



CHRIST^{THE} KING

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

What We Believe - Christian Baptism

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The purpose of this paper is to explain the teaching of our church regarding the sacrament of baptism, and to demonstrate the Scriptural support for these teachings. Our doctrinal standard in these and all other matters is contained in the Westminster Standards, which would be profitable reading for you.

Baptism

Christians have experienced sharp disagreements over the issue of baptism, particularly in the centuries since the Protestant Reformation. Generally, the various sides in such disputes hold their position with integrity and a real desire to obey God's Word. Therefore, we enjoy fellowship and sympathy with other Christians who might differ on these points. With that being said, our views regarding the sacrament of baptism are significant and will have a bearing on all other points of Christian doctrine. This is an important matter and one we should address with humility and submission to the teaching of Scripture. We baptize in obedience to our Lord's command, as given to the disciples prior to his ascension in glory, for the solemn admission of appropriate persons into the visible body of his church: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

I. The Meaning of Baptism

"What is baptism?" The first thing to be said is that *baptism is a sign*. Dr. Boice has written, "A sign is a visible object designed to point to a reality different from itself and greater."¹ Baptism signifies *union with Jesus Christ*, specifically in his death, burial and resurrection. Thus the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 6:3-5, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." This is what the water of baptism symbolizes, both the cleansing of our sins by the blood of Christ and the washing of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. ¹James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985. p. 129. Baptism identifies us as belonging to the Lord. "It does not make us the Lord's, but it is a sign that identifies us as belonging to him... It is our way of telling the world we are not our own, that we have been bought with a price, that we have been identified with Jesus."² Thus, Paul writes in Galatians 3:27, "*For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*" In another passage the Bible teaches that baptism points to our entry into the one body that is the church. "*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*" (1 Corinthians 12:13). Similarly, baptism commits us to the Christian life of holiness. "*In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature . . . having been buried with him in baptism*" (Colossians 2:11, 12).

The second thing we must note about baptism is that it is a *seal*. Like the wax seal placed on ancient documents to denote ownership, baptism is God's mark of ownership upon us. By means of baptism, therefore, we receive God's promise to be our God, to forgive our sins through faith in Christ, to graft us into Christ, and to give us life eternal through him. Finally, through baptism, God engages us to walk in newness in life. Thus, we may summarize the meaning of baptism by saying it is a *sign and seal of the covenant of grace*. Baptism points not to what the recipient has

done (such as believing or giving a testimony), it points not to the efficacy of what the minister is doing (as is taught by the Roman Catholic church) but signifies the covenant of grace by which the recipient relates to God by his grace. No longer do we stand before God on the basis of our works as judged by the law, but God promises deliverance to sinners through the work of the Redeemer upon the condition of faith in him, even Jesus Christ.

II. The Mode of Baptism

How must baptism be done? Numerous biblical passages make clear that baptism is performed with water as the outward element, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, this must be performed publicly by a designated officer of the church.³ In our denomination this is an ordained minister. Most of the controversy regarding the mode of baptism deals with sprinkling versus immersion. Should baptism be performed by sprinkling the water upon the recipient's head or by dunking the recipient into a body of water? Our church recognizes baptism by both modes, but holds that sprinkling is the proper method. While this teaching is upheld by biblical support, the matter cannot be concluded from direct statements of Scripture alone. For instance, the mode of baptism cannot be determined from the Greek word *baptizo* or the Hebrew *tabal*. In Leviticus 14:6 and 51 the terminology denotes dipping but not immersion; 2 Kings 5:14 portrays bathing in a river; in Luke 11:38 it describes the washing of hands, which normally was done by the pouring of water.

Passages that recount actual baptisms in Scripture similarly do not conclude the matter. When we read of a person going "in and out" of the river we are not told if this means he went under the water or down into the river from the bank. Similarly, the fact that John the Baptist brought people to where "there was much water" (John 3:23) does not resolve the issue, since a large amount of water would be needed just for so large a crowd to drink. Finally, passages like Romans 6:3-6 which compare baptism to death and burial refer to the *import* and not the *mode*. The point of this is that the mode of baptism cannot be derived simply from statements in the Bible, an observation that ought to make us tolerant of those with whom we disagree. 2 Ibid. 3 Jesus' teaching in Matthew 28:18-20, as well as the representations from the Book of Acts, make clear that the sacrament of baptism is to be administered publicly by the same officers entrusted with the public teaching of God's Word.

