NB gedagtes oor die doop.

Now what I am going to do in a moment is to give a four fold response to these things. But before we do that, perhaps I could just outline for you some data from the Old Testament which impinges upon our understanding of mode of baptism in the New Testament. As you know, baptism is not a unique, New Testament phenomenon. There were Old Testament baptisms, and that is very important. We are not just talking about proselyte baptism which was mandated in the Old Testament; there were actually mandated baptisms in the Levitical code. Let me walk through with you some of the information for these.

First of all, let’s talk about unrepeatable Old Testament baptisms.

Unrepeatable Old Testament baptisms. You remember in Hebrews 9:10, there is a reference there to various washings, or various baptisms. The Greek word there is βρώμασιν, or baptismoy, and it is a word found in the Septuagint version, the Greek version of the Old Testament. The writer in Hebrews 9:10 has in mind the various ritual baptisms, or ritual washings, by which ceremonial defilements were removed in the Old Testament.

If we investigate the Old Testament, we find that there were two unrepeatable baptisms in the Mosaic law. First, there was a blood baptism, and second, there was a water baptism. And then there were at least eleven subsidiary repeatable baptisms which are associated with the sprinkling of blood. There is also evidence of purification rites prior to Moses. For instance, you find purification in Genesis 35 verses 1-5 in the life of Jacob.

Now, what about the basic unrepeatable washings, the blood washings, and the water washing. They are found respectively in Exodus 24 and in Numbers 8. In Exodus 24, we have the sprinkling of the blood of the covenant at Sinai. That is something that we are going to look at the next time we are together a little more closely. That passage, by the way, is referred to in Hebrews chapter 9 very directly. It is also referred to in all the synoptic Last Supper accounts. Exodus 24, the sprinkling of the blood, the unrepeatable blood baptism.

Then there is the water baptism. It is found in Numbers 8 and involves the consecration of the Levites. Now we looked in detail earlier at that passage in Hebrews chapter 9 where the definition or translation of covenant is difficult, and I want to remind you of that passage again, but this time, focusing on a different set of verses, verses 18-20 of Hebrews chapter 9, where we read:

“Therefore even the first covenant was not inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "THIS IS THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT WHICH GOD COMMANDED YOU."

So this particular Old Testament unrepeatable blood baptism is actually mentioned in the New Testament, and it is highlighted by the author of Hebrews, in chapter nine verses 18-20. This sprinkling of blood qualified the Israelites to enter into the presence of God. Exodus 24, subsequent to verse 8, goes on to record that Moses and the representatives of the people met and ate with the Lord. So this sprinkling of blood confirmed that God was the God of Israel. And that Israel was the people of God. Israel had been adopted into the family of God and enjoyed appropriate fellowship and this was because of the blood that pointed to atonement for sin.

Now in light of that Old Testament ritual and its New Testament reality, because you remember in all the synoptic cup words, especially in Matthew and Mark, the language of the cup words, that is the words of institution that Jesus gave when He was explaining the cup to the disciples. What is their form? It is identical to the Greek Septuagint translation of Exodus 24:8 with one change. The impersonal form, the is replaced by the personal pronoun My. We read, “This is the blood of the covenant,” in Exodus 24:8, but in Mark and Matthew, we read “This is My blood of the covenant.” So Jesus goes right to that Exodus 24 passage to explain His atoning work.

In light of that Old Testament ritual and the New Testament reality in the death of Christ, it would not be surprising if the New Testament used baptismal language in reference to the death of Christ. And that is precisely what we found. For instance, in Mark chapter 10 verse 38, Jesus says, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And in Luke 12:50, we read, “I have a baptism to be baptized with and how I am constrained until it is accomplished.” This usage confirms the position that the purifying rituals, using cleansing agents other than water, can come under the classification of baptism in the Old Testament. You know, if someone comes and says, “Well you can’t count these blood rituals in the Old Testament as a baptism,” Jesus thinks you can. Not only from what He says from Matthew and Mark in the cup sayings, but in these passages here in Mark 10:38 and in Luke 12:50.

So the question is then, “How do you relate the Old Testament covenant with sprinkled blood with the ratifying of the New Covenant by Christ’s death?” Clearly the correlation is not because of the mode of the administration of that baptism. In other words, though we know, that baptism, in Exodus 24 was by sprinkling, it is not the sprinkling that connects that with its New Testament realization. Nor, is the link to be found in the manner in which Christ died.

Now, this is the point: The ritual in its connection with the New Testament fulfillment is not linked by the external mode, but by its internal meaning. It is the meaning of the ritual that links it with the New Testament fulfillment.

