



## Baptism at Mearns Free Church

Since this will be our first baptism as Mearns Free Church, I want to offer some words of explanation. What follows is simply to help you understand why we do what we do!

### Baptism in General

- We baptise because Jesus commanded us to (Matthew 28:19). The apostles preached baptism (Acts 2:38), and they themselves conducted baptisms (Acts 2:41).
- All Christian churches baptise with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20). Therefore, we baptise as a Christian church.

When we baptise in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the act is a signpost that identifies this person with God. More specifically, it is a sign of union with Christ and our oneness with Him in His death and resurrection. It represents all the blessings that flow from union with Christ, pointing us to the grace of God in His promised presence and our inclusion within the family of God.

The water used in baptism is a clear **sign** of the washing away of sin and guilt (not by the waters of baptism, but through the cross of Calvary). It is also a sign of the new life brought by the work of the Holy Spirit (which we call regeneration). It is a "**seal**" because it serves as an authenticating stamp or verification of the covenant promise. (Romans 4.9-12)

Where in adults the sign and seal points back to what the Lord is professed to have done in the life of the believer by his grace received in faith, in the infant it points forward to the day when he or she is embraced by that same grace.

## The Mode of Baptism

We often speak of the "**mode**" of baptism, which refers to how the water is applied in baptism. In our church, we view the "mode" as less significant than some other churches do.

Some churches operate on the assumption that the Greek words for "to baptise" and "baptism" inherently mean "**immersion**" (to be put completely under water).

(However, very few hold this view consistently. An elderly, sick person professing faith in a hospital bed before dying will have water **poured or sprinkled** as immersion would be impossible in that context.)

A few examples show the meaning of "to baptise/baptism" is broader than just submerging something or someone under water:

- **Old Testament (Septuagint):** In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint),

In Leviticus 14:6, a live bird is to be "bapto" in the blood of a killed bird. The ESV translates this as "**dip**." Similarly, Ruth was invited to "dip" her bread in wine (Ruth 2:14), and Jonathan dipped the end of his staff in a honeycomb (1 Samuel 14:27). In Daniel 4:33, Nebuchadnezzar is "**baptised**" by the dew. Translating this as *fully immersed* would be unusual; we would more likely say he was "**drenched**" in dew.

- **New Testament:** In Luke 11:38, a Pharisee criticises Jesus for not **washing** before dinner (baptise). It seems unlikely that the Pharisee expected Jesus to be fully immersed under water before eating.

Hebrews 9:10 mentions various ceremonial "**washings**," referring back to Old Testament purifications that included **sprinkling**. This passage refers to a process that includes dipping *and* sprinkling for cleansing, but not "full immersion."

It is sometimes argued that the baptism of Jesus and the Ethiopian Eunuch speak of immersion. However:

- The account of Jesus' baptism does not actually say he was immersed, only that he was baptised **in** the River Jordan. He could have stood in the water as John scooped water up over Jesus.

- Regarding the Ethiopian in Acts 8:36-38, we often assume too quickly that because he goes down *into* the water and comes **up out of** the water, this means full immersion.

However, careful reading of the text shows that what the Ethiopian Eunuch does in this regard, **Philip** the evangelist does also: ...*they both went down into the water...when they came up out of the water...* Philip did not immerse himself.

Furthermore, even the Greek verb (*eis*) used for "into" here is found repeatedly in this same chapter of Acts and in most cases is translated "to" (so it could be that they went *to* the water). Given that it was a "desert road," it seems more likely that Philip applied water to the Eunuch by sprinkling or pouring rather than having sufficient water to submerge this fully grown man.

What I personally find persuasive regarding the breadth of meaning of the word baptise/baptism relates to Jesus words about the coming of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:5):

*"John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."* Jesus is speaking about Pentecost.

So, as Pentecost is then described in Acts 2:3 and Acts 2:17, we read how the Spirit came. He comes in the sign of fire-like tongues that come to rest on the apostles.

When Peter then explains what happened, he quotes the prophet Joel in Acts 2:17:

*"I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh..."*

This baptism which Jesus spoke of regarding the coming Spirit rested on the apostles as he was poured out on the apostles (rested on them).

In Ezekiel 36:25-28 when the prophet speaks ahead to the coming of the Spirit he says;

*"I will sprinkle clean water on you...and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you..."*

While the definition *may* include "to immerse" or "immersion," the definition is not limited to this. Therefore, although our church accepts immersion as a valid mode of baptism, we do not ordinarily practice it ourselves.

