

Sprinkling: A Biblical Study

A Study Comparing its Biblical Meaning to its Contemporary Practice



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Ezekiel 36:25 – “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.”

Restoration Movement Literature

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A long-time acquaintance of mine recently celebrated “their son’s choice to be baptized.” Having not heard from this acquaintance for quite some time, but being aware of her long-time church background, I assumed believer’s baptism by immersion. Instead, he was sprinkled. I wrote to her how she and her family was doing and then kindly asked her about her change of mind about baptism as she had previously understood it. Her answer was, “This is how my husband’s church baptizes and when I married him, I accepted that.” Needless to say, religious positions in today’s world are commonly received this way.

Could we really imagine doing this with anything else though? “This is how my husband’s family does Christmas and when I married him, I abandoned all of my family’s traditions.” Or, “This is how my husband’s family spends vacations and when I married him, I abandoned all of my own desires of where to go or what to do on vacation.”

Is it not interesting how we treat God’s church and commands with human-flexibility we would never realistically exercise elsewhere? Is this not a testimony how we really view God – as under our will (or our husband’s/wife’s/children’s/whoever) – instead of us under His will?

Nonetheless, this circumstance got this preacher thinking about “sprinkling” in the Bible: it is certainly there – 63 times total – and 6 of those times being in the New Testament. For this reason, the word “sprinkling” cannot be ignored or simply discarded as unscriptural, as it is certainly present many times in the Bible.

In fact, from many of these sprinkling Scripture passages many have proposed various “defenses of baptism by sprinkling.” Is there validity to their claims? Is there at least enough proof that it could be

rationally argued that Scripturally, baptism by sprinkling could be Biblical?

Popularly, baptism by sprinkling is overwhelming the preferred choice: Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, and other sects practice it – some exclusively. Most Baptists still immerse, but since baptism is viewed only as a symbol by virtually all Baptist groups, baptism (or its mode) is not considered important by most contemporary Baptists. As well, liberal denominations (like the Disciples of Christ) immerse, but also accept any other form of baptism into their communion, or even “not baptized at all”. Baptism is left to a matter of individual conscience in most liberal churches.

So where do we begin looking at sprinkling in the Bible? Where is it mentioned, why is mentioned, to what is it referring to, and what – if any – relation does it have to New Testament baptism?

For the sake of narrowing down what verses that specifically mention sprinkling are relevant, we will limit our study to specifically when a person or persons are “sprinkled” in the Bible. Many of the verses in the Bible that mention sprinkling have to do with sprinkling the altar or the mercy seat in the Tabernacle or Temple, and though an interesting study, it is outside the context of our study here. Our goal is to focus on people who were “sprinkled” in the Bible, and what – if any – correlation this has to Christian baptism.

The very first mentioning of “sprinkling” a person or persons in the Bible is Exodus 24:8:

“⁸Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

This blood was from the sacrifice of bulls in verses 5+6. Its purpose is clear in the verse – the blood sprinkled on the people was the time in which they were entering into a covenant relationship with God (specifically, the Mosaic Law).

Since in this verse people were “sprinkled”, does this verse symbolize, foreshadow, or otherwise provide any frame of reference to what we would call “Christian baptism” today? Let us contrast and compare:

Comparing Exodus 24:8 to Christian Baptism			
#	Comparison	Exodus 24:8	Christian Baptism
1	Substance	Blood	Water (John 3:23)
2	Purpose	Allegiance to Mosaic Law	Salvation (Galatians 3:27, Romans 6:3+4)
3	How Many?	Many at once	One at a time (Acts 2:38)
4	Officiate	Moses, then only the male sons of Aaron	No requirement for the baptizer in Scripture
5	Confession Giver	By Moses	By the recipient (Acts 8:37)
6	Time of Confession	After Sprinkling	Before Baptism (Acts 8:37)
7	Repeated? (Some of the references are with blood, dust, salt, or water)	Yes (Exodus 29:21; Leviticus 8:24, 30, 14:6+7; Numbers 8:7, 19:13, 18-21; Joshua 7:6; Job 2:12; Isaiah 52:15; Lamentations 2:10; Ezekiel 27:30, 36:25; Hebrews 9:13, 19)	No

It is clear that Exodus 24:8 and Christian baptism – even without discussing the “mode” aspect – have no inherent similarities, and at least seven opposing differences. Since the word “baptism” is absent from this verse, and every detail of “sprinkling” in the verse has no relation to what is understood to be “Christian baptism”, we have to conclude that Scripturally speaking, the “sprinkling” mentioned and Christian baptism have no relation here.

What about some other examples of people being “sprinkled” in the Bible?

Exodus 29:21 – ²¹ And take some blood from the altar and some of the anointing oil and sprinkle it on Aaron and his garments and on his sons and their garments. Then he and his sons and their garments will be consecrated.”