The Old Testament ritual of sprinkling of blood was an initiation or confirmation of a relationship. The death of Jesus was likewise an initiation. It meant the inauguration of a new state of affairs for Christ, as well as those for whom He died. And so His death is termed as a baptism. Now that is the blood baptism that I wanted to look at. The unrepeatable blood baptism. Let’s go then to the unrepeatable water baptism.

Now, a question: Where do you find that reference to Jesus’ death described as in baptismal language? We could go on to Romans 6, couldn’t we, but we will just stick with the Gospel accounts. There are two references, Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50, in which Jesus refers to the experience of suffering and of death that He is going to undergo as a baptism.

The second basic and unrepeatable washing in the Old Testament is connected with the first. In Exodus 13, we read that all the first born males of Israel were dedicated to the Lord, in testimony to the fact that Israel was indebted to God for all that He had done for her. So the first born, were to be, as it were, living sacrifices by which the people expressed their gratitude towards God. Paul, of course, takes up that imagery in Romans 12:1, and he says in the New Covenant, you are all living sacrifices, not just the first born. All of you are to be living sacrifices to the Lord.

But in the Old Covenant, in Numbers 3:11-45, God specified that He would take one tribe of Israel instead of the first born. And instead of all the cattle, He takes the Levites’ cattle. And that the Levites would have no inheritance rights in Canaan. We learn that in Deuteronomy 10:9. Why? Because the Lord was going to be their inheritance. And then the Lord makes arrangements for the Levites to be given over to Him in a public ceremony, a confirmation of their being given over to the Lord.

Before the Levites could be given to the Lord, however, they had to be purified. How did the purification happen? By the sprinkling of water and the shaving and washing of their clothes. And then the representatives of Israel laid their hands upon them, identifying the nation with them, and they were offered to the Lord as a wave offering. And then before the beginning of their service, they offered an atonement offering for their sin in Numbers 8 verse 12.

Now this baptism has a connection with a New Testament as well. You will remember that in Matthew 3:15, Jesus’ baptism is called baptism to fulfill all righteousness. In other words, to meet all the requirements of God. As such, Jesus’ baptism indicated His identification with His people, the true Israel. He is consecrated for them, on their behalf in baptism. He is baptized at the age of thirty years, Luke tells us, in Luke 3:23, because that was the age necessary before the attainment of priesthood, according to Numbers 4:3 and verse 47. The spirit is pledged to Him to uphold Him in His office of mediation and as our true high priest, Christ is set apart to the Lord’s servant.

So again, this sprinkling of the Levites is an example of unrepeated Old Testament baptism. And it is not that we call the purification of the Levites a baptism, because of the way that they were baptized, by sprinkling, but because of the meaning of the baptism.

Let me summarize briefly. Two unrepeatable baptisms involve the sprinkling of the cleansing agent so that it falls upon those who are thereby cleansed as a ritual cleansing. The mode of the baptism is not at the forefront. The meaning is. These rites of purification speak of a new position or relation that has been obtained by the ones who are cleansed. In the first case, Israel’s unique relation to God as His people. In the case of the Levites, they have been consecrated and constituted as God’s priests. So what is being held out in that purification ceremony is not so much the mode, as it is the meaning of what they are doing.

The repeatable Old Testament baptisms.

Now, let’s look then at the repeatable baptisms in the Old Testament. There are I said before, eleven subsidiary and repeatable rituals of cleansing in the Old Testament found in the ceremonial laws. They were given for a definite purpose, and that purpose was to instill certain truths about purity and holiness on a spiritual level, by material means. If you broke these laws, it could put you into the category of being unclean. And of course, more importantly, the unclean person was excluded from the place where God met with His people in a special way, that is, from the tabernacle and later, from the temple.

Now, this kind of exclusion from the privileges of Israel because of ritual impurity was designed to result from serious sins of the heart. This wasn’t just an external sort of formalism. This was designed to symbolize serious sins of the heart. So for instance, after David was convicted of his lust and adultery and murder and concealment, he said, in Psalm 51:7, “purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.” What is hearkening back to? Those purification rituals set forth in the law of Moses. From these words, we see that David recognized the meaning of sprinkling blood with the hyssop plant in the ceremonial ritual. He saw that it pointed to the need for the defilement of the heart to be removed by the atoning sacrifice provided by God’s covenant love.

Now as the New Testament undoubtedly uses the word baptism in reference to many or all of these ritual washings, it appears clear that baptizo cannot mean only immerse when applied to such rituals. Rather, it refers to washing in general, which always involves the idea of removal of disqualification, bringing a person or a thing into a new relationship. The quantity and manner of the water in its application is not prominent. Although in the promise of cleansing in Ezekiel 36 verse 25, the clean water is explicitly referred to as sprinkled.

