

First Presbyterian Church of Coral Springs/Margate
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 for obedience to God's Word. In short, this is an in-house discussion among fellow-Christians. Therefore, while the following is a summary of this church's teaching on baptism, we enjoy fellowship and sympathy with other Christians who would differ on these points. With that being said, our views regarding the sacrament of baptism will have a significant bearing on all other points of Christian doctrine. Therefore, 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*. James 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

¹ James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985. p. 129.

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.”

Baptism is a sign of union with Christ, and the water of baptism symbolizes both the cleansing of our sins by the blood of Christ and renewing by the Holy Spirit.

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 signifies to us 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). All of these passages tell us something about the symbolism of baptism: they speak of his death, burial and resurrection, of our being clothed with Christ, of our entry into his body, and our spiritual renewal. No one of them is alone definitive, but together they tell us what baptism signifies.

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, of our ingrafting into Christ, and of life eternal through him. Through the seal of 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*. A covenant is an agreement or contract that God stipulates for our salvation. The covenant of grace is God’s offer to save those who trust in Jesus Christ. Baptism is a proclamation of this covenant promise, made public within the covenant community of the church. 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 instead it signifies the covenant of grace by which God receives us as his people. No longer do we stand before God on the basis of our works as judged by the law, but God promises salvation to sinners through the work of the redeemer, Jesus Christ, in whom we must believe.

II. The Mode of Baptism

How must baptism be done? Matthew 28:18-20 makes clear that baptism is performed with water as the outward element, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

² Ibid.

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 most biblical method.

Those who teach the baptism view, which says that baptism must be by immersion into the water, often state that the Greek word *baptize* demands this understanding. But this is not the case. In Leviticus 14:6 and 51 the word denotes dipping but not immersion; 2 Kings 5:14 describes bathing in a river; in Luke 11:38 it describes the washing of hands, which normally was done by the pouring of water. Therefore, the mere use of the word *baptize* or *baptism* does not specify the manner in which it is to be conducted.

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. (It is not at all certain whether John baptized in places where the river was deep or where it was shallow. But where water was scarce so great a multitude would have interfered with the water supply and would have themselves lacked water to drink).

Moreover, the New Testament's descriptions of the importance of baptism do not determine the exact mode. It is often said, for instance, that Romans 6:3-6 demands immersion because it is a picture of the transition from death to life, which Paul is speaking about. But, as we have seen, Paul elsewhere speaks of baptism in terms of "putting on Christ," in terms of entering the Body of Christ, and of the removal of the sinful nature; no one of these should be insisted upon as determining the mode of baptism. Furthermore, burials in the New Testament age were generally not into the ground as we do today, but into mausoleums or caves, as was the case for our Lord Jesus.

What this means is that since the express statements of Scripture do not specify the mode of baptism, we must necessarily rely on theological considerations. In this we will find strong biblical support to support 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 "baptisms" -- 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 verses 13, 19, 21. The

³ Jesus' teaching in this passage, 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.

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 confirms our relationship to God in Christ, it signifies our union with the blood-shedding of Christ. 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". The pattern is this: 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 biblical language for both cleansing from sin and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit point to sprinkling. As Ezekiel 36:25-26 says, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness... And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you."

Finally, 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.

Again, our church acknowledges the validity of baptisms performed by immersion. The above sets forth why we baptize by sprinkling, out of conviction that this best 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.

Perhaps the best way to begin explaining the reason for this is to reflect upon the way covenants are presented in the Bible. Two things can be said about every biblical covenant: they each have a sign to go with it, and they each specifically state that the covenant includes the children of those receiving it. This starts with God's covenant with Noah. Genesis 9:13 gives the rainbow as the sign of this covenant. Genesis 9:9 says, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and with your offspring after you." The same is true of God's covenant with Abraham. Genesis 17:10-14 identify circumcision as the sign of this covenant. Verse 9 says, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations." What is particularly noteworthy here is that the sign of the covenant, circumcision, was applied not merely to Abraham but to his infant children as well. We know that not all of his children and later descendants were saved, but being members of Abraham's family and household they received the mark of the covenant, because his was to be a covenant household.

Infant baptism reflects the continuity between New Testament baptism and the Old Testament rite of circumcision. A considerable amount of Scripture upholds this continuity. In Romans 4:11, the apostle Paul notes that circumcision was the seal of “the righteousness of faith,” which is rightly said of baptism as well. In Colossians 2:11, 12, Paul points to the same spiritual reality (separation from the sinful nature) by means of both circumcision and baptism. Furthermore, the privileges of the New Covenant are hardly less than those of the Old Covenant. The 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 latter passage, Peter explicitly affirms that the prior practice of including children in the covenant will continue in the New Covenant: “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off.” The Old Covenant sign was circumcision and the new covenant sign is baptism. Finally, Galatians 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. 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 note that children of believers are accountable 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, to 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; however, he is saying 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 in these occasions, nor does it say that all who were baptized in these households 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/her belief.

That benefit was baptism, signifying a public identification with the church and the privileges of membership in God's covenant community.

It is because of this biblical data that our church, along with the whole of the Reformed tradition, baptizes infants of believing adults. In so doing with 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 by which believers are saved and through which their children are made holy (different) before the Lord. We do not teach that baptism itself saves a child (or an adult), nor do we teach that we baptize because we know that a person has been born again. We cannot know whether anyone is regenerate – infant or adult. We baptize in obedience to God's Word those who make a credible profession of faith and also their children. Some however, point out the apostles' command, “Repent, believe, and be baptized.” That, however, was given to adults and corresponds to them. This command simply does not address the situation of the infant.

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.” Furthermore, their baptism serves the function of proclaiming God's offer to forgive and renew anyone who believes, makes the child as belonging to God's people before both the church and the world, and charges the parents to be faithful in the Christian nurture and admonition of the child.

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 noting God's particular concern for our children. Rather, 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 our children, to teach them the doctrines of our holy religion, and to strive by all the means of God's appointment, to bring them 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 First 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. But this paper should make clear that our teachings on baptism are founded on the teaching of 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 for anyone who trusts in Jesus Christ. 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 calling of that baptism played in our daily lives through faith in Christ and obedience to the Word of God.