

TEN REASONS

WHY WE BAPTISE
OUR CHILDREN

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SPRINKLING OR POURING

J J LIM

Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptised.

Westminster Confession of Faith 28.4

TEN REASONS WHY WE BAPTISE OUR CHILDREN

1

Contrary to common understanding, baptism is not a sign of faith and repentance. It is, rather, the sign of regeneration. This is why Paul speaks of the new birth as “the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Tit 3:5). The washing with water in baptism points to the sovereign work of God which begins our spiritual life, rather than the spiritual activity which is a result of God’s work. God’s work in us can begin long before we are even able to understand the Gospel, not to mention do anything to further that work. Thus, infants may legitimately be baptised though they cannot profess faith. It is, after all, possible for covenant children to be regenerated even in infancy (e.g., Lk 1:41).

Like circumcision, baptism additionally signifies and seals membership in the covenant. Adults are baptised because their profession of faith identifies them as members of the church visible; whereas infants grow as olive shoots on the Olive Tree (Rom 11:16ff) and are therefore to be baptised not to make them members but to seal their membership.

In Colossians 2:11–12, the apostle Paul confirms that baptism has replaced circumcision by suggesting that water baptism signifies heart circumcision, or a “circumcision made without hands” which was in Old Testament times signified with fleshly circumcision. Circumcision and Baptism are, in other words, essentially the same though their outward mode is different. Thus, in Philippians 3:3, Paul intimates that

Christians are “the [true] circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus”.

4

God commanded that infant boys in the Old Testament be circumcised that they may be distinguished as children of Abraham (Gen 17:7ff); in the New Testament, there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28), so all children of believers are to be baptised into Christ (Gal 3:27) to mark them as Abraham’s seed (Gal 3:29).

5

When the apostle Peter told the crowd at Pentecost, “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ... For the promise is unto you, and to your children” (Acts 2:38–39), he was clearly alluding to Genesis 17:10 where God was telling Abraham that the promise of the covenant is unto

him and his children, and therefore he and his children must be circumcised. Therefore, in the New Testament not only believers but also their children should be baptised.

6

It is clear that children are welcomed and regarded as part of the church by the Lord Jesus and His apostles. The Lord says: “Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:14; cf. Lk 18:16). Whatever confusion regarding the place of children in the kingdom that the apostles might have had prior to this occasion would surely have been addressed by the Lord’s admonishment. Children are not only to be received as members of the kingdom, but are to be viewed as illustrative of what attitudes adult members should have. If they are to be received, then they should be

baptised so that they may bear the sign and seal of the covenant.

Thus, the apostle Paul not only addresses children in the church directly in his letters (e.g., Eph 6:1), but spoke of children as being covenantally holy (1 Cor 7:14) as an argument that an unbelieving spouse is covenantally sanctified (set apart) by his/her believing spouse. The only way that Paul's argument would make sense to the members of the Corinthian church is if they knew as a matter of fact that children of believing parents in the church are holy. How did they know? Probably because it was a common practice to baptise infants!

7

Though there are no direct accounts of infants being baptised in the New Testament, the New Testament records numerous instances of household baptism: the household of Lydia (Acts 16:15); the household of

the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:33); the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16); almost certainly the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:24); and most likely the household of Crispus (Acts 18:8). Though no infants are mentioned in any of these households, the matter-of-fact references to household baptism suggest that the Jews still saw faith as a household rather than an individual affair. Therefore, it would have been surprising to them if infants were not to be baptised, and would definitely have prompted the Gospel writers to note the prohibition if it existed. But none did.

And moreover, a plain reading of the book of Acts suggests that whole households were baptised solely on account of the faith of the head of the household. For example: (1) No mention is made of the faith of the members in Lydia's household; (2) The Greek of Acts 16:34 tells us that it was the Philippian Jailer who believed (the phrase "with all his house" [Acts 16:34] is one word in the Greek, *πανοικί*

(*panoiki*), which suggests that the household was represented by the Jailer).

