

## Why Presbyterians Only Baptize Once

### Dennis Bills

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The Wednesday night lesson on the Westminster Confession of Faith ground to an awkward halt when the minister read paragraph seven of the chapter on Baptism: “The sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered unto any person.” As he read the words, he felt instant resistance from some in the congregation. This was apparently new information. Several immediately raised their hands and questioned why people could not be rebaptized, even if they had already been baptized as infants. Several even testified that they themselves or their own children had been rebaptized after coming to Christ later in life. Some of these were new to the Presbyterian tradition, but others had been raised in it since birth. As the minister listened, he saw that some were confused about what Presbyterians believe, even after years in the church.

A prudent preacher knows that such misunderstandings take time, patience, and wisdom to address, but the process begins with understanding why some believe in rebaptism and why Presbyterians baptize only once. Many Presbyterian denominations require their ordained teaching elders to subscribe to the clear statement of the Confession. This means that teaching elders cannot rebaptize anyone who has already received a valid baptism during their lifetime. A valid baptism is loosely defined as an ordained minister applying water to professing believers or their children in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Church has been baptizing infants since its earliest days. Following the Reformation, a group of Christians began teaching that infant baptism was unbiblical, and that Christians should be baptized only after they professed faith in Christ. These people were called “Anabaptists” (“*ana*” means “again” in Greek) because they believed in rebaptizing or “baptizing again” those who had already been baptized as infants. Although these Anabaptists are not the same as today’s Baptists, Baptists do believe something similar: (1) that infant baptism is not valid, and (2) that anyone who has been baptized as an infant must be rebaptized after their conversion before they can join a Baptist church. Today, most people who rebaptize attend baptistic churches. However, some in Presbyterian churches also believe that rebaptism is appropriate or even necessary. Why is this so?

## Why do People Rebaptize?

There are at least three reasons some people rebaptize. The first is they do not believe the Bible teaches infant baptism. While this is true of most Baptists, I have occasionally encountered similar beliefs in Presbyterian churches, particularly among those who have transferred their memberships from Baptist churches. In spite of this, many of them will allow their children to be baptized as infants based upon two rationalizations: 1) they tell themselves that infant baptism is basically equivalent to baby dedications, a common baptistic practice, and/or 2) they quietly reserve the right to give their children a “legitimate” baptism after they profess Christ when they are older. They may not believe that infant baptism is biblical, but do not see any harm in it as long as they can do the real thing later.

The second reason that some people rebaptize is they recognize that infants cannot understand the meaning of baptism. They ask themselves, “What is the point of baptizing a baby if he or she has no understanding or memory of the occasion?” They conclude that it might be valuable for the child to go through the ceremony again when they are older and can understand the rite better.

The third reason that some people rebaptize is they believe it will be an aid to their walk with Christ. Perhaps they were baptized as children, but did not profess Christ until they were much older in life. Their sinfulness in the meantime somehow suggests that they should be rebaptized. Perhaps they are looking for a sort of religious satisfaction or some additional, tangible way to symbolize their new, clean lives. As a mile-marker in their Christian lives, it serves as a type of anniversary “sobriety chip.”

There may be other reasons, but these are the most prevalent in my experience. It has been helpful to note that these reasons might relate to two sociological phenomena: (1) Many who attend Presbyterian churches are not themselves fully Presbyterian in their beliefs. They may have been saved and educated in a baptistic type church, but later transferred to a Presbyterian church. “I like this church,” they might say, “but I cannot buy into infant baptism.” Even amongst valuable and welcome members of our church communities, there are always a few baptistic holdouts and (2) Some Presbyterian communities are heavily influenced by the pervasive baptistic perspectives of their larger communities, so that even while professing Presbyterianism, they may find themselves occasionally espousing viewpoints that might be more prevalent within non-presbyterian communities. In these situations, it is likely that these congregations have been unknowingly influenced by baptistic doctrines for generations. This may be especially true in isolated areas with large baptistic populations.

## **Why Should Baptism only be Performed Once?**

### **What Baptism Signifies**

The first reason baptism should only be performed once involves what it signifies. According to the Word of God, both baptism and its Old Testament counterpart, circumcision, signify several aspects of the Holy Spirit's saving work in people's lives. The most obvious of these are cleansing (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Acts 22:16; Tit. 3:5-7), regeneration (Rom. 2:28, 29; Tit. 3:5,6), union with Christ (Rom. 6:1-7), justification by faith (Rom. 4:11-12; Col. 2:11-14), and initiation into the Covenant community and Body of Christ (Gen. 17:4-11; Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38-39; 8:12-13; Gal. 3:21-29; Eph. 4:5). What is significant about all these aspects of salvation is that they are once-in-a-lifetime works of God. We do not lose them, fall away from them, or get them taken away from us. We therefore do not need to get them again a second time. Inasmuch as baptism signifies these things, it also does not need to be done a second time.

Some will say that infants, however, do not have any knowledge or understanding of these things, so the ceremony is meaningless to them. However, this argument fails for several reasons: (1) Parents and elders are responsible to teach children about their covenant relationship with God that is initiated at their baptism (Deut. 6); (2) Children will hopefully see dozens of baptisms throughout their lifetimes, each providing wonderful teaching opportunities for parents and elders; (3) We are each called upon to "improve our baptism" (Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 167) by, among other things, learning what it means, why Christ instituted it, what privileges and benefits it provides, and what parents have vowed therein on behalf of their children; And (4) just as the work of salvation is entirely by God's grace and mercy toward helpless, ignorant, rebellious people, so baptism is given to children who are helpless, ignorant, and sinful.

