

BAPTISM: HOW AND WHO

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There are two issues regarding Christian baptism on which much discussion focuses: the method (the how) of baptism and its recipients (the who).

1. New Testament baptism was accomplished by a sprinkling.

First, we address the how. A proper understanding of the Bible argues that baptism should be administered by sprinkling or pouring. The argument, briefly stated, is that John the Baptist baptized by sprinkling, Jesus baptized just like John did, and the early church baptized just like Jesus did.

This point is established by many texts, but here we will only look at a few of them. It is certain that John the Baptist preached a “baptism of repentance.” This, however, does not establish by itself, the how of baptism.

John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Mark 1:4

This is established by a few additional texts. Mark 7:3-5 says,

For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash (wash) *their* hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. ⁴When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash (baptize). And there are many other things that they have received and hold, *like* the washing (baptism) of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. ⁵Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed (common) hands?”

Here we learn that the Pharisees baptized their hands, but we learn this from the Greek not from the English translation. What is called “wash” (3) is called (baptize) in verse 4 (compare the Greek of Luke 11:38). The same verse extends our understanding of baptism when we read (in the Greek that the Jews baptized their cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. By the time we get to the end of the verse it is clear that baptism cannot mean immersion.

Why conclude that it means sprinkle? Or, specifically, why do we conclude that John was baptizing people by sprinkling? We conclude this because we know from the Talmud how the Jews “washed” their hands before eating. This is indicated, although not clearly to the English reader, by the Greek of Mark 7:3 and in the words “in a special way.” Alfred Edersheim comments that this phrase describes,

... the rabbinic command that the only acceptable way to “wash” (elsewhere in the Bible rendered by Greek baptize, Luke 11:38) one’s hands was to make a “fist” by holding the fingers and thumb together and holding this fist into the air with the fingers pointed upward. A second person would then pour water over the “fists.” This water had to run off one’s wrists so that no pollution would attach itself to the hand or fingers for then the one eating would not be defiled by the residue remaining on the hands.

A somewhat small amount of water (no more than 1½ eggshells of water) was to be used.

This is consistent with the biblical command in Num. 19:18ff. where Israelites are instructed to sprinkle themselves and their household items for purification from defilement. These verses also explain why in John 1:19-26 the envoy from the Jerusalem priests asked John why he was baptizing if he was not the Messiah (Christ), Elijah, or the Prophet. These are the three figures who, according to the Jews, were to come to sprinkle God’s people.

So, is there any OT support for this Jewish belief? In Isa. 52:15 God promises that the Servant of the Lord, “shall sprinkle many nations.” In Ezek. 26:25 God promises He will sprinkle clean water on the Jews to cleanse them. And He would give them a new heart and a new spirit. The first text promises the sprinkling of many nations but does not identify a specific agent who will do this in God’s behalf. Similarly, Ezek. 36 prophesies a sprinkling *with* water but does not indicate the agent. The Jews saw the coming baptizer as one of three possible figures. We believers know from the description in Isa. 53, for example, that the coming one was Jesus the Christ. The Jews did not see Jesus as the Christ either when they were questioning John or when Jesus Himself began to baptize. Note the prophecy specifically promises that the coming one would sprinkle the Jews (Ezek. 36:25) and many nations, that is Gentiles (Isa. 52:15).

So, we have seen that the Bible specifies in several ways that John, and after Him Jesus, baptized or sprinkled the Jews.

One final passage offers additional support for our conclusion. After the resurrection of Jesus, He told the disciples,

"... for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." Acts 1:5

There is much to say about this baptism with the Holy Spirit. For one thing, this is surely attached to what John said in Matt. 3:11,

"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Note that what John says here is not said to the disciples, but to all believers.

Moreover, we have a God-supplied picture of this Holy Spirit baptism in Acts 2. There we are told that divided tongues of fire appeared on the heads of the believers and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit – as Jesus (Acts 1:5) and John (Matt. 3:11) had promised. What we have then is a visual image of a pouring out of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit was applied to the individuals they saw a flame sitting on each one of them. So the baptism started as a pouring and concluded as a sprinkling.

Hence, the baptisms of John, Jesus, and the early church were all sprinklings. We know what John did, and Jesus was doing the same thing according to what is self-evident but also according to John 3:26. Also, it should be obvious that what Jesus did, His disciples did, and so, too, the early church did.