8

Two instances of a large number of people being added to the church are recorded in Acts (Acts 2:41 and Acts 4:4). In the first instance, Luke used the word *ψυχή* (*psuchē*), translated “soul” to reckon the number. In the second instance, he uses the word *άνήρ* (*anēr*), properly translated “man”. Why this difference? Probably because Luke was a careful historian! In the first instance, he wanted to include children in the count; whereas in the second instance, he wanted to count families (compare Lk 9:14 and Mt 14:21). See how Luke carefully recorded it in such a way as to make it clear that infants were part of those who were baptised.

The Church Father, Origen, who was himself baptised as an infant in AD 185 believed that the doctrine of Infant Baptism was passed down from the apostles.

Our *Confession of Faith*, expounding Exodus 4:24–26 where the LORD threatened to kill Moses for not circumcising his son, warns that it is “a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance” (WCF 28:5).

In Summary

In short, we baptise our infants because: (1) Baptism is not a sign of faith and repentance which infants may not be capable of, but of regeneration upon which infants may be bestowed; (2) Baptism signifies and seals membership in the covenant and children of believers are part of the covenant as olive shoots;

(3) Baptism has replaced circumcision and has essentially the same nature and function as circumcision; (4) As the infants of believers in the Old Testament were circumcised, so infants of believers today are to be baptised; (5) The congregation at Pentecost understood Paul as telling them that they and their children should be baptised; (6) Household baptisms in the New Testament imply that children were routinely baptised and members of the household were indicated as being baptised on account of the faith of the head of household; (7) Christ admonished his disciples and us to suffer little children to come unto Him; (8) Dr Luke's record of the large numbers which were baptised and/or added to the church suggests that he had in mind the baptism of infants in the multitude; (9) The early church practised it; and (10) Our Confession warns upon Exodus 4:24–26 that it is a great sin to refuse to have our children baptised.

*Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary;
but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring,
or sprinkling water upon the person.*

Westminster Confession of Faith 28.3

TEN REASONS WHY WE BAPTISE BY SPRINKLING OR POURING

1

Despite the insistence of our Baptist brethren, the Greek word *baptizô* (βαπτίζω) does not actually mean “dip, immerse or plunge”. There is another Greek word which means to immerse, which is *baptô* (βάπτω), but that is a different word. The Presbyterian pastor James Wilkinson Dale has written a five-volume classic work to show how the word *baptizô* is used in Judaistic literature, in the Bible, in Classic Greek literature, and in Patristic writings. Through it, he proves conclusively and indisputably that, whereas *baptô* basically means “to dip” or “to put together and to remove from,” *baptizô* is about “putting together so as to remain together”. *Baptizô* emphasises the effect, whereas *baptô* does not. This is why we say that

baptizô is basically about washing. This is why the apostle Paul speaks of the new birth which is signified by water baptism as “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Tit 3:5).

The verb *baptô* which is commonly seen as the root word of *baptizô* and almost consistently meaning “dip” (e.g., Jn 13:26; Lk 16:24) is never used interchangeably with *baptizô* in the Bible. *Baptizô* always implies cleansing or purification, whereas *baptô* never carries this meaning. Whenever the object (e.g., liquid) involved in *baptizô* is specified, it is always applied to the subject, not vice versa, as would be implied in immersion. This is seen in Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26 and Acts 1:5. The KJV translators, together with almost all modern translators, have no doubt correctly rendered the Greek preposition *en* (ἐν) in these verses as “with” (instrumental) rather than “in”.

There are no instances in the Greek New Testament and even the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) where the word *baptizô* must and can only mean immersion. There are very few instances in Scripture where *baptizô* could *possibly* involve immersion and none of them are conclusive. For example, the Septuagint translation of 2 Kings 5:14 uses *baptizô* to translate the Hebrew *tabal* which usually means “dip” or “plunge”. We say *possibly* because *baptizô* could be used to mean “wash” here, especially when Elisha’s instruction in verse 10 was to “wash in Jordon seven times”.