Comparing Exodus 29:21 to Christian Baptism			
#	Comparison	Exodus 29:21	Christian Baptism
1	Substance	Blood	Water (John 3:23)
2	Purpose	Consecration as priests	Salvation (Galatians 3:27, Romans 6:3+4)
3	How Many?	Many at once	One at a time (Acts 2:38)
4	Officiate	Moses	No requirement for the baptizer in Scripture
5	Confession Giver	None given	By the recipient (Acts 8:37)
6	Time of Confession	N/A	Before Baptism (Acts 8:37)
7	Repeated?	Yes (Leviticus 8:30)	No

Again, if this passage has any foreshadowing or relation to Christian baptism, the word “baptism” is not only absent, but the “sprinkling” that did occur opposes everything about we know about Christian baptism in every detail.

Leviticus 8:30 is functionally identical to Exodus 29:21 in every way; it is a repeat of this same consecration of the sons of Aaron to the priesthood, so no corresponding comparison to Christian baptism can be had here either.

Leviticus 14:7 gives us the first picture of a person “sprinkled” individually in the Bible:

“⁷ Seven times he shall sprinkle the one to be cleansed of the defiling disease, and then pronounce them clean. After that, he is to release the live bird in the open fields.”

In verse 1 of that same chapter, we learn that this is a ceremonial cleaning for anyone who has developed and otherwise been healed of a skin disease.

What is most interesting is that although the priest pronounces the person “clean” upon their sprinkling, they are still not actually clean according to the Law of Moses until they “bathe with water” – both their own bodies and their clothes (verse 8-10). So at most we can conclude here that sprinkling is not sufficient without the “bathing of water” the Law further required in the full context of the immediate passage (rather, both are required). This, again, fails to match what we understand of Christian baptism on any meaningful level (who is bathed and also sprinkled as part of any baptism?).

Numbers 8:5-7 presents a similar “sprinkling”, only this time water is also involved:

“⁵The LORD said to Moses: ⁶“Take the Levites from among all the Israelites and make them ceremonially clean. ⁷To purify them, do this: Sprinkle the water of cleansing on them; then have them shave their whole bodies and wash their clothes. And so they will purify themselves.”

Let us do a quick compare again: is this “sprinkling” for everyone? No, it was only for the Levites. Were the Levites “cleansed” by the water alone? No, they also had to shave their whole bodies and wash their clothes. Was the purpose of the sprinkling salvation, or any aspect of salvation? No, it was purify them to serve in the Tabernacle. Was this “sprinkling” repeated? Yes. Numbers 19:13 (and verses 18-21) state that this sprinkling and cleansing process had to be repeated each time that a priest was to serve in the tabernacle. Christian baptism is designed to be a one-time event, by comparison.

Again, we can see this does not foreshadow Christian baptism in any determinable manner.

Joshua 7:6, Job 2:12, Lamentations 2:10, and Ezekiel 27:30 all mention “sprinkling dust on their heads”. This is a universally accepted sign of mourning, not any kind of “baptism”. All the same though – if we run into a verse that says “sprinkling with dust” – and safely assume it has nothing to do with baptism, why do we assume any different with “sprinkling with blood?” Logically, for the case of our study, only “sprinkling with water” examples have any possible candidacy for comparing the modern practice of sprinkling baptism today, but this

study attempts to be thorough regardless (for if we are to persuade, it is best to be as thorough, systematic, and comprehensive as possible).

Isaiah 52:15 is possibly one of the strongest Bible passages used to support the idea of Christian baptism by sprinkling:

“so he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.”

Whoa! The Messiah will sprinkle?!

Before we jump to any conclusions, let us examine the text itself: 1) Who will He sprinkle? Nations, not people. 2) Sprinkle with what? We already know that He will sprinkle with His blood, not water (Hebrews 10:22, 12:24, and 1 Peter 1:2). 3) Jesus Himself was baptized with water (Matthew 3:13-17), but He did not actually baptize others with water Himself (see John 4:2). Instead, He baptized only with fire and Spirit (Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16).

We can safely assume, therefore, that any kind of “Christian baptism” we practice today is inherently different than the baptism Christ Himself performed. We can also, therefore, safely assume that the baptism He commanded in Matthew 28:19+20 and Mark 16:16 is not the same as the one He Himself performs with fire and Spirit. The one He commands is necessarily by water.

Therefore, again, any relation to how we understand Christian baptism, even today, is not found in this passage.

Now what is likely the strongest verse used in favor of sprinkling baptism in the Bible, Ezekiel 36:25 -

“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.”

God...will sprinkle...clean water... on you. Home run, right?