Let’s look at these repeatable baptisms. I will give you names for them, I will give you a reference for them, and I will give you an indication of what kind of coverage or washing they involved.

The first kind of repeatable baptism under Moses was at the investiture of priests. Exodus 29, verses 4-6, Exodus 40:12, Leviticus 8:6. In the investiture of priests, the washing was to entail the whole body. Their whole body was to be washed.

The second kind of repeatable baptism was the priestly purification before entering the tabernacle. You find it in Exodus 30 verses 18-21. In that case, what was to be baptized, or ritually purified, was only the hands and feet.

The third repeatable baptism. Purification on the Day of Atonement. You see this in Leviticus 16 verses 4, 24, 26, and 28. In this case, the body was to be washed and the clothes were to be washed.

The fourth purification or ritual baptism or ritual cleansing was on the occasion of the purification of the red heifer sacrifice. Numbers 19, verses 7-8. In this case, again, the body was to be washed and the clothes were to be washed.

The fifth repeatable baptism was for the priestly purification before touching or eating the holy offerings. This is referred to in Leviticus 22, verses 1-7, especially verse 6. Here again, the body was to be washed.

The sixth repeatable baptism, was for purification if you touched something unclean. Purification for those who touched something unclean. Whether you were touching a dead body, a corpse, bones, the dwelling place of the dead, a graveyard or cemetery, prisoners of war, or body. You find this in Numbers 19, verses 11-22 and Numbers 31, verses 19-24. This purification was to be accomplished by sprinkling ash, a mixture of ash and water. It involved the washing of the clothes and the washing of the self.

The seventh repeatable baptism, was the baptism of Leviticus 14, verses 1-9. It was the purification for the infection of leprosy, and it was to be done by the sprinkling of blood. It involved the washing of the clothes and the washing of the self.

The eighth repeatable baptism was required if you had eaten meat with its blood still in it, Leviticus 17, verses 14-16 addresses this. Again, the clothes are to be washed, the person or body is to be washed.

The ninth repeatable baptism is connected with unclean human discharges. If you have been made unclean by virtue of a particular discharge from your body, Leviticus 15, verses 1-13 describes the purification that occurs by the washing of clothes and the self.

In connection with that, also in Leviticus 15, verses 16-33, the discharge connected with sexual reproduction whether it be semen or the menstrual cycle, purification was to be accomplished by the washing of all the body.

And then finally again, the repeatable baptism as a result of coming into contact with the dead or objects which had come into contact with persons who are dead. You find this in Leviticus 11, verses 25, 28, 32, and 33. Again, sometimes objects that have come into contact with a dead person were to be cleansed by water, other times they were just to be thrown away and clothes of the person who had done this were to be ritually cleaned.

Now, what can we conclude from this? Let me summarize briefly. First there is an absence in all of these examples of specification of mode in these washings, and I would invite you to go back and look them up and work through them. The emphasis in not on the manner in which these washings are done.

Secondly, though the Pentateuch makes it clear that the whole person is defiled by uncleanness, the principle behind these washings indicates that only that part of the body or only that object effected by uncleanness requires the application of the cleansing agent. That is interesting, isn’t it in light of Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet and the exchange with Peter. “You are never going to wash my feet, Lord.” “If I don’t wash your feet, then you are going to be unclean.” “Well, then wash all of me.” “No. This is enough.” It follows an Old Testament pattern. Even though the whole person becomes unclean by certain ritual acts of disqualification, specific purification rights are often applied to part of that person, the hands, the feet, part of the body, etc. Only on one occasion did we see a specification that the complete body had to be involved.

Thirdly, in every single one of these repeatable baptisms the emphasis is on the application of water to the person, rather than the action of putting the person into the water.

Fourth, water in motion is aimed at in several rituals involving illness and death caused uncleanness. So fresh or running, or flowing, or living water is specified with the sixth, seventh and ninth of those eleven repeatable baptisms that we find in Moses. No doubt that is because the water symbolizes life in contrast with corruption and uncleanness and death. So flowing or living water is to be used.

Fifth and finally, all these washings were private, all the washings which could have been total, in other words, involving total touching of every part of the body with water were private, involved the removal of the clothes and were self administered. So there is no precedent for administering a total immersion to another person found in the Levitical ritual whenever a total washing is involved, it is always self administered.

So baptizo in the Old Testament has the idea of application of a cleansing agent with a view to removing that which disqualifies us from acceptance with God. The mode of applying the cleansing agent varies in each of these baptisms. But the predominant mode is sprinkling or pouring.