On the other hand, there are many instances in Scripture where immersion is *unlikely* or *impossible*. Such is the case of the Septuagint, in the apocryphal Judith 12:7, which suggests that Judith *baptizô* herself in a fountain or spring. In fact, there are places in the inspired Scripture where *baptizô* clearly *cannot* mean

immersion. For example, in Luke 11:38—“And when the Pharisee saw it, he marvelled that he had not first washed [*baptizô*] before dinner”. Surely the Pharisees did not expect Jesus to immerse Himself before dinner? Again Mark 7:4 speaks of “baptisms” of tables or couches [*klinê*]. These washings refer to ceremonial purifications, which are most probably done by pouring or sprinkling.

Moreover, there are places where *baptizô* carries no suggestion of mode, e.g., Matthew 20:22–23—“... Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?” Also, no one would translate Galatians 3:27 with “immersed into Christ”. Therefore, to insist that baptism must be by immersion is both legalistic and unbiblical.

There are instances where *baptizô* is auto-suggestive of pouring or sprinkling. For example, John the Baptist compares water baptism with the Baptism of the Holy Spirit (Lk 3:16), and indeed, our water baptism points to our Spirit baptism. But according to Acts 2:4, 17–18, the Holy Spirit is poured out; we are not immersed in the Holy Spirit.

Similarly, in Hebrews 6:2, *baptismos*, literally “baptism”, probably refers to the Old Testament rites of sprinkling (cf. Heb 9:13 and Num 19:17–18; Heb 9:19 and Ex 24:6–8; Heb 9:21 and Lev 8:19).

The weight of biblical evidence suggests very strongly that *baptizô* and *baptismos* do not imply immersion at all. Indeed, although the words themselves signify purification and cleansing more than anything else, the mode that they suggest is pouring or sprinkling.

John the Baptist most likely baptised by sprinkling or pouring contrary to the common misconception that it was by immersion. It is unlikely that John baptised by immersion. John stood in the Jordan simply because it was the most convenient place to baptise the thousands who came to him (see Mt 3:5–6). John was a priest by descent as Zacharias was a priest (Lk 1:5). Surely the Jews coming for John's baptism of repentance would not have been expecting an innovative ritual. More likely, John was sprinkling water on those who came with a sweep of a sprig of hyssop as suggested by the OT: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Ps 51:7) and "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean" (Ezk 36:25a). This must also have been the way in which the 3,000 could have been baptised in a day (Acts 2:41), in an event which, incidentally, took place in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5), more than

20 miles from any river which may be used for immersion for such a large crowd of people!

5

Biblical evidence suggests that the Lord Jesus Christ was baptised by sprinkling rather than by immersion. But did He not come “up out of the water” (Mt 3:16)? Yes, but that is no suggestion of immersion:

- a. The phrase simply means stepping out of the river, or else Acts 8:39—“And when they [Philip and the Eunuch] were come up out of the water”, would mean that Philip was himself immersed when he baptised the Eunuch.
- b. Christ, in fulfilling “all righteousness” (Mt 3:15), was probably referring to His priestly ordination which involves sprinkling (cf. Num 8:6–7). After all, it would be meaningless and fulfilling no righteousness for Him to have a “baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mk 1:4, Lk 3:3) since He

knew no sin. This also explains why He waited till He was 30 years old to begin His ministry (Lk 3:23), since the Old Testament priests were taken into the number and ordained only when they reached the age of 30 (cf. Num 4:3, 23, 30, 35, etc.).

6

The baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch. Again there is no evidence that he was baptised by immersion. They were in a desert. Philip must have explained to him about John baptising in the river so that when he saw some water (Acts 8:36), he asked to be baptised. Not only would a pool of water in the desert be unlikely to be sufficient for immersion, it is likely that Philip explained to him that baptism is by sprinkling. The Eunuch was reading Isaiah 53:7–8 (Acts 8:32–33). Surely he would have read Isaiah 52:15 which is just a few verses up—“So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had

not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider”. Remember that there were no chapter divisions then. Why then did the Eunuch wait until they reached the pool of water to ask to be baptised? Why did he not asked to be baptised with the water bottles that they no doubt carried? The simple answer is that the Eunuch must have been thinking about what Philip was saying to him, and it was the sight of the pool of water “as they went on their way” (Acts 8:36) that triggered a resolve in his heart to seek baptism there and then. Why did the sight of the pool trigger this request? Because Philip would, no doubt, have been talking about how John was baptising by the river and how the people stood in shallow water to be sprinkled of him with a hyssop dipped in water!

