

WHY IMMERSION?

by Doug Vernon

One of the most common questions that we get asked at Wildwood Christian Church is this one - "Why Immersion?" Perhaps you have visited our church, and you've seen that area behind the pulpit, and wondered "what kind of a hot-tub is that, and what is it for?"

Maybe you grew up in a church that baptized infants, or haven't had a Christian background and are wondering why we feel a person needs to be immersed.

First of all, let me assure you that you are not alone in our congregation. Most of our people grew up as Catholics, and many in denominational backgrounds that do not immerse.

And I also want to assure you that we don't believe baptism to be any more or less important than any of the other steps in accepting God's grace (i.e. faith, repentance, confession, belief). We also do not believe that there is anything special in the water. It is plain St. Louis water. The purpose of baptism is symbolic and supernatural.

Let me give you some reasons why I believe it is so important to be immersed in Christ:

1. IMMERSION WAS THE NEW TESTAMENT PRACTICE.

The New Testament was written in the Greek language. The Greek word for baptism is "baptizo", which literally means "immerse". If the original writers would have wanted to say "sprinkle", they would have used the word "rantizo".

Every scholar will attest to the fact that immersion was the practice of the New Testament church. It is a common fact.

John Calvin (Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist) - "The word "baptize" signifies to immerse. It is certain that immersion was the practice of the primitive church."

Martin Luther (Lutheran, all Protestants) - "Baptism' is a Greek word, and may be translated 'immerse.' I would have those who are to be baptized to be altogether dipped."

John Wesley (Methodist) - "Buried with him by baptism' - alluding to the ancient manner of baptizing by immersion."

Wall (Episcopalian) - "Immersion was in all probability the way in which our blessed Savior, and, for certain, the way by which the ancient Christians received their baptism."

Brenner (Catholic) - "For thirteen hundred years was baptism an immersion of the person under water."

Stoudza (a native Greek) - "The verb 'baptize' has only one meaning. It signifies to plunge. Baptism and immersion are identical. To say baptism by sprinkling is as if one would say immersion by sprinkling."

Encyclopedia Americana - "Baptism; that is, dipping or immersion."

Sprinkling babies as a practice was not fully introduced until the Catholic church made that decision in the year 1311. It is fairly simple to see that this was not God's original idea. Mark 16:16 says "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." Babies can't BELIEVE. I Peter 3:21 says that baptism is a "pledge of a good conscience toward God." Babies don't have CONSCIENCES. As a matter of fact, I have never talked to anyone (Catholic, Reformed, Methodist, I mean anyone) who really, truly believed that God would send a baby to hell. Scripture teaches us that we all must make our own decisions. Until we reach that age, there is

nothing to judge. So, sprinkling has nothing to do with the New Testament practice. Since we are patterning ourselves after the New Testament, we feel it is important to do things the way they did them.

2. JESUS WAS BAPTIZED BY IMMERSION.

This alone would be enough reason for me. Jesus said he wanted to be baptized "to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15), and then it says "he came up out of the water". He was baptized in the Jordan river, by immersion, as an example to us. That is very important to me.

3. WE ARE COMMANDED TO DO IT.

When the people in Jerusalem, on the day the church began, asked the Apostle Peter what they needed to do to be saved, Peter said, "Repent and BE BAPTIZED, everyone of you, so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). That seems pretty clear to me. When we are talking about salvation from death and hell, I think it is important to get the details right. If God told me that in order to be saved, I needed to stand on my head and gargle peanut-butter, I WOULD DO IT! Wouldn't you? In Mark 16:16, Jesus says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

I will in no way tell you that a person can't be saved without baptism, or without immersion. God is the judge, I will never take that place, I don't want it. God sees the heart and judges what is inside. And he is the God of Grace and Mercy, I am glad that he is the judge. I've known people who have been baptized by immersion and gone on to live like the devil. And I've known people who have been sprinkled for baptism who demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. That is not the point. The point is, He did command us to be immersed.

Scripture is very plain on the subject, and I think that each of us should respond to the truth as we understand it.

Anyway, wouldn't it be best to do as much as possible, instead of trying to decide how little we can get away with?

4. WE ARE COMMANDED TO SPREAD IT.

In Matthew 28:19 Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of all nations, BAPTIZING them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

This means that part of our responsibility as Christians, and as a church, is to baptize people. It is not the most important job, nor the least important, just one of them.

And if God commanded us to do the peanut-butter thing to be saved, you can rest assured that I would have a few cases of Jiffy around the office.

5. IT IS A DEMONSTRATION OF HUMILITY.

Jesus walked 60 miles to be baptized. He could have seen John out there in the water, in front of all those people and said, "I DON'T NEED THAT." "When I was 8 days old, my parents consecrated me in the temple." "I grew up in the synagogue." "I've been a good person." "I'm 30 years old, it would be too embarrassing to be baptized."

