



IN THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

First Presbyterian Church
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Reason for Baptism:

Christ's Command

Christians of many different kinds of tradition are agreed that the basis and authority for baptizing in water lies in the command given by Jesus Christ to His disciples and recorded by Matthew (28:18-20)

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 observe everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the end of the age.

The Reason for Christ's Command

Presbyterians believe that while Christ gave the above command about 2,000 years ago, to understand the true significance of baptism one needs to go back another 2,000 years to the time of Abraham - our "ancestor in the faith". God chose Abraham to belong to Him and that his descendants would be God's own people. God made a covenant, or agreement, with Abraham. In this covenant God gave them certain promises and made it clear that He expected the descendants of Abraham to be faithful to Him in obedience to His law. (See Gen. 17:1,2,7,9-14,23-27)

As an outward sign of belonging to God's covenant people, Israelite male babies were to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. This ritual was a sign of initial entry amongst the Covenant people of God. Later, God indicated that the outward sign of the covenant of His grace would be changed when, through the prophet Ezekiel He declared:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will be my people, and I will be your God. (Ez. 36:25-28)

In the New Testament, we learn that God's covenant was no longer restricted to the Jewish people. With the sign of circumcision changed to water baptism, it was given to the Christian Church so that believers and their children in all nations might be assured that they belong to God by covenant. This is borne out by the following Bible passages: Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2:38,39)

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of your sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ. In baptism you were buried with him and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11,12)

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home ... (Acts 16:14,15)

The Meaning of Baptism

Baptism (like circumcision in the Old Testament), whether administered to an adult or a child, has one primary meaning: Because of our sinful (rebellious) nature we are separated from God; we can do nothing in and of ourselves to end that gulf of separation; through Jesus Christ's sacrificial death, God, on His own initiative, has stepped into the breach and provided us with the only way back into friendship with Himself.

... for Adults

When an adult is baptized, that person is declaring that God has brought him to believe in Jesus Christ as his own savior and Lord. When adults are baptized in the Presbyterian Church, such a step qualifies them to be full or communicant members of the church - committed to, and entitled to share in the privileges and responsibilities of belonging to God's family on earth - e.g. worship, teaching, fellowship, witness and service.

. . . for Children

Presbyterians believe it is most appropriate to baptize the children of Christians - not only on the basis of the covenant first made with Abraham but also because small children (although they may not, at the time of baptism, have sinned wilfully against God or His commandments) share with all adults a sinful nature (see Romans 5:12) and therefore they need to seek God's forgiveness and friendship by believing in Jesus Christ.

When a child is baptized in the Presbyterian Church it is done so only after the parents have affirmed their own Christian belief by answering in the affirmative the following question: "In presenting your child for baptism, do you confess your faith in God as your Heavenly Father, in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, and in the Holy Spirit as your Sanctifier?"

Presbyterians recognize not only the necessity for children in due course to make their own personal commitment to believe in, and to follow Jesus Christ, but also the biblical truth that such a commitment can only eventuate through the initiative and gracious work of God the Holy Spirit within the individual concerned.

It is, therefore, customary during a service of infant baptism in Presbyterian churches for a prayer to be said in which God is asked to bring the believer's child to personally acknowledge Jesus Christ as his or her own Savior and Lord.

The Responsibilities of Baptism

. . . for Parents

To assist the realization of this desirable goal in the baptized child's life, the Presbyterian Church requires those parents having their children baptized to promise:

... in dependence on Divine Grace, to teach him/her the truths and duties of the Christian faith, and by prayer, precept and example, to bring him/her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and in the ways of the Church of God ...

This promise by the parents expresses in a realistic fashion the fact that the quality of one's "growing up" environment will, by and large, determine a person's adult belief system. Stress is laid on the need for adequate Christian teaching and example by the parents within the home setting. Participation in the regular life of the local Christian church is seen as essential to assist and reinforce the Christian home environment of the baptized child.

. . . for the Christian Congregation

The Presbyterian Church believes baptism must be carried out in the presence of a congregation of God's people, i.e. during an ordinary church service.

By witnessing the parents making the vows before God, the congregation is agreeing with them and therefore has a responsibility to the family to:

- a) provide love and friendship to the family and child, i.e. to welcome them at church, to get to know them and to generally encourage them
- b) to pray for the child and parents as God has commanded all Christians to pray for one another
- c) use their gifts in serving the church so that the church can provide biblical training for the families and children in its care.

. . . for the Church Elders

The Presbyterian Church believes the Bible gives very important responsibilities to the elders (church leaders) in relation to the spiritual welfare of people in the congregation. Elders are to:

a) take the responsibility for the well-being of members, and therefore to determine that parents do not make false promises to God where it can be avoided. As only God finally knows if a person is a genuine Christian, the Elders must look at signs of spiritual awareness in parents before agreeing to baptism. Most basic of these are regular attendance at church and some understanding of basic Christian teachings.

b) to teach the people God's truth as found in the Bible. To fulfil this responsibility the Elders are to see that worship services, bible study, Sunday School, fellowship groups etc. are provided.

c) to encourage and pray for members. This means getting to know them, visiting them, knowing them well enough to share prayer, spiritual advice, and even to seek to correct them if they fall away from God's teachings.

In Short . . .

Presbyterians do not believe the act of baptism in any sense makes a person a Christian, i.e. effects or assures the salvation of an individual. Presbyterians do not believe baptism is something we do for God, i.e. an act of submission or obedience to God. In their understanding and practice of baptism, Presbyterians seek to express the central theme of both the **Old and New Testaments**:

- that by nature we are in a state of rebellion against God - we need a Savior;
that Jesus Christ is that Savior; and that God the Holy Spirit is the only one who can effect our salvation and bring us into God's family.