Now in further considering the Old Testament background of Christian baptism, we need to look at the word baptizo with regard to how it was used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, and if you don’t want to write Septuagint out every time, remember it is normally abbreviated “LXX” and that is a lot easier than writing “Septuagint.”

The standard lexicons recognize that baptizo is an intensive and prequintative form of bapto, the word which means to dip. And so apparently the earliest meaning in the Greek language of bapto is dipping. And from that root, the word came to be used in many connections. It was used when people talked about dying cloth, the materials being immersed in the dye. It was used off tempering iron, since the metal was plunged into the water.

And there are only two places in the Greek translation of the Old Testament where baptizo is used. The first is in Isaiah 21 and the second is in II Kings 5:14. In the first it has to do with Isaiah’s vision of the fall of Babylon, in which he said in Isaiah 21 verse 4, my heart pants and fearfulness baptizes me, or overwhelms me, or horrifies me. It is used in a figurative sense. The second reference is in II Kings 5:14 and it is a description of Naaman’s washing in the Jordan. The common English versions, of course, indicate that he dipped himself seven times and the flesh was restored. The Hebrew uses the word, tabal, which had the idea of dipping though it does not always express mode, and it does not mean total submersion. But the Greek translation uses baptizo.

Now in the Apocrypha, those non canonical, intertestamental books, the word baptizo appears. In Ecclesiasticus, the wisdom book known as the Ecclesiasticus, Jesus ben Eleazar ben Sira(ch), we read something that sounds a lot like Numbers 19. “Be baptized after touching a dead body and then touch it again, what have you gained by your washing?” Again this refers back to that ritual of water purification that we saw. There is also a reference in the book of Judah.

As we move into the New Testament, looking at passages connected with purification, Hebrews 9 is important. The writer is contrasting water purification and the putting away of sin accomplished by Christ with the Mosaic regulations. Again, at the marriage feast of Canna, there were six stone water pots, each able to hold about 25 gallons. And these were used, John tells us in John 2:6, for Jewish purification rites. There was a ritual of washing your hands before you entered in, before eating, and that ritual purification was done by pouring a quantity of water over the cupped hands and then bringing the water into contact with the surface of the entirety of the hands.

In Mark 7 verse 2, and following, we have the incident where the Pharisees are pressing for the disciples’ compliance with that kind of purification, especially in verses 3 and 4. And there is archeological evidence in the first century that Jews in Palestine practicing ceremonial washings in cisterns.

Josephus, the Jewish writer of the first century is useful, because he uses the word fifteen times in his writings. He uses it once to refer to plunging a sword into an enemy, ten times of sinking or drowning, twice in destruction of cities in war, once in intoxication, and once in reference to the purification rituals of Numbers, especially Numbers 19. And these are consistent with the uses of baptizo by the pre-Christian classical writers. He says this of these writers: “These use baptizo, baptize, to describe the sinking of a ship, the drawing or water or wine by dipping one vessel into another, of bathing, in a metaphorical sense of a person being overwhelmed by questions or doubt, in addition to the more general usage of dipping or dying in any matter.” It is interesting to note that in this latter usage, this verb soon ceases to be expressive of mode.

So, the evidence that we have reviewed as we have looked at scriptural and extrascriptural usages of baptizo, prior and contemporary to the writing of the New Testament, indicates this: baptizo was used for a literal washing with a view to ritual cleansing. It is a washing which brings a change or which represents a change. And in that context, or in a religious context, that means a ritual purification which removes disqualification in the sight of God.

It is interesting to note that the Latin Vulgate, completed by Jerome in the late fourth century, early fifth century translates baptizo by the Latin term, mergo, this being the Latin for immerse or submerge or dip. And our English translators, by transliterating baptizo as baptize instead of trying to render it in a strictly English term referring to mode, may have been wiser than anyone else, because they have kept the attention from being on the mode itself. It remains to determine whether baptizo in reference to religious ritual necessarily carries the idea of a literal immersion. But the examples, texturally from looking at the Old Testament, the New Testament, and extra biblical literature, make it clear that you cannot linguistically preclude all reference to nonimmersion forms of this washing. So all of this is piled up evidence to say that the argumentation that the language of baptizo settles the case just doesn’t do justice to the realities there in the literature, either in the scriptural literature or in the extrascriptural literature.

