

Dunk or Sprinkle?

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Many years ago, when Sue and I were part of an international church plant, one of our fellow elders asked me my opinion on baptism. He believed that we should practice infant baptism (also known as Christening) in the new church, based on what the Bible teaches about household baptism. I asked him what he thought about the passages in the New Testament, which clearly teach that baptism followed repentance and a confession of faith (believing) in Jesus. He stuck to his position. Sadly, in the end, this church practised both infant and adult baptism^[1], which proved to be very confusing.

This story highlights a very important principle in how we approach the Bible: do we use vague and unclear passages and practices to interpret the clear ones, or the other way around?

My Adult Baptism

Growing up in the Netherlands, in a strict Dutch Reformed Church, my parents baptised me as a baby, in line with reformed tradition. I was 18 when the Lord Jesus saved me, and the following year, after reading through the New Testament, I became convinced that I needed to get baptised. My mum was very upset about this as she felt that I was rejecting my upbringing and she felt rejected. Despite this, I got baptised by full immersion that year in, what I believed was, an act of obedience to the Lord.

Over the years, I challenged church leaders from different denominations to search the Scriptures for themselves to discover its teaching on infant baptism. Especially church leaders from Anglican and Protestant churches. I believe the Bible's teaching is clear and conclusive.

The Historical Approach to Baptism

The Word 'Baptism' Was Never Translated

When the New Testament was translated into the main European languages, the English translators ran into a challenge regarding infant baptism. It was already a practice in the newly founded Anglican Church, as the Reformers, who heralded the Reformation, did not challenge the practice of

infant baptism incorporated into the Catholic Church. In Greek, the word is *βάπτισμα*. The translators simply did not translate the word at all but included it in the English King James translation. Problem solved. It should have been translated to 'immersion' or 'dunking,' but that would surely have upset the traditional theological applecart.

Covenant Theology

There was also a theological argument used by the Reformers, and the Dutch Reformed Church still firmly hold to this today. It is called 'Covenant Theology' (Verbands-Theologie). It is taught that through the baptism of children (babies/infants) of believing parents, these children are included in the New Covenant. Just like in the Old Testament, the children of believing parents had their sons circumcised to be included in the Abrahamic Covenant and become, as such, part of God's people. Though this is an honourable practice and teaching, it is not defended by Scripture.

What About Girls?

A further question arises from this practice, which is: why are baby girls baptised? Only boys were circumcised on the eighth day under the Old Covenant Law, and this did not apply to girls. If the theology and practice would be consistent with the Old Testament, girls would automatically be included in the covenant people by virtue of being girls. Baptism of infant girls would then not need to be practised at all.

The New Testament teaches that children of believing parents are included in God's covenant family as He considers them clean and holy,^[2] until the children confess their faith in the Lord Jesus and commit to following Him as their Lord and Saviour. Infant baptism is not mentioned as a prerequisite.

Full Immersion vs. Sprinkling

Let's look at the terminology. Baptism in the Bible means to submerge in water (full immersion). The practice in the Reformed Church tradition is that of sprinkling drops of water on the forehead of the infant. This can take place three times: in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But, as someone bluntly put it, when you dunk a biscuit into a cup of coffee or tea, you don't take some hot liquid in your fingers and sprinkle it on the biscuit – you dunk it into the liquid. At least the Eastern Orthodox Church practices baptism by immersion – they simply dunk the infant three times under the water!

But What Does the Bible Teach about Baptism?

Household Baptism

In the four occurrences in Acts, there is no mention of babies or little children.

- **Cornelius' household** (Acts 10:44-48): The Holy Spirit came upon all who heard the [Gospel] message ... and were speaking in tongues and praising God. Peter challenged his companions regarding the need of these new believers to be baptised in water because all had received the Holy Spirit. *There is no mention of babies being present, speaking in tongues or praising God.*
- **Lydia's household** (Acts 16:14-15): In response to Paul's preaching of the Good News, the Lord opened Lydia's heart to respond to the message. Later, she, together with the members of her household, were baptised. Again, *no mention of babes or children.*
- **The Philippian Jailer's household** (Acts 16:29-34): Under the conviction of sin, through

witnessing an extraordinary miracle, the jailer cried out: *"What must I do to be saved?"* Paul replied that he needed to believe in Jesus to be saved, which also applied to all the members of his household. Paul and his friends continued to proclaim the Good News to the jailer and all the others in his house. All the members of his house were baptised and filled with joy – because he and his whole family had come to believe in God. Clearly, *all who believed* were baptised.

