baptism. Not only do some sprinkle while others immerse (dunk), churches even differ in whom they baptize. Some churches baptize only those who profess their faith in Jesus Christ (this is often called “believers baptism”) while others baptize believers and their children. While what a person believes or even practices in regard to baptism is not essential to one’s salvation, it is still an important doctrine. On a practical level, parents must wrestle with whether or not they believe their own children should be baptized.

At Village Seven, while we believe that parents should have their children baptized, we also believe that parents should have the freedom to follow their own conscience in this matter. We believe that Village Seven should be a place where Christians can worship and serve together regardless of their convictions about baptism.

What follows is the reasoning why we believe Christian parents should present their children for baptism.

The Definition of a Sacrament

Baptism is one of the two sacraments that our Lord has given to the church. The other is the Lord’s Supper. Saint Augustine said that a sacrament was a “visible form of an invisible grace,” or “a visible sign of a sacred thing.”¹ John Calvin says that it is “an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men.”²

It is important at the outset to state that the Reformed doctrine of baptism rejects all forms of sacerdotalism. Sacerdotalism is the doctrine that the sacraments in and of themselves infuse grace into the recipient. In other words, sacerdotalism claims that one is saved through the sacraments. The Reformers clearly rejected this, as do we, when we claim the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone.

As a sacrament, baptism in and of itself does nothing. The very act of receiving baptism does not save a person. It is not a magical formula. The Westminster Confession of Faith states:

The grace revealed in or by sacraments in their right use does not come from any power in them. Neither does the effectiveness of a sacrament depend on the devoutness or the intention of whoever administers it. Rather the power and effectiveness of the sacraments are the result of the

¹Quote found in *Calvin's Institutes*, 4.14.1

²*Calvin's Institutes*, 4.14.1

*work of the Spirit and rest on God's Word instituting them, since His Word authorizes their use and promises benefits to worthy receivers of them.*³

All of this is to say, that sacraments in and of themselves do not save a person nor do they guarantee one's salvation.

Children in the Old Testament

As one reads through the Old Testament, one can see that children have always been counted among the people of God. Throughout the Bible, believers as well as their children enjoy God's blessing and protection. For example, when God made his covenant with Noah, it was with Noah and his descendants (Genesis 9:9).

In Genesis 17:7-14, God established his covenant with Abraham and his descendants. The sign of the covenant was given not only to Abraham, but even to his children. After that point, baby boys were circumcised on the eighth day. This covenant that God established with Abraham, while having nationalistic aspects, was also a spiritual covenant (Galatians 3:16; Romans 4:16-18, 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1).

This covenant did not end with the Old Testament, nor is it just for the Jews. In Romans 4:16, we discover that all Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles, are now included among God's covenant people. Those who have the faith of Abraham are considered to be the true descendants of Abraham. That means that all Christians are descendants of Abraham. We are the true Israel of God.

The church, then, is not a separate people of God from the nation of Israel. Rather, the church is the name that the Bible gives to God's people in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the people of God were called Israel. In the New Testament, Israel has been expanded to include Gentiles as well as Jews. As Paul says in Romans 9 (quoting from Hosea 2:23): As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

In Romans 11, Paul writes that the Gentiles are grafted into a pre-existing covenant that God had with Israel. While it is a new covenant, it is not completely new. It was not built from scratch, but is more akin to "New and Improved." It is far superior to the old. All this is to say that God's covenant with His people in the New Testament is built upon His covenant with His people in the Old Testament.

In the Old Covenant, children were included. They received the sign of the covenant (circumcision) as well as the promises. How could a Jewish parent whose child was included in the old covenant see the new covenant as superior if it now excluded his children? God did not scrap the old covenant to build the new. He built the new upon the old.

³The Westminster Confession of Faith, new edition, 27.3.

The Meaning of Circumcision

The Old Testament sign of the covenant was circumcision. By sign, we mean that those who had the mark of circumcision were included in the covenant community and counted among the people of God. Those who did not receive the sign were excluded from the community and cut off. Circumcision was established as the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17:11. Deuteronomy 10:16 (see also Deuteronomy 30:6 and Jeremiah 4:4) states that circumcision was symbolic of cleansing, and of the cutting away sin. While it was an outward act, it was primarily to serve as a symbol of an inward reality, namely God's working on the heart. It is a symbol of putting to death the flesh.