So having said that, let’s look at our four responsive arguments to the Baptists on immersion. These are the Reformed paedobaptist arguments for effusion or pouring or sprinkling. You remember we said the Baptist argument for immersion was that the meaning of the Greek word was immerse, that the meaning of baptism is best symbolized by immersion, that the New Testament practice of baptism affirms or confirms immersion, and that the practice of the early church affirms immersion. Here is my response.

The Reformed position

First of all, as we have already demonstrated the meaning of baptizo or bapto or their various derivatives, the meaning of baptizo is much broader than immerse. And indeed there are places in the Old and the New Testament where it cannot mean immerse. Let me just reference a few of them. In Leviticus 14 verses 6 and 51, the Levitical sacrificial system called for a bird to be slaughtered and to be baptized in the blood, called for a bird to be baptized in the blood of a slaughtered bird in of the same kind. Clearly, simply by virtue of the volume of the blood in two birds of similar kind, there could have been no total immersion and yet the terminology of bapto was used in that context. Again, it is just one of those typical ceremonial rituals in which actually the sprinkling is the more significant thing.

In Acts chapter 1 verse 5, a New Testament example, the baptism of the Holy Spirit spoken of by the Lord Jesus in Acts 1 verse 5 was fulfilled in Acts 2 and that baptism was patently not a baptism by immersion. The Holy Spirit came upon them as they were baptized. They were not immersed into the Holy Spirit, but rather the Holy Spirit was poured out.

A third example, I Corinthians 10 verse 2. We are told there by Paul that the Israelites were baptized into Moses in the sea during the Exodus, but as you remember, the Israelites crossed the sea on dry land. So there was no immersion for anyone but the Egyptians in the Exodus. So here you have an example of baptizo being used in a metaphorical sense or a symbolic sense in the New Testament.

In Hebrews 9 verses 10-23, we have already looked at that reference to the various baptisms, or the various washings. And again, we have indicated that those washings were the washings done by the Levitical priests. Those were the ritual washings and in all the ritual washings, the water is applied to the body, not the body introduced into the water. So there is our first line of argumentation. We don’t argue that baptism never means immerse. In fact, that is not our argument. All you have to indicate is that baptism does not always mean immerse. At that point it becomes contextual.

Secondly, the New Testament practice of baptism confirms effusion or sprinkling or pouring. The New Testament practice of baptism confirms effusion. Appeals to the Greek preposition en or eis as determinative as the mode of baptism are inadequate. A golfer may go in or into a sand trap. That does not mean that the golfer is emerged into the sand trap, although many golfers may wish they were sometimes when they were in the sand trap. So the word in or eis can naturally express, but the golfer goes into the area of the sand trap without being immersed in it. And that is in fact how those terms are most frequently used.

For instance, in Matthew 3:16, where Jesus and John are said to go down into the Jordan. First of all, it is not a reference to the mode of baptism at all. It is a reference to the fact that they left the bank and they went down themselves together into the water. So if eis in that context means that they were immersed, then they were both immersed. But clearly the reference is simply that they left the side of the river and they both went down into the river. It is not a reference to immersion.

There are places in the New Testament where immersion is extremely unlikely. For instance, you remember when Saul of Tarsus was baptized, he was baptized where? Yes. In a house, in the house of Simon the Tanner. And it would have been extremely unlikely that there would have been any facility in a house large enough to immerse a person. Even in the ritual purification founts which have been found in Jewish homes from that time, they would only allow you to baptize “parts of the body” such as the feet or the legs. There was no Jacuzzi option in most of the homes at that particular time.

In Acts 10:47, Peter uses some interesting language, you remember after he has seen evidence that the Holy Spirit has come upon Cornelius and his family and he then says, can anyone refuse the water necessary to baptize these brothers? And that is an interesting way of speaking. The water necessary to baptize that entire household would have been significant. It would have been very significant for servants to have to go and gather that much water up. And so one could see plausibly how Peter’s rhetorical question which clearly assumes that the answer is going to be no, of course we couldn’t refuse the water necessary. He assumes a negative response to that rhetorical question. If in fact, it was going to require immersion, then I could see someone very reasonably saying, “Well, actually Peter, it is going to take us about six hours to get that water, you know. You know, go over to the well, and find some utensils that would allow us to fill up whatever you are going to fill up to do this.” I mean, Peter’s question indicates, this is going to be easy. Just get a little water and we’ll start baptizing here.