Let us not be hasty but examine this verse in its context:

Ezekiel is writing during the Babylonian captivity to the Jews. He is a contemporary of both Jeremiah (who is back in abandoned Jerusalem, later Egypt, where he dies) and Daniel (who is in Babylon). Ezekiel is speaking prophecy regarding the pending return to Jerusalem, which no scholar contests. Therefore, Ezekiel is speaking to *Jews*, and God Himself says in verse 22 that He is not doing this for their sakes, but for His purposes:

This is a very important point to understand about God’s role with Israel; they were not “chosen” to be saved; they were chosen to carry and protect the line of Messiah to fruition! (Starting with Genesis 12:3 on) Throughout the 36th chapter of Ezekiel (where our verse above comes from, verse 25), God summarizes the unfaithful history of Israel, and how He has been faithful to His purposes through them anyway. He will once again restore them (which He does – that is the story of the following books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and also Esther) in order to accomplish His purposes. Any individual Israelite would be “saved” depending on their own faith in the coming Messiah and their obedience to God’s commands (Hebrews 11:40), not any predestination by God.

Therefore, the “sprinkling with water” in context of the rest of the chapter has to do with God restoring physical Israel to Jerusalem (an undisputed historical and Scriptural fact from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and history as we know it), not any kind of foreshadowing or evidence towards any form of Christian baptism.

As well, we can make some of the same comparisons we did before: 1) Who is sprinkling with water in this verse? God, not man. 2) Does God Himself baptize people with water today? No, and even Jesus did not when He was here (John 4:2). There are simply no valid comparisons between this verse and Christian baptism as we understand it today.

Finally, we reach the New Testament verses concerning people being sprinkled, from Hebrews 9:13+19:

“¹³The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.” (Hebrews 9:13)

“¹⁹When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people.” (Hebrews 9:19)

The author of Hebrews describes for us where we first read about the people of Israel being sprinkled in Exodus chapters 28+29. He also tells us **exactly** what this “sprinkling” foretold (and it was not Christian baptism): Hebrews 9:12 tells us that the blood of Christ was “sprinkled” on the mercy seat of Heaven. Hebrews 9:14 tells us that the people being “sprinkled” with blood in the Old Testament in the previous verse was foreshadowing Christ’s blood being sprinkled on the mercy seat of heaven in the heavenly tabernacle (also see Hebrews 9:23-25), cleansing all who are in Christ. The “sprinkling” of Exodus chapters 28+29 did not foreshadow our water baptism, but rather the very blood of Christ sprinkled on the mercy seat of heaven!

It is obvious that the New Testament, for any Christian, interprets the Old Testament. When the New Testament tells us what the

“sprinkling” was for, we are under obligation to interpret it that way, and no other. Quite simply, there are no Old Testament (or New Testament references, for that matter) of any person being “sprinkled” with anything that has anything to do with baptism.

Nonetheless, due to the durability of sprinkling in our present religious culture, we will not be satisfied to merely understand all “sprinkling” passages in the Bible in their proper context, but also to see Christian baptism as it is described in the New Testament so as to properly contrast it. As well, we need to investigate other common “defenses” of baptism by sprinkling starting with the assertion that baptism by sprinkling is a form of circumcision carried over to the New Testament.

Let us compare Christian baptism and circumcision:

A Comparison of Christian Baptism and Circumcision			
#	Category	Circumcision	Christian Baptism
1	Gender	Only Males	All
2	Time	Eighth day after birth	No specified date or time
3	Genealogy	Descended from Abraham	No genealogical requirement
4	Officiate	Parents, relatives, or priests	No requirements as to the baptizer
5	Body	Involves a specific part of the body	No specific part of the body
6	Occasion	In the New Testament, many circumcised Jews were also baptized	No baptized believer is required to be circumcised
7	Covenant	Old Testament	New Testament

It can be clearly seen that not only is circumcision not the same as Christian baptism, but does not foreshadow or resemble it in any manner. Especially point #6 should be considered – if circumcision and baptism were whatsoever the same – then why did any Jew that came to Christ also receive baptism?

Another common defense of baptism by sprinkling is using the examples from the book of Acts where “entire households” were baptized. This happened four times in the book of Acts – chapter 10 (Cornelius’ household), chapter 16 (the Philippian Jailer’s household), again in chapter 16 (Lydia’s household), and in 1 Corinthians 16 where it is said that Stephanas’ household was fervent for the ministry of the Lord.

First, at best, this is an argument from silence, as infants or toddlers are never mentioned in any of these cases. It is argued by some that baptism by sprinkling is necessary because it is inhumane to “immerse” an infant – true! – but there is actually no need to baptize a baby at all – see next point:

Second, each of these households that were baptized had explicit adjectives described of them in the texts that necessarily *exclude* any possibility of baptizing infants or toddlers:

In Acts 10:2, it is said that Cornelius’ household was “God-fearing” – were their babies who were consciously God-fearing? In Acts 16:34, the Philippian Jailer’s household “believed” – were there self-aware, believing infants or toddlers in his household? In Acts 16:40, the household of Lydia is “comforted” by Paul’s words? Were there babies and toddlers listening intently, understanding, and being comforted by

Paul's words? In 1 Corinthians 16:15, were there infants and toddlers fervent to the Lord's work?