Since the express statements of Scripture are inconclusive as to the mode of baptism, we must necessarily rely on theological considerations. In this respect we will find a strong biblical basis for a theological conclusion in support of sprinkling over immersion. One of the most important chapters in this respect is Hebrews chapter 9. The point of this chapter is that the rites of the Levitical order for the cleansing of sin were insufficient and were thus replaced by the work of Christ. These Old Testament rites are called "baptisms." In v. 10, what the New International Version translates as "various ceremonial washings" is a rendering of various "*baptismas*"— using the standard Greek word for baptisms. Notice how these are described as "sprinklings," which is what was done with the sacrificial blood under the Old Covenant. See vv. 13, 19, 21. The cleansing with blood (v. 22) is by sprinkling. These correspond to Leviticus 14:4-7, 16, 49-53, 16:19; and Numbers 8:5-7, 19:18, 19. Similarly, as baptism signifies our relationship to God in Christ on the basis of the blood-shedding of Christ. Indeed, Scripture shows that all God's covenants are confirmed by the sprinkling of blood. See, for instance, 1 Peter 1:2, which speaks of "*sprinkling by his blood*." Here is the pattern: Moses confirmed the Old Covenant by sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice on the altar and then on the people (Exodus 24:1-8). Jesus, the true sacrifice, went into the true tabernacle in the heavenlies and sprinkled His blood on the true altar (Hebrews 9:11-28, especially v. 13 and 21). The blood sacrifice being finished, He then sprinkled the people of the New Covenant with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) and in Christian baptism. The baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost also links to sprinkling as the biblical mode of baptism. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "*I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance . . . He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*" (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16). Here, Christ's baptism is linked to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which definitely corresponds to sprinkling rather than immersion. In conclusion, our church acknowledges the validity of baptisms performed by immersion. The above argument sets forth why we baptize by sprinkling, out of conviction that this represents the biblical pattern.

III. The Subjects of Baptism

Finally, we must address the question, "Who should be baptized?" Our church baptizes adults upon profession of faith, and baptizes children presented for baptism by one or more believing members of the church. Infant baptism is based upon the continuity between baptism and the Old Covenant rite of circumcision. A considerable amount of Scripture upholds this continuity. What did circumcision represent? Genesis 17:11 describes it as a sign of the covenant between the Lord and Abraham. In Romans 4:11, the apostle Paul says it was the seal of "the righteousness

of faith.” These are the very things we have said about Christian baptism. Furthermore, in Colossians 2:11, 12, Paul points to one spiritual reality by means of both circumcision and baptism. The two ordinances refer to the same spiritual reality, namely our separation from the sinful nature.

Furthermore, the privileges of the New Covenant are surely not less than those of the Old Covenant. The Old Testament’s inclusion of children in the covenant is not rescinded under the New Covenant, but is directly affirmed in Jeremiah 31:33 and in Acts 2:38-39. In the first sermon of the New Covenant age, the Apostle Peter cried out, “The promise is for you and your children.” Finally, Gal. 3:27-29, one of the key texts on baptism, relates baptism to circumcision by rejoicing that not only men but women may receive the covenant sign, not merely Jews but Greeks, etc. By baptizing infant children of believers, we take seriously the promise at the core of God’s covenant: “*I will be your God and the God of your children after you*” (Genesis 17:7; Exodus 19:5, 6; Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2; Jeremiah 31:33). We take seriously Jesus’ words regarding the little children, as found in Matthew 19:13, 14: “Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.” This is not just a story about how Jesus was nice to little children. These are the covenant, circumcised children of Israel (at least the boys were circumcised). And here is the Messiah, the Lord of the Covenant, laying his hands on them for blessing and praying for them to the Father. This blessing was bestowed on the children apart from their ability or inability to believe on him. What an encouragement this is for us to bring our children to receive the blessing of the covenant sign of our Lord.