No one would dispute that children were given the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament. The old covenant clearly included children. However, that did not mean that the children would definitely be saved or that they had faith. All infants who were circumcised were not saved just as all the descendants of Abraham were not saved. Salvation, even in the Old Testament, came through faith (Genesis 15:6). So infants had the sign of salvation, the sign of the covenant, even though they had not yet come to faith in God. Even though faith was necessary for salvation, faith was not necessary for being a member of the covenant community or for having the sign of the covenant.

Baptism and Circumcision

Some may ask the question, if circumcision was the sign of the old covenant, why was it discontinued in the New Testament. In Hebrews 10, we see that there no longer needs to be a sacrifice for sin. Christ has shed His blood so there is no longer any point to shedding blood. Since circumcision was a bloody rite, it is made obsolete by the shedding of Christ's blood. However, that does not mean that there is no longer a sign of the covenant.

From the New Testament, one can see that baptism has essentially the same meaning as circumcision. Romans 4:11 says that circumcision was a seal of faith. That is what baptism is. Both circumcision and baptism symbolize the inner cleansing from sin. Acts 22:16 shows that baptism, like circumcision, is symbolic of cleansing.

In Colossians 2:11-13, baptism and circumcision are used interchangeably. Both are used to denote the death of the sinful nature and the new life in Christ. This passage, more than any other, shows that in their spiritual significance, baptism and circumcision are identical.

Both baptism and circumcision were initiation rites into the church. This has been seen regarding circumcision in the passages already discussed and regarding baptism in its practice in the New Testament as well as passages such as Galatians 3:27-29.

Baptism and circumcision both are tokens of the covenant (Genesis 17:11; Acts. 2:38-41; Galatians 3:27-29).

Baptism and circumcision are both seals of the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:11).

Both are symbols of purification (Colossians 2:11).

Baptism in the New Testament

Arguments from silence

The major reason for controversy surrounding the baptism of infants is the silence of the New Testament. If the Bible clearly stated that they should be baptized or should not be baptized then there would be no argument. Unfortunately, it does not.

Some look at the Bible and claim that, since we do have accounts of adult converts being baptized then adults must be the only proper recipients of baptism. However, because children are not specifically mentioned in any record of baptism, it does not necessarily follow that they are excluded from the sacrament.

Those who claim that children should be baptized look at the silence of the New Testament in an entirely differently light. They would claim that the inclusion of children of believers “is so much in line with the thought and practice of the Old Testament that it is taken for granted in the New, as the household baptisms of Acts suggest even if they do not prove. In this regard the unity of the Old and New Testaments has an importance which should not be overlooked, though in the first instance it may mean simply that the apostles who first administered Christian baptism were steeped in the theological teaching of the first revelation of God to Israel.”⁴ In other words, the apostles are silent on the matter because there has been no change in the position of children in the New Covenant from their position in the Old.

Both of these are arguments from silence. That does not mean that they are false or that they are equally compelling. It only means that neither argument forces by necessity a particular conclusion. The question is, can a case be made for the inclusion of children on the grounds of a legitimate inference even though the NT is silent?

An example of inclusion by legitimate inference is the admission of women to the Lord's Table on equal terms with men. It is universally accepted that women can partake of communion just like men. However, there are no explicit texts that include women. No women were present when Christ instituted the Lord's Supper. He did not command any women to “do this.” In the few instances recorded of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, there is no explicit reference to women being present and participating. While this example proves nothing in regard to the baptism of infants, it does demonstrate that even when the Bible is silent, legitimate inferences may be drawn.

Jesus and children

Because there is no explicit statement regarding infant baptism in the New Testament, that does not mean that there is no evidence for it. Jesus' love for children is explicit in the NT (Matthew 18:3-6; 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17). Interestingly, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God belongs to such children, a strong indication that they are included in God's covenant. While not conclusive in and of itself, these verses do give weight to the supposition that children are part of the covenant and therefore should have the sign of the covenant.