In Acts 16 verses 32-33, the Philippian jailer and his family are baptized with the water which had originally been fetched to clean Paul’s wounds, which surely would have not been a quantity of water necessary for immersion. Another passage that you will hear appeal to is the passage in John 3:23 which speaks about the many waters of Anon, do you remember that passage where John goes to Aenon because there are many waters there and the translations deal with it differently. Some translations will say, he went to Aenon because there was much water there. And then others say, there were many waters there. And it has often been argued that John went to Aenon because there was a significant amount of water, significant enough that he could do immersions all day long. But the languages of that passage, as well as the archeology and the geology of it, indicate that many waters is a good translation of the Greek in the passage and that it refers to a collection of small pools rather than to a great amount of water. There were many pools or there were many waters there. So again, that does not provide some sort of definitive indication that the baptism of John was immersion.

In the Gospel of John chapters 2 and 3, Old Testament purification was related specifically to baptism. We have already seen this in the phrase about the baptism of the Lord Jesus in John 3:26. That clearly relates to Old Testament purification. In Numbers 8:7, you remember in those Levitical purifications, the immersion comes when the priest dips his hand into the water. But, the actual act of purification involves the sprinkling or the throwing of the water on the subject which is to be purified. So the major act is the effusion in the ritual. If the priest just dips his hand in the water, then the ritual cleansing does not occur. He has to apply it to the subject. So there is evidence in the New Testament for the practice of effusion. And, in John 2:6, there those six stone water pots we have already mentioned were used for Jewish purification. Each of them contained about thirty gallons each, and again, that would not have been enough for immersion, to say the least for the wedding guests and of course, that is not how the ritual purification was performed. So there is evidence in the New Testament of the practice of effusion. And of course the most significant of that evidence, for those in the Reformed tradition, is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. That is the fundamental reason why we pour rather than immerse, because we see baptism as a sign of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual union with Christ and the Spirit is always pictured in the New Testament as being poured out onto and into God’s people, not God’s people being immersed into the Spirit, but rather the Spirit being poured out into them or onto them.

Thirdly in response to the Baptist argument, the Reformed paedobaptist points out that the symbolism or significance of baptism confirms effusion. I have already hinted at that in the words I just spoke. Water baptism signifies the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Now, that is not only seen in the book of Acts chapters 1 and 2, it is also seen in Jesus’ baptism. What happened on the occasion of Jesus’ baptism? Both Matthew and Luke tell us that the Spirit in the visible form of a dove descended upon Christ so that the picture of the spirit being dispensed from heaven is present there, not only in Acts chapter 1 and 2, but in Matthew 3:11, and in Luke 3:16. And of course, the distinction between John’s baptism and Jesus’ baptism is set forth in the Gospel. John baptizes with water but Jesus will baptize with what? With fire and with the Spirit. And of course, that comes to place. That is actualized in Acts chapter 1 verses 4 and 5 and also in Acts chapter 11 verses 15 and 16. So baptism fundamentally signifies the work of the Spirit not our faith, not our decision, not our loyalty, not our obedience, but the work of the Spirit.

Finally, with regard to the testimony of church history. Both Reformed Baptists and Reformed paedobaptists agree on this point. Church history should not be determinative. Church history doesn’t determine what we do; Scripture does. But, church history can help us understand how the early church and their successors understood the Scripture. And the fact of the matter is, in church history, there is evidence of immersion and of effusion as far back as we can go. Both forms of baptism were used in the earliest days of the church, post New Testament as far as we can tell. Scripture demonstrates the pattern of effusion from our perspective, from a Presbyterian perspective, as the way baptism is to be performed and Christian history does not contradict that. In other words, there is no evidence in the early church of the prescription of effusion as the form of baptism. In fact, it is not until the sixteenth century that someone argues that immersion is the only biblical way of baptism. It is not until the sixteenth century that someone argues that immersion is the only lawful mode of baptism. The original Anabaptists of the Reformation, in fact, practiced effusion. It was only the English Baptists, the general English Baptists in the 1640’s who widely popularized immersion, and it was only in their second Confession of Faith that they specified immersion as the proper or only form of baptism.

Now, let me just address a few practical things. I realize that mode is not the most important thing here. I recognize that for Baptists the whole issue of recipients is more important. For example, I once sat next to Al Martin and had a discussion with him about baptism and Al was ready to say, “Look, mode is not the thing. What I am upset with you about Duncan, is that you baptize babies. That is what I am upset about.” So he was ready to make peace in the church over the issue of mode. It was those babies that he was concerned about. So I recognize that. But mode is significant and it is significant at a pastoral level at the local level, because this is something, especially for lay folk, that causes considerable consternation within families. I have a friend right now who is in the process of moving from a Baptist church to a Presbyterian church, and boy, her pastor is giving her up one side down and one side down the other, not only on doctrinal issues, but on issues like baptism. And that is not uncommon, so there are practical issues involved with this whole debate over mode.