Our practice is to pour or sprinkle water in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit.

### **Who Should Be Baptised?**

It requires little persuasion to say that believers in the Lord Jesus should be baptised. The commission given to the apostles in Matthew 28:18-20 makes that clear and there are several New Testament examples. There must be a credible profession of faith in Jesus.

### **In addition to believing adults we baptise the infants/children of believers.**

We do this out of a conviction that there is continuity of the Covenant of grace made in the Old Testament and the New Testament and explicitly as it was stated to Abraham and his offspring.

Though there were physical aspects to this covenant the heart of the covenant was spiritual. Genesis 17:7 puts it this way:

*"I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring...for an everlasting covenant...to be **God to you and to your offspring** after you..."*

The heart of the covenant is a union with God. A relationship with God.

As one person put it, for God to be our God means:

*"I will be for you, I will exist for you. I will exercise my God-ness for you. I will be committed to you."* (Prof Donald MacLeod)

This amazing grace flows throughout the Old and New Testaments, culminating in the book of Revelation where God's final and eternal dwelling is with His people.

The physical sign of the covenant would be circumcision (Genesis 17:11). This outward sign was not a sign of Abraham's faith, but a sign of the gracious Covenant God had made with him. Abraham received it with trust in God.

Hebrews 11:10 tells us Abraham knew this covenant was spiritual—the promise of an eternal city. This promise included the promise that through his offspring, all nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 22:18). This is why Jesus commands the apostles to go and make disciples of Jesus from all nations.

Here are two points of interest:

1. **Covenant Offspring:** Though a spiritual covenant, the sign of the covenant was to be borne by Abraham's physical offspring at a time when they could not exercise faith (8 days old). It was a physical sign for physical offspring worked out in a physical world but of a spiritual promise.

Both Isaac and Ishmael were circumcised as a sign of the covenant; later, Jacob and Esau were circumcised. Throughout the history of Old Testament Israel, infants who grew up to be believing and non-believing male infants had borne that visible sign of God's gracious covenant.

**We believe the same spiritual covenant continues, but the sign is now baptism and is extended to women also.**

We therefore baptise believers (male and female) and the offspring of believers (at least one believing parent). Even if some believers choose not to baptise their children, those children are still "covenant children."

The sign does not *make* them covenant children; it is the privilege of being born of a believing parent that links them to the Word of God and puts them under the care and prayer of God's people – within the scope of his covenant.

2. **Covenant Households:** Not only were Abraham's physical offspring to bear the sign of circumcision, but all under his authoritative headship in his home were to bear that sign also, even foreign slaves. As Joshua later said: "*As for me and my household, we will follow the Lord.*" (Joshua 24:15). As the believing head of his home, Abraham's household was set apart to the Lord through circumcision.

In the New Testament, the sign itself changes to water baptism because we no longer need the bloody sign of circumcision; Jesus has shed His blood and been raised. We see Paul connecting circumcision and baptism explicitly in at least Colossians 2.11-12.

Believers are therefore baptised upon profession of faith. But the sign has not reduced in New Testament visibility but increased. It is now extended to female believers and, just like in Old Testament times, should be applied to the **infants of believers** (but now extended to female infants). Those under the authority of the believing household head should also be baptised.

This is exactly what we see in the New Testament:

- Believers are baptised (male and female) on coming to faith.

- Households with a believing head are baptised. We see mentioned explicitly the *household* of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16), *the family* of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33), and *the household* of Lydia. (This last household is very interesting because from this it would seem that Lydia was either unmarried or widowed and so she was the head of her own household (Acts 16:14-15). Her household was baptised when she came to faith.)

## Conclusion

So in continuity with God's covenant promises we baptise believers and the children of believers (not so many household slaves in our generation).

What a wonderful **sign and seal** of the marvellous grace of God held out in His Son Jesus! Whether in adults or infants it points us to the forgiveness of sins, newness of life by the Spirit and union with a wonderful Saviour.

We rejoice in the physical birth of these children, but we pray one day they will embrace with conscious faith the God they are being told about and whose life is being modelled by godly parents in a godly church community.

And, as we witness a baptism, we ought to re-profess our own commitment to Jesus, the loving Saviour who bore our sins and by his risen life sets before us the hope of glory.

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