But he didn't. Jesus didn't come to strut. He came to serve. So Jesus waded out into the water, and allowed John to baptize him. And he came up out of the water, and his hair was all wet, clothes clinging to his body. And he had to awkwardly climb out on that river bank. And God said "That's my son - I'm pleased with him."

It is a humbling thing to be baptized. Not humiliating, but humbling. I've never seen a proud person immersed. But proud people can't accept the fact that God has to save them from their despicable sins, either. The very posture of baptism by immersion is one that makes us dependent on another to baptize us.

Becoming a Christian is a process of understanding the fact that we are sinners and we can't save ourselves

6. IT IS A PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE TO GOD.

Ceremonies are often used to demonstrate a new loyalty. If you become a scout, or you join a lodge, or a fraternity or sorority, you go through a ritual of some sort to pledge your loyalty to that organization. When I was ordained into the ministry, I went through a ceremony, in which I stood before my home congregation and I pledged that I would be loyal to the Word of God in my preaching.

I run into people who tell me that they don't know whether they are a Christian or not. They say, "I think I'm a Christian, because my parents had me christened", or "I've got a certificate", or "I was confirmed", or "my name is on the roll", or "I raised my hand at a concert."

But God provided a simple ceremony as a source of assurance and commitment.

If you woke up one night and suddenly had a doubt about whether or not you were really married to your mate, what would you do? You could look at your hand and see that ring. You could dig out the pictures or the video of the ceremony, and remember.

When we are baptized into Jesus Christ, we are saying, "I HAVE MADE MY DECISION - JESUS CHRIST IS MY SAVIOR AND LORD. FROM THIS DAY FORWARD - FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE - I PLEDGE TO PUT HIM FIRST."

I see several parallels between baptism and marriage:

COVENANT OF MARRIAGE:	COVENANT WITH CHRIST:
1. You find a person you like. You learn about them.	1. You find out what Jesus is about.
2. You decide to spend the rest of your life with them, and give yourself to them.	2. You decide to spend the rest of your life with Him, and give yourself to Him.
3. You tell others about it, probably including an engagement announcement, invitations, etc.	3. You tell others about it. In the New Testament, it is called confession. (Mt. 10:32, 16:15-16, Rom. 10:9-10)
4. You have the wedding. You take an oath of allegiance. There is an end and a beginning. You leave single life for shared life	4. You get baptized. You take an oath of allegiance. There is an end and a beginning. You leave "self" life for shared life.
5. You work on that relationship for the rest of your life.	5. You work on that relationship for the rest of your life

7. IT IS A SYMBOL OF THE DEATH, BURIAL, AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST.

Romans 6:3 tells us that when "we are baptized into Christ Jesus, we are 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 in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection."

When we go under the water, we die to our old selves. When we raise up, we are "New Creations" (II Cor. 5:17). We have put on Christ in a whole new way. The old man is dead, and a new one lives. And the great news about that, of course, is that once you have died, you can never die again. Your shell of a body will someday fade away, but your soul will live forever with God.

So there you have it. Seven good reasons why you should be immersed, whether you have been a believer for a long time, or you are just coming to Christ. And if you have come from another denomination that does not immerse, please don't think we are looking down on your tradition, or your families ideals. We are simply trying to restore things to the New Testament pattern. It is a shame baptism has caused so much division among churches. Our goal is unity, not division.

You may ask, "Do I have to do it publicly?" No, you do not. Scripture records all of the New Testament baptisms happening at that very hour, in that very place. However, I would encourage you to think about being

baptized publicly. It is a good pledge of allegiance to God, to do it in front of others who can see your conversion, and help you with your walk in Christ. It is also, as in a wedding, an encouragement to those who witness it. When you go to another's wedding, you can't help but think about your own wedding, your own vows, etc.

The same is true with baptism. It is a great encouragement for other believers to witness it. And also an encouragement for those who are thinking about being baptized. But it is not necessary. If you want to just have the simple ceremony with family and friends, we would be glad to set it up.

Also, baptism does not have to be administered by a "clergy" person either. If you have a Christian friend who means a lot to you, and especially one who helped you get to know Jesus better, we would love to see them baptize you, instead of one of us. Remember, Jesus commanded us ALL to go out and teach, make disciples, and baptize.

Feel free to call me or one of the elders or staff and talk more about it with us. We believe in it so strongly that we require immersion baptism for membership in our church. We want to feel faithful to the teaching of scripture as much as we can. We will never push this on anyone. But we do consider it to be a very important act of obedience to God.

The bottom line is, God said that we should be baptized. That is all the reason I will ever need.