You understand that the reason why orthodox Baptists, whether they be Southern Baptists, or Reformed Baptists, or whatever else, will not recognize other modes of baptism as legitimate is because they believe that mode is of the essence of baptism. Whereas for paedobaptists, and that is everybody else, we do not believe that mode is of the essence of baptism. So if you come to First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, and you were baptized by immersion, or believer’s profession when you were fifteen years old, no one is going to ask you to rebaptized or to be rebaptized, because we acknowledge that as legitimate baptism. So there is a difference there between the two traditions. One of the traditions says, “Mode is of the essence of baptism.” The other says, “Mode is not the essence of baptism.” We argue for a preference for that mode. We have biblical reasons for why we prefer a particular mode, but we do not deny the legitimacy of the other mode.

Question: Why would you ask somebody to be rebaptized?

Once again, in both the Reformed and in the Presbyterian tradition, just to speak of those two traditions, we neither of us would ever ask anyone to be rebaptized. Now there might be cases where a person had received heretical baptism. Let me give you some examples. Maybe from a “Jesus only” group, a Pentecostal group that does not baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit because and denies the doctrine of the trinity. Or, perhaps someone who had received Mormon baptism. And we would ask that person not to be rebaptized, but to be baptized because we don’t recognize what they received as Christian baptism, so the standard position for both the Reformed Baptist and the Presbyterian standpoint is that if a person has received Christian baptism, they are not asked to be rebaptized. So even our Reformed Baptist friends, if they said to me, if I were coming to join their church, “Ligon, you are going to have to be baptized,” and I said, “Oh, no, I have been baptized before,” they would simply say, “No you have to be rebaptized,” they would say, “because what you had before wasn’t baptism.” That would be their response. And that is basically the Presbyterian response to those who have received heretical forms of baptism, whether it be from a cult that denies the doctrine of the trinity, or doesn’t use the words of institution, so practically speaking, that would be the only circumstance in which we ask a person to be baptized who had been previously received something prior to that, that had been called baptism.

Question: In my own family, my brother-in-law has recently become a Christian and we had this discussion, I guess about a month ago, and I have had it with several other people as well. So that is why I am seeing this. One of my friends is from the north and so they have come from Catholic families where they now recognize that neither their parents are believers nor probably was the priest who administered baptism to them. How do you respond to that?

Good question, and thank you for raising it. This question was raised last century especially and you need to understand that even under Old School Presbyterians there were two views. In the northern Presbyterian church, Charles Hodge argued that all Roman Catholic baptism ought to be accepted as legitimate Christian baptism. In the southern Presbyterian church, James Henley Thornwell argued that it should not be accepted as Christian baptism. And in the PCA, in order to avoid the controversy, we have left that up to local sessions, so we split the difference as usual. Basically what we said is, that we will leave that up to the local session to determine on a case-by-case basis.

Now what was the rational? - because that is more important. It gets, not only to this issue of what about parental belief, and so forth, but to other issues of Ecclesiology. You need to understand that the view that Roman baptism was illegitimate was tied to the Puritan view that the Roman church was that it was not a church. That by the Declarations of the Counsel of Trent, and the continued public proclamation of those particular declarations which anathematized anyone who believed in justification by grace through faith, that the Roman Church had in fact excommunicated herself from the body of Christ by those declarations, and therefore the Puritans did not recognize any of the rites of the Roman Church. As the Puritans came to America, some Puritans continued to hold that particular view, while other theologians held to different views.

However, there are only two views you can have on that: that it is either baptism or not, and of the need to be rebaptized or not. So in the North, Charles Hodge argued that the Roman Catholic church baptizes in the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, so it ought to be recognized as Christian baptism. But in the south, Thornwell argued, A. the Roman Church wasn’t a church, and B. since the Roman Church was not a church, therefore the Roman Priesthood was not ordained clergy. And, in a very colorful debate at General Assembly with Hodge, he said, “Mr. Hodge, you believe that any Tom, Dick, or Harry, can apply water in the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and it is baptism.” And he argued against that. So, those are the two views that have been held in the Reformed tradition in America in the last hundred years, mostly focusing on the issue of the status of the Roman Church rather than the more particular question of were the parents true believers? That question, I think, ought to be decided within Protestant boundaries on the basis of professed belief or we really get ourselves into a mess. We have recently had some converted Roman Catholics join at First Pres, who strongly felt that on a theological basis that they had not received Christian baptism and they wanted to receive baptism in the Presbyterian church and on that basis, the session honored that particular request.

