

Baptism

What is baptism?

This question has become one doctrinal dividing line between Christians, sometimes a contentious one.

The issue concerns two main questions:

- 1) WHOM are we to baptize?
- 2) HOW are we to baptize them?

As to WHOM we should baptize, there are two views:

A) Baptize only believers- only those who have professed faith in the Lord. Those who hold this view are called CREDO-BAPTISTS (“credo” meaning “faith”).

B) Baptize infants of believers also. Those holding this view are called PAEDO-BAPTISTS (“paedo” meaning child).

The issue of WHOM to baptize is usually called the **subject** of baptism.

As to HOW we baptize them, there are three main views. One is sprinkling, one is pouring, and one is immersion. The issue of HOW to baptize is usually called the **mode** of baptism.

An Initial Consideration

To understand Baptism, we must understand John the baptizer’s Baptism first:

Mat 3:6 And they were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

A common mistake made in the study of baptism is failure to connect John’s baptism to its Old Covenant foundation and counterpart, ceremonial washing. Paul references the Old Covenant practice when he says:

Heb 9:9 For it *was* a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices that could not make

him who did the service perfect as regards the conscience, Heb 9:10 *which stood* only in meats and drinks, and different kinds of washings and fleshly ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation.

“Washings” is from the Greek word *baptismos*. It has the same root word as “baptized” in Matthew 3:6 above. And to what does it refer in Hebrews 9:10? To the baths the Old Covenant required when one had acquired a ceremonial uncleanness.

Lev 14:8 And he who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes and shave off all his hair and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean. And after that he may come into the camp, but live outside his tent seven days.*

Think about it. Why didn't the Jews object to John's baptism? If it was an unheard-of rite, surely someone would have protested. But if it was just an Old Covenant practice they were familiar with, they could make an easy transition to it, which they seem to have done.**

John's baptism was different than the Old Covenant ceremonial washing in this way:

Luke 3:3 And he went into all the surrounding region of the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance **for** the forgiveness of sins,

Apparently, it was easy for the Jews to mentally translate this baptism/washing from what they already knew. They thought of 'washing' for one kind of ceremonial defilement or another; all John had done was to attach a specific spiritual significance to his washing. Even the Pharisees saw the propriety in this, coming to participate in John's baptism, Matt 3:7 (though he refused them, not seeing repentance in their lives***).

Actually, God's Old Covenant washing always had a primarily spiritual significance.**** The Jews obviously got this, at least to some extent, seeing how easily they adapted to John's baptism. In fact, the particular association with REPENTANCE in John's baptism may have been commonly understood. It is a fairly straightforward association, after all: physical washing signifying a cleansing from spiritual defilements.

The Mode of Baptism

Our study so far has provided us with a good clue as to the **mode** of baptism. However, the three modes we mentioned may not be mutually exclusive. John baptized in a river. If he performed the basic Old Covenant ritual, he **bathed** the people. He may well have **poured** water over them until the whole body was covered. It would have taken a bit more **sprinkling** to accomplish this. Or he may have **dipped** them underwater for the purpose (immersion). Here it is instructive that the root word for “baptize” in Greek means “to dip.” Again, though, bodily coverage seems to have been the important idea, not necessarily complete submersion. Submersion, however, would have done the trick neatly enough.

Those who hold strictly to sprinkling or pouring, though, object that 3,000 people could not have been immersed in water in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). However, recent discoveries have shown us that the Temple in Jerusalem was equipped all the way around its circumference with water for self-submersion, being continuously supplied from a nearby river. Jews who had contracted ceremonial uncleanness had immediate access to this system of pools for ceremonial washing. The new Jewish converts at Pentecost would have had immediate access to the Temple’s extensive baptismal waters as well, enabling 3,000 baptisms with relative ease.

Again, immersion itself was perhaps not strictly necessary, but bodily washing would seem to have been the objective in baptizing.

So much for the **mode** of baptism.

