

“Enter the Water”

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When I was in seminary, my church history professor, Bruce Rigdon, told a story about an early church in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The old priest came up (and they believed that you had to baptize within the first few days of birth. It didn't matter whether it was too hot or too cold,) Well this was the middle of winter, and the old priest asked the people to go out and chip the ice away from the river so they could get enough water to do the baptism. So, they chipped it away. Family and all the church members gathered around by the river side to do the baptism.

The old priest was shaky, with old hands. He grabbed the infant, said the name of the child, baptized the infant, and when they baptized in the Eastern Church the priest would take the infant, and he would take his robe, pinch the nose of the child and cover the mouth, and baptize in the name of the Father and bring the child up. And, if the child wasn't screaming, the priest would pinch the baby, if wasn't bad enough. But, believe me, the baby was already crying most of the time after the first dunk in the bitter cold water. Then [the priest baptized in] the name of the Son and the name of the Holy Spirit.

The reason the baby needed to be crying and [and the reason the priest would] do it that way was, as I explained earlier: the child was dead in sin and when they [the child] was brought out of the water, it wasn't really [into] the priest's hands. The priest was just the conduit between the Father, who saved the child from death to new life; the Son, who saved the child from death to new life; and the Holy Spirit that saved the child from death to new life.

Well, on this particular occasion, the old priest (it was a windy, cold day) was shaky and as he did the Holy Spirit he lost the baby down the river. This is the story. It was true. And the priest turned to the family and he said, “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.”

I can't imagine what that must have been like. So I thought to myself, “Why in the world did they continue to do that?” Then I thought, “Sometimes we get harassed in the Presbyterian Church for sprinkling. But I wonder, in part, if that is why?”

Can you imagine? I mean we had a little bit of trouble, especially with Dylan this morning. Can you imagine my saying, “Dylan, we are not just going to sprinkle you, buddy, we are going to dunk you now?” I don't think it would have gone over well - and I think we have started sprinkling as a means of making it less traumatic.

Then a lot of people would say, “Then why aren't you waiting to do believer baptism when they are old enough to understand? When they can make a decision for Christ themselves, and that way they can remember it?” As Presbyterians - I'm sure Ken has had the same experience from time to time - you have people coming and saying, “Why can't I be re-baptized now I can remember?”

I want to explain why that happens and why we do it the way we do. I think we do sprinkle because it is easy. It is much easier on a child. But the reason we do infant baptisms is very important for us to understand. And, we certainly do adults, but we only do one baptism, to affirm all baptisms from all different denominations.

I want to take us back for a moment as I explain why we do infant baptisms and baptize the way we do.

We need to go back to the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, we had covenants. We had the covenant with Noah with the flood. We had the covenant with Moses. We had the covenant with Abraham. And, we had the covenant with the Kings and David. We had a number of covenants with the prophets, each one God becoming more intimate in relation with us.

But the greatest covenant came with Jesus, and that covenant came in Jesus' baptism. John the Baptist is saying, "Why do I have to baptize you? You should be the one baptizing me." But Jesus knew that even Jesus needed to be responsible to the covenant, just the same as you had the Old Testament covenants. Jesus was calling baptism the new covenant and so, in a covenant relationship it goes both ways: Jesus had a responsibility to God and God had a responsibility to Jesus.

In baptism, each one of us has a relationship to God in this covenant that we hold dear. So, when there is a baptism, we are fulfilling our covenant with God. Gwen fulfilled that covenant in her baptism and, in bringing her children to this font; she answered God's call. The reason we fulfill baptism as an infant baptism [is that] we are children of the Old Testament. We didn't just throw the Old Testament out when Jesus came, we hold both together equally.

Baptism replaced circumcision. Circumcision was dealt with in infancy as a mark, as a sign so that no one could ever deny their faith in God, because they were marked forever, their entire life on earth. Baptism is the new mark, or seal that fulfills the Old Testament and carries through in the New Testament. It is even better than circumcision, because Jesus was more holistic than all people. Women could not be circumcised. They were second class citizens in the Jewish religion of that time. But with baptism all people are equal, all are marked with the same symbol in baptism.

But there is another clear reason why we do infant baptism; because as Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics who do infant baptism, the emphasis is on the understanding that God chooses us, we do not choose God.

I always cringe when people talk about how they made a commitment to Jesus Christ. "I chose to be baptized." I just cringe, because in my theology, which is the reformed theology that includes the Presbyterian Church, I am not capable in my sin of ever being able to choose God. Only by God's hand can any of us have enough faith to come before that font. God chose Preston and Dylan and Gwen. Gwen, Dylan and Preston could never choose God, God chose them, the same way as [he chose] you and me. So, that is why infants are baptized - because God chose to call them to the font. If we are older - an adolescent or an adult - God chooses to call that person to the font at that time. But, it is always God's initiative, not ours. That is why we do infant baptism. It keeps us humble. It keeps us

always seeking God. And, it attempts to keep us from becoming arrogant in our faith that, "I know the right way, because I am choosing God. You're not acceptable because you are not doing it the right way. You're not in the right denomination. You're not saying the right salvation prayer." We can't share that. I don't want to say the word "arrogant," but [it's an] exclusive type of faith - because as Presbyterian we begin our lives humbly, unable to have faith apart from God.

That is the clear emphasis of why we baptize in sprinkling: because it makes Dylan happy. Why we do it with water, as a seal in the new covenant, and why we do it once and with an infant - because at its very core we are not in control. It is always God. God is the prime mover in creation, and in our recreation; in baptism, and life anew, for all eternity. There is a lot of comfort in that because, thank goodness my salvation is not up to Scott. That wouldn't be very pleasant. I'm just grateful that it is up to God and not me. And that is why baptism is the way we have it. It may not be perfect, but I think it's blessed.

Amen.