2. New Testament Christian Baptism included the children of believers.

We offer several texts in defending our stated proposition.

¹⁴But when Jesus saw *it*, He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. ¹⁵assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." ¹⁶And He took them up in His arms, put *His* hands on them, and blessed them. Mark 10:14-16

In this passage Jesus receives little children into His arms (16). These were quite small children who were being hindered from coming to Him. Moreover, the reason He gives for admitting them (an act the rabbis would never do) is that they very well might belong to God's kingdom. They have as much right to approach, indeed, to be blessed by Jesus as adults do. Moreover, if adults do not come in the same spirit of eagerness and love exhibited by these little children they will not enter the kingdom at all. We twenty-first century Christians may not see what was obvious to the Jewish audience. The Jews knew quite well that the kingdom of God embraced children. After all, by God's command they circumcised their little children admitting them to the kingdom of God. Jesus is saying what was obvious to all who were watching. His actions, however, were unusual because the Pharisaical rabbis would never have allowed little children (other than their own) to approach them. In this explanation Jesus teaches us that both the OT kingdom of God and the kingdom He preaches admitted children.

In Acts 2:38-39 Peter tells the converts that they and their children were to be baptized. In Gen. 17 Abraham is told to give the sign and seal of the covenant, circumcision to his household, including the children who were to be circumcised when only eight days old. Every man and all males of his household who joined Israel were to be circumcised (Exod. 12:48). So, the children of all who were of Israel were included under the covenant and were therefore to be circumcised, marked, as God's.

To the converts on the day of Pentecost the statement that the promises were made to them and to their children were clearly understood. God included children under the covenant because of the promise of the covenant. This is clearly stated by Peter in Acts 3:25-26,

²⁵"You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed (children) all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' ²⁶"To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities."

Therefore, the inclusion of children in the covenant and applying to them the sign and seal of the covenant was well established in the OT and in the minds of the Jews of Paul's day.

In Acts 25:8 Paul, being under trial, denied the charges, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all." Unless Paul was a liar he never taught against the doctrine that little children should be given the sign and seal of the covenant, that they should be baptized. But we need to back up a little. Paul did teach that Christians should not be circumcised.

And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased. Gal. 5:11

How can we maintain that Paul was not lying in Acts 25:8? He did not teach circumcision. So how could he preach “no circumcision” and still not speak against the law of the Jews? This is not a contradiction in the Bible if one understands that Paul taught the principle(s) included in the practice of circumcision but he did not teach the practice of circumcision. Indeed, in obedience to Jesus he taught baptism (Matt. 28:19). So, in obedience to God he changed the form but not the principle of circumcision as he taught in Col. 2:11-12,

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

It should be clear that Paul was not lying because, as he taught in this passage, the Gentile Christians who were not physically circumcised were spiritually circumcised in their baptism. Therefore since circumcision was given to children, and the two acts signify the same thing, it should be clear that Paul taught that babies should be baptized.

We see this practice in what Paul says in Ephesians. In 1:1 he writes to the saints in Ephesus. In the epistle he calls upon the “saints” to be faithful to their Lord. Later, after giving instructions about the organization of the church, he instructs husbands and wives as to how they should relate within the family. In chapter 6 he instructs the children to honor their parents and the father to properly raise their children (4). Significantly, in this instruction to children he cites the fifth commandment including the promise of long life. So, the little children of Ephesus like the little children of Jerusalem were included in the church. They are among the saints. Like the little children of Jerusalem they may not be born again, but they are included as members of the covenant. Here, in Ephesians he addresses the little children with the assumption that as soon as they can understand they are responsible to be faithful to the Lord in whose name they had been baptized. So, what Paul said he taught in Acts 25, he teaches in Eph. 6. He did not teach that the Gentile children were to be circumcised, but because he knew they were baptized (under the covenant) he knows they were included in the church and he addressed them accordingly.

Finally, when Paul preached the gospel of “repent and be baptized” in the synagogue in Berea, his Jewish audience “searched the Scriptures (OT) daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:10-11). As a result, many of them believed. Where did they find baptism by immersion and the exclusion of children from baptism in the OT? Nowhere. But they did find baptism by sprinkling and the inclusion of children in the OT!

Therefore, baptism is to be accomplished by sprinkling and little children of professing believers are to be baptized. They, too, belong under the covenant and of such is the kingdom of God.