⁴*Children of Promise*, by Geoffrey W. Bromily, p. 2.

Household baptisms

In the book of Acts, an interesting phenomenon occurs. When the head of a household comes to faith in Christ, not only is he or she baptized, but so is the entire household. There is the case of the Philippian jailer (Act 16:33-34), and the case of Lydia (Acts 16:14-15) and Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16). While it is possible in these cases that only the adults were baptized and that all who were baptized came to faith in Christ before being baptized, but the text never says so. In view of the Jewish doctrine of the covenant and the inclusion of the family, it seems most plausible that if the children were now excluded, that would have to be stated. Interestingly, Peter, in his first gospel message, demonstrates the continuity of the covenant and the inclusion of children when he speaks of the promise being not only for his adult hearers, but for their children as well (Acts 2:39).

Children included in the promise

Children have always been included in the covenant. This is seen in the administration of the old covenant (Genesis 9:9; 17:7; Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 29:10-13). This did not change in the new covenant. Peter states that the promises of the covenant were not only to those who heard his sermon and understood it, but also for their children (Acts 2:38-39)

“Holy” children

Just as is the case today, many adults come to Christ after being married. Often times, the spouse does not come to Christ at the same time. In Corinth, there were some women who had become Christians whose husbands had not. They were concerned about the state of their children. In 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul indicates that even the spouse enjoys some sort of blessing from being married to a Christian and that the children are “holy.” Obviously, Paul is not saying that the spouse or the children are holy in their character and behavior just because they are married to Christians, but that they are set apart, they are legitimately a part of the covenant community. For those who do not include children, this passage is impossible.

Admonitions to children

In the Epistles, Paul and Peter both admonish children to follow Christ in obedience. These admonitions are given to them as part of the church. He seems to regard them as part of the church and expects them to live up to their covenant obligations (Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20).

Evidence from History

Arguments from history, like arguments from silence, do not force any necessary conclusions. The Bible, not the practice of saints in the past, is the only rule for faith and practice. However, historical arguments are valuable as corroborative testimony.

An interesting point is that Jews during the time of Christ practiced baptism as a rite for initiation of converts from other nations. In this rite, children were included.⁵

Irenaeus and Origen, who lived in the late 100's speak of the baptism of infants. Irenaeus, who was "a hearer of Polycarp and Polycarp of the apostle John," also testifies of infant baptism.⁶ That means that baptism of infants was definitely practiced in the time not too distant from the closing of the New Testament. Again, this evidence does not necessarily prove anything, but it is compelling.

⁵Bromiley, p. 4

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How Should People Be Baptized?

Introduction

One of the most noticeable differences in churches is in the way they observe the sacrament of baptism. Some churches immerse the recipient under water while others only sprinkle or pour water on the head. At Village Seven, we recognize that Christians have different understandings of what the Bible teaches about this issue. Because of this, we accept as a true baptism any baptism done under the authority of any Christian church where water is used in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We do not believe that this is an issue that should prevent Christians from enjoying one another's fellowship. It is not an essential issue.

Our own doctrinal statement, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, claims: "Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary. Baptism is correctly administered by pouring or sprinkling water on the person" (WCF, 28:3). While the Bible is not explicit in regard to the mode, leading to many arguments and divisions in the church, there are reasons for preferring sprinkling and pouring over immersion.

The Meaning of the Word "Baptism"

Many Baptists point to the root meaning the Greek word for baptism (*baptizo* - *baptizo* to dip) as proof positive that baptism must only be done by immersion. However, a word's meaning must not be determined by only its root meaning, but by its historical development and its usage at the time of the writing in question. All of that is to say that in order to understand what *baptizo* means, one must look at how it has been used historically up to its occurrence in the New Testament as well as how it was used in the New Testament itself.

Hebrews 9:10 speaks of "various ceremonial washings." The word translated "ceremonial washings" is a word for baptism (*baptismos*). The ceremonial washings, or baptisms, that follow are rites of purification in the Old Testament (cf. Heb. 9:13-21). In all of these ceremonial washings, the method of application was sprinkling. In fact all Old Testament purifications or washings were by sprinkling (Numbers 8:7; 19:19; Leviticus 14:7, Exodus 29:21). Clearly then, in at least Hebrews, baptism can mean sprinkling.