This last point is significant because some cling desperately to the notion that, having made a "decision" for Christ of their own free will, they should also be able to choose baptism of their own free will. However, the work of God in salvation is "monergistic" or "one-sided"—it is, from start to finish, totally and entirely God's doing (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; John 6:44; Eph 1:4-11; 2:1-10; I Cor. 4:7; 12:3; Rom. 9:15-18). We cannot claim any credit whatsoever for our own involvement in salvation. We, with our free will, would never choose God if he did not intervene. In this sense, the baptism of unknowing and helpless infants is a beautiful picture of God's love and grace to people who march toward damnation when left to their own strength, intelligence, and free will.

### **God Himself Does Not Require a Second Baptism**

The second reason baptism should only be performed once is that God himself has nowhere required a second baptism. Presbyterians believe that New Testament baptism replaces Old Testament circumcision because they both signify the same things (see above) and because they were both commanded by God as initiatory rites of the Covenant. Along these lines, it is interesting to note two things about circumcision: (1)

For millennia, God himself required that a sign and seal of his saving work be given to infants who were not yet saved. If God had no problem giving such a sign and seal to infants throughout the Old Testament era, why should infant baptism provide any more of a problem today? (2) God also never hints that it was ever problematic to give this sign to those who were too young to understand or be willfully involved. There is no record, in circumcision's 2000 year history, of an additional, divinely authorized, post-salvation ceremony that made up for what was lacking in the initial rite. Why then should we need one now? Once was apparently good enough for God, so why must we do more than God demands as if it were not good enough for us. When we rebaptize, we effectively say to God, "I know you did not ask us to baptize more than once, but I want to anyway, because I don't believe your plan is sufficient."

### **God Forbids Adding to His Word and Worship**

The third reason baptism should only be performed once is that God forbids adding to his Word and worship unbiblical and extrabiblical traditions and commandments of men. Some may grant that God does not require additional baptisms but do not believe he would object to additional baptisms anyway. They may have good intentions, desiring to do something positive for others and for themselves. For others, they want their church and community to know they have made a profession of salvation. For themselves, they desire some tangible representation of their salvation to latch onto, a sort of personal marker or monument of their conversion. They may even reason to themselves, "Since I have no memory of my first baptism, I will get rebaptized in order to feel that it has meaning for me. It is not wrong to do more than God requires, is it?" The answer is an unequivocal "Yes! It is indeed wrong!"

The Pharisees were masters at padding God's requirements in order to feel better about themselves spiritually. They added ceremonies and traditions believing they were doing something good for God. Christ was very clear when he said to the them, "Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" In Matthew 15, he said, "in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

Similarly, Paul wrote about extrabiblical rules, traditions, and commandments:

These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2).

God demands that his Word not be compromised with additional requirements, and that he alone authorize the elements of worship. As clear teachings of Scripture and key elements of worship, the sacraments are not open to modification. We do not have the liberty to worship God any way we want, no matter how good our intentions, nor to add to God's requirements, no matter how good it makes us feel.

I will conclude by answering a final argument that is often held in reserve until all others have been exhausted. On several occasions, it has been the fall back argument by which the most insistent have rejected everything taught above: What if “one baptism and one baptism only” becomes a stumbling block to someone who desperately wants to be baptized again? What if they fall away because they did not get what they felt they needed spiritually? I will respond with two points:

(1) The Bible presents many stumbling blocks to sinful people. Christ himself was a stumbling block according to 1 Corinthians 1:23. People often do not like “this teaching” or “that teaching” in the Bible. However, those who stumble are still personally responsible to align themselves with the clear teaching of the Word of God. We cannot alter the Bible’s teaching simply because someone does not like it. The early church apostles said in the book of Acts, “Judge for yourself whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God,” and “we must obey God rather than men.”

(2) If our doctrine on the issue is such a stumbling block that someone no longer wants to attend our church, I would be disappointed, but would affirm his or her right to attend elsewhere. It may be that those who are unteachable regarding this doctrine may need to align themselves with a congregation that better represents their beliefs. Of course, that does not preclude full efforts to persuade them, but sometimes people need to be released of their own “free will.” The simple fact is that not everyone agrees on the issue of baptism, which is, of course, why some other denominations and churches exist. The Bible says that each person stands or falls to his own master and should be fully convinced in his own mind (Rom. 14).

Presbyterian denominations do not require lay members to agree with every detail of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. However, our Presbyterian teaching over the centuries has been consistent with the Confession simply because we believe the Confession dependably represents the teaching of the Word of God. Those who disagree, but who still desire to attend our churches, must be willing to accept 1) that we will teach the Word of God as we understand it, and, 2) as Presbyterians, the Westminster Confession of Faith is *our* creed. They should not be surprised when what we teach is consistent with it. We will therefore teach that Presbyterians should only baptize once because of what baptism signifies, because once was good enough for God, and because God forbids adding to his Word and worship.

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