- **Crispus' household** (Acts 18:8): Crispus (the Synagogue Ruler) and his entire household believed in the Lord, and many Corinthians *believed in the Lord and were baptised*.
- **Stephanus' household** (1 Corinthians 1:13-17): Paul baptised the household of Stephanus, but nothing more is known about this. It clearly happened after Paul preached the gospel message to Stephanus and his household, as preaching the gospel is Paul's focus in this passage.

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We can conclude from these passages that infant baptism cannot be defended Scripturally from silence, as there is no mention of babies or little children being included in the baptism of the members of the above households.

What Did Jesus Command Regarding Baptism?

Going back to the Great Commandment (Commission) of Jesus to His disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, He tells them to *go, make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything he commanded them*. This is where Jesus lays down the pattern to be taught and practised in the community of believers everywhere in the world. Baptism clearly follows unbelievers becoming disciples (followers) of Jesus, in response to the Gospel message.

The Early Church's Practice

When the people had heard Peter's preaching of the Good News they were cut to the heart, convicted of their sins and need for being saved, they asked Peter and the other apostles what they now needed to do; *"Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins."* (Acts 2:37-41, NIV). Those who accepted (believed and acted upon) Peter's message were baptised; they most likely used the many ritual baths (*mitvas*) near the temple or even the Pool of Siloam, to do this.

The Theology of Baptism - a Few Verses to Ponder

- Matthew 3:13-14 (NIV): Jesus Himself was baptised by John in the Jordan to fulfil all righteousness. There are a number of reasons for Jesus doing this, one of which was that He set an example for all His followers.
- Romans 6:3-4(NIV): *"Or 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 from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."*
- Galatians 3:27(NIV): *"... for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."*
- Ephesians 4:5(NIV): *"... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ..."*
- Colossians 2:12(NIV): *"... having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."*

Baptism as a Symbol of a Burial

One aspect to highlight from these verses is that baptism symbolises a funeral, a burial. The reason for this is that when a person repents of their sins, puts their trust in Jesus and is forgiven by Him, they 'die with Christ' to their old sinful life.

What is to be done with our old body that was subject to sin, which has now died? We need to bury it! Sprinkling a few drops on one's head just doesn't do this. Full immersion in water, however, does represent a grave, as the water completely seals a person from life. Just keep him under a few minutes and physical death will surely follow! Every believer in Jesus has died with Him and needs to be buried with Him so that they will be raised with Him to new life!

Someone put it as follows: *"When someone dies, you don't just sprinkle some dirt on his body, you bury him in a grave six feet deep. In the same way, when you baptise someone you don't just sprinkle some water on him, you hold him under water and cut him off from life!"*

A friend of mine, who was an elder in a Dutch Reformed Church, came to a confession of faith in Jesus, saw the biblical teaching on baptism and challenged his Dominee (Dutch for pastor), stating that he could not follow through with having his newborn baby baptised. The Dominee told him that he had some books he needed to read about why children need to be baptised. My friend countered with, "But Dominee, I have read only one Book, and it convinced me that my baby boy first needs to believe in Jesus himself before being baptised!" To this, the Dominee had no reply!

Baptism as a Witness

When a new believer responds to the Lord's command to be baptised and does this with the church family witnessing (not to mention family members and others who have been invited), this is a tremendous testimony of a radical commitment to following Jesus. It's a milestone in their relationship with and subsequent growth in Christ. We have witnessed many cases of Christians who have stagnated in their faith for years, yet experienced a breakthrough once they got baptised. It is often seen as the first act of obedience in a believer's relationship with Jesus. In many Muslim countries, the very act of being baptised equates with a radical change in belief, which can even result in a death sentence being put on one's head.

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The Good Intentions of Christening

A final thought regarding parents who have baptised (Christened) their infant children. They acted according to the tradition and teaching of the church they were part of at that time. Their intention was good. They acted in faith and made a public commitment before the whole congregation and additional witnesses that they would raise the babe in the ways of the Lord and the traditions and teachings of the church. However, the underlying belief that their action would somehow save their child and include him or her in the family of God is not correct. Only the Lord can save people, but parents can surely commit themselves to leading their children in the right direction.

Diligently searching the Scriptures does reveal a clear teaching on baptism, what it is about and how it is to be practised. If we are committed to finding out what the Bible teaches on this (and any other) important subject, we need to diligently study, with an open mind, and be willing to change and follow the pattern the Lord has set out in His Word.

[1] Infant baptism is also known as paedobaptism. Believers baptism is a practise which follows a person who has confessed belief in Jesus. This can be from a young age, but, most commonly, it is practised after the age of 12.

[2] 1 Corinthians 7:14

Got more questions? Explore the topic of Water Baptism in greater depth by downloading our Water Baptism booklet.

<https://four12global.com/resources/booklets/water-baptism/>

Recommended read: [The Pool Party by Shaun Brauteseth](#)