The Use of Sprinkling in the Bible

The word "sprinkle" or some form of it occurs 84 times in the Old Testament and 7 times in the New. Of the New Testament occurrences, six are in Hebrews and one in 1 Peter. Most of the Old Testament examples are connected with ceremonial rites (sprinkling the altar, sprinkling the mercy seat, the sprinkling bowls, or cleansing by sprinkling).

Many people argue that immersion is a better symbol of baptism because it symbolizes cleansing in a way that sprinkling cannot. While that may be true in our cultural context, it ignores the context of the Scripture where all ceremonial cleansings were either by pouring or sprinkling.

Below are a few of the instances of sprinkling in the Bible:

Old Testament

Exodus 24:6-8ff – Moses sprinkles the people with blood, initiating the covenant and purifying them before God.

Exodus 29:21 – The blood is sprinkled on Aaron and his sons, consecrating them as priests.

Leviticus 8:11ff—Oil is sprinkled on the altar, and then poured on Aaron, to consecrate him.

Leviticus 8:30 –Blood and oil are sprinkled on Aaron and his sons to consecrate them.

Leviticus 14:7 –A person is to be sprinkled to be cleansed from an infectious disease.

Leviticus 14:51 – Blood and water are sprinkled on a house for its purification.

Numbers 8:7 – The Levites are made ceremonially clean by the sprinkling of water.

Numbers 19:13 – Speaks of the importance of the water of cleansing being sprinkled on a person before entering the Tabernacle.

Isaiah 52:15 – The Messiah sprinkles many nations.

Ezekiel 36:24ff – In a discussion of the New Covenant, we read that God will sprinkle Israel with clean water and they will be clean.

New Testament

Hebrews 9:13-14 – Christians are cleansed because they have been sprinkled clean with the blood of Christ.

Hebrews 9:19, 21, and others – Sprinkling clean with blood.

Hebrews 10:22 – We can draw near because our hearts have been sprinkled clean.

1 Peter 1:2 – We are sanctified by the sprinkling of Christ's blood.

Baptism in the New Testament

Often, people say that they want to be baptized the way folks were in the New Testament. Because so many pictures and movies depict the baptism of Jesus and other baptisms as immersions, people often assume that this is the way that it was done. However, in every case of baptism in the New Testament, nowhere is it required to believe that the baptism had to be immersion. Yet, in several of the cases, baptism could not have been by immersion. It had to have been sprinkling or pouring.

When John the Baptist was baptizing, the Pharisees thought that his baptism was a sign that he was the Messiah (see John 1:25). Why did they expect the Messiah to baptize? Because Isaiah 52:15 and Ezekiel 36:25 led them to believe that the Messiah would sprinkle the people. If John had been immersing people, then this would not have made sense.

Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in a desert (Acts 8:36). If there had been a river nearby, it would not have been a desert. It must have been a small oasis with a spring.

Paul's baptism in Acts 9:18 seems to indicate that he stood up and was baptized on the spot. If so, he could not have been immersed since he was inside a house. Apparently, Cornelius was baptized indoors (Acts 10:48). The Philippian Jailer was baptized indoors at night (Acts 16:33). Remember, this was a time before swimming pools and Jacuzzi tubs. The only water a family would have had in a house would have been in jars and pots.

Besides water baptism, two other types are mentioned in Scripture. Man baptizes with water, but God baptizes with fire and with the Spirit. When God baptized with fire, the fire sat upon their heads (Acts 2:3). When God baptized with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit "fell upon" (Acts 10:44, 11:15-16) or "descended upon" (Luke 3:22; John 1:32), or was poured out upon (Acts 2:17; 10:45-46), or came upon (Acts 19:6). Baptism by sprinkling or pouring fits all of these descriptions much better than immersion.

Conclusion

Christians have disagreed about baptism for centuries and this debate will probably continue until the end of time. While this certainly is not a fundamental issue of the faith, nor is it an issue over which Christians should break fellowship, hopefully, you have seen that there are many sound reasons why Village Seven sprinkles rather than immerses in baptizing members.