The Subjects of Baptism

Now on to the **subjects** of baptism.

Should we baptize only those who have professed belief in Christ, or should we also baptize their infants?

The easiest answer is to return to John’s baptism. Did people show up to his baptism holding their infants, expecting them to be baptized? No, Old Covenant washing was an individual rite, not a family one. They would not have brought their infants

to be baptized, and neither should we.

Those who hold to infant baptism have historically appealed to Abraham's covenant as the precedent for Christian baptism. They say that baptism has simply replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Abraham circumcised his children; we baptize ours.

As we have seen, though, the Old Covenant precedent for baptism is ceremonial washing, not circumcision. There *is* a correlation between baptism and circumcision, but it is a spiritual one:

Col 2:11 In whom you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by the putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 2:12 having been buried together with Him in baptism, in which also you were raised together through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

This correlation tells us that spiritual circumcision and spiritual baptism are basically the same as **REGENERATION**- God bringing us into his family by spiritual rebirth . Another reference to spiritual baptism is in Corinthians:

1 Cor 12:13 For also by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free, even all were made to drink into one Spirit.

But does this further imply a correlation between *physical* circumcision and *physical* (water) baptism? The theological connection paedobaptists make is that Abraham's covenant carries continued relevance for Christians. We who have believed are Abraham's children and are therefore in his covenant; or Abraham's covenant is part of a larger one which we are in.

To analyze this position, we need to make a comparison between the two covenants- Abraham's covenant and the New Covenant- respecting one key question:

When Abraham circumcised his children and household, were they entered into his covenant thereby?

Yes.

Gen 17:13 He that is born in your house, and he that is bought

with your silver, must be circumcised. And My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 17:14 And the uncircumcised male child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.

Physical circumcision brought a child (or an adult) into Abraham's covenant.

Can the same be said for physical baptism (water baptism)? Does it bring a Christian's infant child (or an adult) into the New Covenant?

no.

To confirm this, it is critical to know what the New Covenant is and how it differs from Abraham's covenant. Of the New Covenant God says:

Jer 31:31 Behold, the days come, says Jehovah, that I will cut a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah... 31:32 **not according to the covenant** that I cut with their fathers... 31:33 but this *shall be* the covenant that I will cut with the house of Israel: After those days, says Jehovah, I will put My Law **in their inward parts**, and write it in their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

The "covenant cut with their fathers" was Moses' covenant, but Moses' covenant was the same as Abraham's in this respect: circumcision PUT a person in the covenant in both covenants. The Hebrews' covenants through Abraham and Moses were both "in their flesh" (Gen 17:13), whereas this New Covenant would be "**in their inward parts**." Many people in Abraham's and Moses' covenants did not have the Law written in their hearts. In the New Covenant, this lack would be remedied:

Jer 31:34 And they shall no more teach each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, Know Jehovah; for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them

"All" always means all of some category. That category is often smaller than all mankind, for instance, but "all" never sim-

ply means “many” or “most.” The “all” in this verse is clearly defined in the context. Who are the “all” that shall know God in Jeremiah 31:34? They are “all” that are in the New Covenant.

Note that this gives us an exegetical (from the Bible text) explanation, not a presuppositional one. Paedo-baptists prefer to say that no Bible texts decide the issue, but rather our presuppositions do: whether we assume a covenant sign carrying over from the Old Covenant to the New. As we have seen, this approach fails to ask the right question/ make the right connection in the first place; but furthermore, it is unwarranted, since the issue can be decided on exegetical grounds.

Paedo-baptists resist this exegetical definition from Jeremiah 31:24. Why? Because if *everyone* in the New Covenant knows God- is a saved person- then baptizing infants would mean they were all saved. Only a very small segment of the paedo-baptist community believe that all baptized infants are thereby saved (versus “holy,” or “set apart,” which infants of believers *are*). Those who say baptism saves a child, though, are simply being consistent with Jeremiah 31:34 + their definition of baptism.