Along similar lines, we observe that children of believers are held accountable in the New Testament as members of the covenant. In Ephesians 6:1, 4 and Colossians 3:20, 21, the apostle Paul commands children to obey their parents “*in the Lord*.” Parents, he says, are to bring their children up “*in the training and instruction of the Lord*.” Here we find that the children of believers are treated as Christians, and receive the benefits and obligations thereof. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 7:14, in a passage discussing marriage and divorce, Paul remarks that children of a believing parent are “holy.” Paul is not saying that these children are automatically saved or that they automatically come to faith in Christ; he is saying, however, that such children are set apart in God’s sight.

Finally, we take note of the household baptisms seen in the New Testament (Acts 16:15, 33-34; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Of only twelve actual baptisms recorded in the New Testament, three of them are household baptisms. Scripture does not tell us that infants were baptized on these occasions, nor does it say that all who were baptized believed. Indeed, the clear inference from these household baptisms is that those under the headship of the head of the house received a benefit from his or her belief. That benefit was baptism, and with it a public identification with the church. It is because of this biblical data that our church, along with the whole of the Reformed tradition, baptizes infants of adults church members. In so doing we gratefully lay hold of the promise of our God, when he says: “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your seed after you” (Deuteronomy 29:10-13).

IV. Objections to Infant Baptism

Despite all this, many Christians object to the baptism of infants. What follows is a response to the main objections: The first and most frequent objection is that infants cannot believe and cannot therefore be saved by faith—therefore they should not be baptized. But baptism does not signify the faith of the believer but the covenant of grace which offers salvation through faith in Christ. The household baptisms of the New Testament make clear that baptism was given not only to believing adults but to those under the headship of a believer. Finally, the command, “*Repent, believe, and be baptized*,” which is often cited to prove baptism only for believers, was issued to adults and corresponds to them. This command is simply not directed to the situation of the infant.

A related objection is that there is no way to know that infants are regenerate. However, there is also no way to know whether professing adults are regenerate. Only God knows that. We baptize adults not on the basis of regeneration, but on a credible profession of faith. We baptize the infant children of members on the basis of their credible profession and out of obedience to God’s Word as we trust in his promise. Similarly, it is argued that infants cannot understand the meaning of what is happening to them. But that does not mean they derive no benefit from the sacrament, just as the infants Jesus blessed and prayed for received a benefit despite their ignorance. One very real benefit comes as baptized children grow in the church. As they watch other children being baptized, their parents

point to what is happening and say, “You were baptized as well. Jesus has placed his mark of ownership on you.” They receive the prayers of the church and the innumerable blessings of identification with Christ.

Finally, it is objected that many baptized infants go on to lead ungodly lives of unbelief. Sadly, this is true. However, it is also sadly true of many adults who were baptized after a profession of faith. The fact is that all the institutions of grace carry with them both responsibility and obligation. It is indeed a mournful thing for baptized children to reject our Lord Jesus later in life, and yet this ought not deter us from trusting in God’s promise for our children. Mainly, this ought to serve as a stern reminder that by presenting our children for baptism we acknowledge our parental obligation and vow before God to set them a godly example, to pray with and for them, to teach them the doctrines of our holy religion, and to strive by all the means of God’s appointment to bring these children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Indeed, such an obligation falls not only on the parents but upon the whole congregation, which also promises the same at the time of the baptism.

V. Conclusion

In joining [Christ the King] Presbyterian Church you are required simply to affirm your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and your willingness to accept the authority of this church. You are not required to assent to the Westminster Standards nor to the above teachings regarding baptism. Nonetheless it is important for you to know what we are doing and why we are doing it in accordance with the Word of God. Through Christian baptism we give glory to God for his covenant of grace, and his saving works in history for our salvation. We proclaim the washing away of sins and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. We identify ourselves as a people set apart out of the world for the ownership and lordship of Jesus Christ. And in this sacrament, received once-for-all even as Christ died once-for-all for us, we embrace God’s wonderful promises of salvation and gain strength to walk in newness of life. It is our duty, therefore, to endeavor with God’s mighty help to see the effects of that baptism displayed in our daily lives through faith in Christ and obedience to the Word of God.