Questions and Answer

Q. Is the word "christen" the same as "baptize"?

A. The word "christen" is not used in the Presbyterian Church to describe baptism. It means to make a person a Christian by the act of baptism - a view held by the Roman Catholic Church but one Presbyterians reject as having no biblical basis.

Q. Why baptize an infant when an infant cannot repent and have faith?

A. Circumcision, the sign of the covenant, was performed upon infants who could not repent and have faith, and circumcision has been replaced by baptism. Most of Paul's references to baptism do not mention repentance and faith (Rom. 6:1-11; 1 Cor. 6:11; 12:13; 2 Cor. 1:21; Eph. 5:25-7; Col. 1:13). The picture of the helpless babe is a perfect picture of our helplessness in regard to our salvation, and of how God takes the initiative in establishing his covenant of grace. (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4; 2:7; 3:11; 2 Th. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:2).

Q. Is the baptism of an infant biblical baptism?

A. Yes indeed - if this baptism was in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19), and if water was used. Being biblical baptism it is unnecessary to be followed by immersion later, for baptism, being an initiating rite, can never be repeated. "The sacrament of baptism is but once to be administered unto any person." (Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 28:7)

Q. What benefit does a child receive in baptism?

A. This has been well answered by Canon T.C.Hammond in his book *In Understanding Be Men* p.172, "The child is brought into the visible church and thus brought within the sphere of the covenanted mercies of God. The sacrament is a sign and pledge that he is within the circle which is enjoyment of the privileges bestowed by the Christian covenant. But the child is yet responsible himself to receive Christ by faith and voluntarily to enter into the covenant union with Christ. The early administration of baptism does not remove the requirement of faith either in the parents who bring the child or in the child himself who must exercise it, on coming to years of discretion, to claim his inheritance."

Q. Why does the New Testament not speak directly about infant baptism?

A. Because it was taken for granted that as the old covenant with Abraham included children, the new covenant instituted by Christ's sacrificial death would also include children. The New Testament is silent about many things e.g. women sharing in the Lord's Supper, and the baptism of adult sons and daughters of Christian parents. Silence about infant baptism points to its unquestioned acceptance and practice in the New Testament era.

Q. When did the idea of "believers' baptism" emerge in church history?

A. "Believers' baptism" in the sense that children are excluded, seems to have arisen in the heretical Paulicians of Armenia in 1140 A.D. At least that was the finding of Church of Scotland scholars in their "Draft Interim Report in Baptism" p.32 (1959).

It had its full expression in the Anabaptist movement, which had its origin in Zurich in 1523. They were called Anabaptists because they re-baptized those who had been baptized in infancy. It is a relatively modern idea.

Q. Do Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian churches etc. have "believers' baptism"?

A. Yes. Adults who were not baptized in infancy are baptized on confession of their faith, the same as with Baptists, etc.

Q. Why do these churches not baptize by immersion?

A. Some may if requested. But they believe that sprinkling or pouring with water is more in accord with the biblical meaning of baptism (see Ezekiel 36:25-28) and the form found in the New Testament record of the early Christian church.

Q. Is not immersion a better way?

A. How can it be if Scripture does not teach it? We must remember that the verb used for baptism is always passive. This means that the initiative is always with God. So the truths behind baptism are best seen in the baptism of a helpless baby. When the word is used un-Biblically in an active sense, as in immersion, when people speak in an un-Biblical way of "obey the Lord in baptism" or "confessing Christ in baptism", they are in effect turning baptism into a work of merit. It can become a "work", and we are not saved by "works" (Eph. 2:9).

Q. Is not infant dedication a better idea than infant baptism?

A. No. Infant dedication has no basis in the New Testament, and it is therefore an unsatisfactory substitute for the baptism of infants. The latter, Presbyterians believe, was practiced by Christians of the New Testament era (see Acts 10:47; Acts 16:13-15; Acts 16:29-34; 1 Cor. 1:16) and affirmed by many early Christian writers.

For example Origen in 210 A.D. stated "the church has received a tradition from the Apostles to give baptism even to little children".

Q. Is it not true that many people who have been baptized in infancy show no signs of being Christians?

A. Yes. This is a tragedy, and is partly due to poor baptismal discipline. But this also holds good for many who have been immersed as adults. Baptism of any kind is always based on the presumption that those who take the vows required have a true faith, a presumption that may well prove to be wrong, (e.g. Simon [Acts 8:13, 18-24]).

Q. I am a believing parent, but my husband (wife) is not a believer. Can I have my baby baptized?

A. Yes. See 1 Corinthians 7:14.

Q. Is baptism essential to salvation?

A. Of course not. Calvin said, "how much evil has been caused by the dogma that baptism is necessary to salvation". We are saved by our faith in Christ as Savior and Lord (Jn. 3:16; 5:24 etc.). The "dying thief" was not baptized (Lk. 23:43). There is no record of the disciples of Jesus, the 120 in the Upper Room (Acts 1:15), or Apollos (Acts 18:25) being baptized. Yet they were all undoubtedly saved, and were "fervent in the spirit" (Acts 18:25). The Society of Friends and the Salvation Army do not baptize.

Q. Why then baptize?

A. Because our Lord commanded us so to do (Mt. 28:19). Through our baptism we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, and this fact is a wonderful strength and blessing to us if faith should fail. Martin Luther, in times of despondency, used to repeat to himself, "I have been baptized" meaning, "the mark of Christ has been placed on me. I belong to him. He holds me fast" (Jn. 10:28). The Westminster Confession of Faith says (ch. 28:5), "It is a very great sin to condemn or neglect this ordinance." This is because to fail to be circumcised was to break God's covenant (Gen. 17:14). It is the same with baptism.

Based on *Biblical Baptism - What the Bible says about Infant Baptism* by Arthur Gunn. pp. 26-29.
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