How does a credo-baptist apply Jeremiah 31 to baptism? He says that the New Covenant is a covenant God makes with the elect. It is therefore an ‘invisible’ covenant, so to speak: we can’t see its members just by looking. Since no humanly administered ordinance (like baptism) can PUT a person into this covenant, baptism must serve a different function.

John’s baptism was symbolic of washing sin out of one’s life as evidenced by accompanying **REPENTANCE**. Old Covenant baptisms had dealt with symbolic defilement. John’s baptism completed this picture by tying the washing to a real change (repentance).

In the Gospel records, when Christ’s disciples began baptizing, there was no note of alteration; they continued to baptize in John’s basic mold. Then in Acts, Christian baptism continued to have the same basic significance. An additional defining point was perhaps appended by the resurrected Christ:

Matt 28:19 Then having gone, disciple all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit

This simply clarifies WHO is doing the spiritual washing and forgiving- who it is that grants men repentance: it is in the Trinity's name/ authority/ power that we baptize.

The credo-baptist therefore asks: Why would we baptize infants? John required repentance for his baptism and Jesus followed suit. Why would we proceed differently? In that case, we would wait for our children to **show repentance**, *then* we would joyfully baptize them. And we wouldn't just wait; we would press our children towards repentance. Nor would we just press them, we would do so confidently, patiently, knowing their two advantages:

- 1) Matt 19:14 But Jesus said, Allow the little children and do not prevent them to come to Me, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven.
- 2) Prov 22:6 Consecrate a child on the teaching of His way; even when he is old, he will not turn aside from it.

If we are consistent in "consecrating" (same word used when Solomon "consecrated" the Temple) our children per Proverbs 22:6 above, God assures us it will have its effect. Of course, this is a huge condition. What parent can sincerely say, "I utterly consecrated myself to God (an obvious first requirement). I also completely separated my child unto God's teachings."

But God, being merciful, blesses our total attention to consecration, as far short as it may fall. We would only expect the occasional 'Judas exception,' so to speak. Jesus' own twelve included a devil. God therefore has a purpose for specific reprobates in specific settings, including families.

When signs of God's electing grace are present in a child's speech and behavior, *then* we baptize him. We celebrate his repentance with the sign of baptism. To baptize him before this would prejudice us *and him* concerning his regeneration. Of this bias, some say that conversion *should* be assumed. That seems directly contrary to the nature and necessity of **repentance**- a clear component of New Testament baptism.

Summary

In summary, the **mode** of baptism appears to simply answer to Old Covenant ceremonial washing: a bodily washing, whether by immersion or pouring or a good bit of sprinkling, or some combination of these (assuming continuation of the same physical rite).

The **subjects** of baptism are those who have repented of their sins. Christian parents should train their children unto this moment, waiting on God- not rushing Him, but not lagging behind- when their children have truly evidenced a recognition of their sins and a turning *from* their sins *to* Christ as their mighty Deliverer (this “from”/ “to” being a good definition of repentance).

* The usual “fix” for the various Old Covenant ceremonial defilements was washing the clothes only:

Lev 11:25 And whoever carries the carcass of them shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening

But even before these various washing were described, bathing the body was part of Old Covenant symbolism:

Lev 8:6 And Moses brought Aaron and his sons, and washed them with water. [As commanded in Exod. 29:4]

** Their only question seemed to concern John’s *personal* authority to baptize, They accepted the idea of a legitimate authority figure baptizing as part of his ministry, Jn 1:25.

*** Knowing the Pharisees, their thinking was probably the more washings the better; plus, if it’s popular with the people, perhaps we’d best not leave it out.

**** The animals, diseases, and emissions that defiled them were never unclean *in themselves*:

Rom 14:14 I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean of itself...

God temporarily attached unclean symbolism to certain objects and processes for *teaching purposes*. The lessons taught- the realities portrayed- were spiritual ones. The spiritual realities remain.