The Proper Recipients of Baptism

Now, the proper recipients of baptism. Reformed Baptists and Reformed paedobaptists agree that baptism is sign and a seal of the Covenant of Grace. Furthermore, we agree on the unity of the Covenant of Grace. There is a single Covenant of Grace, from Old Covenant to New Covenant, the Mediator is the same, the requirements are the same, and the blessings are the same. And some Reformed Baptists even agree with Reformed paedobaptists that baptism replaces circumcision. That baptism is the New Covenant form of circumcision. David Kingdon in his book, Children of Abraham, accepts this view. So they would argue that to experience the circumcision of Christ, in the putting off of the body of the flesh is the same thing as being buried with him and raised with him in baptism through faith. They would argue, then, speaking now of both Reformed Baptists and Reformed paedobaptists, that to experience the circumcision of Christ, I am using Paul’s language here, that to experience the circumcision of Christ in the putting off of the body of the flesh, is the same as being buried with Him and being raised with Him in baptism through faith. So they would acknowledge that both of those were spiritual realities. The circumcision of Christ is a spiritual reality, baptism into the death of Christ is a spiritual reality. If that is so, the only conclusion that can be reached is that the two outward signs, circumcision and baptism, symbolize the same inner realities about which Paul speaks there in Colossians 2.

I think that many times, Reformed Baptists think that the Presbyterian argument from Colossians 2 verse 8-15 is that Paul is speaking of external water baptism and comparing it to external circumcision. And what they normally do is they say, “No, no, no you have missed Paul’s point. Paul is talking about spiritual circumcision being illustrated by water baptism. And you guys think that he is correlating physical circumcision with water baptism.” But the fact of the matter is, Paul is comparing spiritual circumcision and spiritual baptism. And the reason he can do that is because those two inner realities are correlated Old Covenant to New Covenant, and their external realities under both covenants also correlate. So Paul is speaking spiritually at that point consistently, but the external signs are outward signs of those inward spiritual realities. And that is clear, as we have said before in the Old Testament, even with circumcision. Moses could say in Deuteronomy 10, circumcise your hearts, not your foreskins. Moses knew that circumcision was more than a mere external reality.

So, we can agree that far. But, but, Reformed Baptists differ from Reformed paedobaptists on two crucial issues. Regarding the inclusion of children in the covenant community under the New Covenant manifestation of the Covenant of Grace, they believe in the unity of the Covenant of Grace, old to new, but they would say in the New Covenant there is a different constitution for the covenant community. The covenant promises belong to the real covenant community, to those who have been spiritually united to Christ, and to none other.

And in conjunction to that view, Reformed Baptists in their doctrine of the church, based on their understanding of Jeremiah 31 argue that Jeremiah 31 indicates that in all the covenant community, there will be experiential knowledge of God. And that requires a “believers-only” church. So when they define the church, they define it as those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ, as opposed to the historic Reformed paedobaptist position that views the church as made up of professing believers and their covenant children. So it is those two points which constitute the difference between Reformed Baptists and Reformed paedobaptists on the issue of who are the appropriate recipients of baptism.

And we argued the last time as follows: baptism is a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace; that is made clear in Romans 6 and in Galatians 3. Children are included with their parents as part of the Covenant of Grace in both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant and we saw this in the formula of Genesis 17 and Acts 2. The New Covenant Promises are extended to believers and their children in Acts 2:39 and therefore the sign of the covenant, especially the sign of covenant initiation belongs to professing believers and their covenant children. Because the Covenant of Grace of which we are members today, is the same Covenant that God instituted with Abraham and because baptism has now replaced circumcision, as the sign of initiation into that Covenant of Grace. Any questions so far?

Question: At what age do covenant children joint the church?

Well, you are going to have to use sanctified common sense in that particular setting, but here at First Presbyterian, that question is solved for us because the session has set a minimal age of discernment with regard to church membership: age twelve. And so that helps you a little bit. Say you have a family coming with a one year old child, a three year old child, and a nine year old child. And the nine year old child, and this has happened several times since I have been there, the nine year old child made a profession of faith at a local Baptist church when she was five, or hasn’t made a profession of faith publicly, but has told her mommy and daddy that she believes in Jesus, so should she receive believer’s baptism and or should she receive covenant baptism? We have handled that uniformly with covenant baptism. And simply on the household principle. But we slightly misname it when we say infant baptism. The real meaning behind the right is covenant baptism. The child is under the authority of the householder and as long as that obtains, then you have a biblical principle. I do think that you can have situations where an older child is indifferent and even antagonistic towards the faith in the household, and at that point, I think you have got to have discussion, not just with regard to the ritual of baptism, but with lots of other things too. That is just part of the reality of covenant family life in a fallen world.