When we examine all the other instances of baptism recorded in the New Testament, we again find that in most instances immersion is *impossible* or *improbable*. Saul “arose, and was baptised” (Acts 9:18) or, literally in the Greek: “and arising he was baptised.” He did not go out to the river, nor do I think he “received meat” (v. 19) while dripping wet from immersion. The Philippian Jailer and his household were baptised in the middle of the night (Acts 16:33) in the outer prison (cf. vv. 24, 30). It is unlikely that there was a tub of water sufficient for immersion there, nor is it likely that they went to a river in the dead of the night. There were no street lamps nor heated rivers! It is much more probable that Paul and Silas baptised them from the same basin used to wash their wounds, for we read: “And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptised, he and all his, *straightway*” (Acts 16:33; italics added).

The contention of our Baptist brethren that Paul was pointing to immersion when he speaks of our being buried with Christ in baptism (Col 2:12; Rom 6:4) holds no water. Besides the fact that Christ was entombed in a rock cavity rather than buried in the ground (which immersion may picture), this text is not directly speaking about the act of water baptism, but about what baptism symbolises. Besides that, if we want to press the case, we find Paul speaking about the Jews being “baptised unto Moses” as they passed through the sea (1 Cor 10:1–2). The Jews were being sprinkled by the sprays of droplets from the wall of water to their left and to their right (Ex 14:22). The Jews were not immersed. The Egyptians were (v. 28).

Although it is possible that some of the Early Church Fathers baptised by immersion for various reasons not

excluding superstition, the *Didache* or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, an anonymous book dated around 60–80 AD, explicitly mentions only pouring as a legitimate mode of baptism. Immersion may be inferred as valid, but certainly not as the only legitimate mode.

10

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* indicates that “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person” (WCF 28.3; cf. Heb 9:10, 19–22; Acts 2:41; 16:33; Mk 7:4).

The idea that the Westminster Assembly was “one vote short of adopting immersion as a preferable mode in their confession of faith” is a myth. The fact is that the vote concerned which was taken on August 7, 1644 was not at all on whether the mode of baptism should be sprinkling and pouring, or immersion. The question was whether “the directory [of Public Worship]

should mention dipping” (David F. Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective* [Great Britain: Paternoster, 2007], 250). The fact is that the divines were quite united on the proper mode being sprinkling or pouring. The question was really whether immersion can be regarded as a lawful mode!

In Summary

In short, we baptise by sprinkling or pouring because: (1) The Greek word *baptizô*, not to be confused with a similar but synonymous word, *baptô*, does not imply immersion but washing; (2) There are no instances in the Greek New Testament or the LXX where *baptizô* must and can only mean immersion; (3) There are instances in the New Testament where *baptizô* is auto-suggestive of pouring or sprinkling; (4) Multiple evidences suggest that John the Baptist probably baptised the multitude standing in shallow water by sprinkling with a hyssop; (5) It is unlikely that the Lord Jesus

Christ was baptised by immersion for the biblical evidence suggests that He was being ordained by John the Baptist to the priestly ministry by sprinkling; (6) The Ethiopian Eunuch was probably baptised by sprinkling according to the mode indicated in Isaiah 52:15; (7) When carefully studied, immersion is *impossible* or *improbable* in almost all the instances of baptism recorded in the New Testament; (8) The apostle Paul was not referring to the mode of baptism in Colossians 2 or Romans 6, he was rather speaking about identification with Christ; (9) The first century book *Didache* explicitly mentions only pouring as a legitimate mode; and (10) *The Westminster Confession of Faith* while not denying the legitimacy of baptism by immersion intimates that “Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person” (WCF 28.3).

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Pilgrim Covenant Church

203B Henderson Road

#07-07

Singapore 159546

www.pilgrim-covenant.com

info@pilgrim-covenant.com



www.pilgrim-covenant.com