No, it is truly absurd to apply any understanding of these "household" conversions to include baptism by sprinkling by the assumption there were children present who also had "need" of being baptized (or "sprinkled", as claimed).

We can also simply analyze the origin of the word "baptize" – it is a transliteration, not translation, of the Greek word "baptizo", which means to "dip, submerge, or immerse." If it were translated, every English Bible would read "immerse" or "dip" or "submerge" where the word "baptism" or one of its other forms is stated in the New Testament.

So why do we have the English word "baptism" instead of just "immerse"? Would this not be a lot less confusing?

Yes, it certainly would be; however, "sprinkling" for baptism has been around since at least the 13th century. It was adopted by the Roman Catholic Church originally, and it rose up again in Protestantism sometimes because of expediency (little water available, or the rise of infant baptism and therefore an attempt to be humane to babies) or because of theology (Calvinism – whether in Presbyterian or Baptist form - either dismisses or belittles the role of water baptism because of its doctrines of election, irresistible grace, etc.).

The early English translators used "baptism" because their practice was sprinkling, not immersion; to translate everything "immersion" after they had for so long, both traditionally and culturally, practiced sprinkling, seem unconscionable. When the translators of the original King James Version Bible approached King James about finally

translating the word instead of transliterating it, it is said he refused because he himself had not been immersed (and certainly did not consider himself the lesser because of that fact). So, the unfortunate **transliteration** of “baptizo” continues to this day in our English Bibles and daily vernacular.

Nonetheless, it can be easily established that “baptizo” means immerse – and only immerse. Most scholars agree anyway but for the few - who argue the point - let us ask the Greek people – they should know their own language! The Greek churches have always immersed; even the Greek Catholic church immerses. They know what “baptizo” means, because it has a specific, exclusive meaning in their language and culture – not an arbitrary one developed over time by Western culture like our own. Could we imagine saying “dip” but meaning “sprinkle?” Would this not be endlessly – and needlessly – confusing?

As well, even the early Latin leaders of the church, when considering sprinkling only as an emergency measure (such as in the case of a drought), would not assign the name “baptism”, considering sprinkling at best to be a stop-gap, and not “worthy of the name”.

Now that we have attempted to cover sprinkling in its Biblical context, now let us look at Christian baptism in terms of mode to see if there is clear, distinctive evidence as to a divinely-prescribed “mode”:

In all the examples of Christian baptism in the New Testament, is there a “mode” of baptism that is required to meet the examples?

- 1) Only Immersion requires “much water” – John 3:23
- 2) Only Immersion requires someone to go “to water” – Matthew 3:13

- 3) Only Immersion requires someone “come out of the water” – Matthew 3:16
- 4) Only Immersion requires someone to be baptized “in water” – Mark 1:9
- 5) Only Immersion requires walking “into the water” – Acts 8:38
- 6) Only Immersion resembles “a burial” – Romans 6:4
- 7) Only Immersion resembles “a resurrection” – Colossians 2:12
- 8) Only Immersion is a “washing of the body” – Hebrews 10:22 (also notice how “sprinkling of the heart” is distinctive from the “washing of the body” in this verse)

If sprinkling was a Christian baptismal “mode”, it would necessarily contradict most – if not all – of the above examples. No, instead, logic, history, language, and especially Scripture all come to one conclusion – Christian baptism is immersion – and immersion alone.

As one final point, absolutely no scholar disagrees that immersion is a Scripturally-acceptable form of baptism. If we can all unite on that fact, why introduce other forms that necessarily cause division? This is against the very spirit of Christ, who prayed for unity based on the Apostles’ doctrine (Acts 17:20), and not the imaginations of men.

In summary:

- 1) The people who were “sprinkled” with blood, dust, salt, or water throughout the Bible foreshadowed Christ’s service in the heavenly tabernacle after His ascension, offering His blood on the mercy seat of Heaven, once for all (Hebrews 9:12, 14, 19).

- 2) Any example of people being “sprinkled” in the Bible has many obvious opposing elements with what is understood to be Christian baptism in the New Testament.
- 3) Circumcision and baptism have no Biblical relationship.
- 4) The “households” that were baptized in the book of Acts never mention babies or toddlers, and all have descriptions in the Scripture that necessarily exclude babies or infants from having been present or participated in the baptism.
- 5) The Greek word “baptizo” has been transliterated into English, not translated, causing great confusion in our own language over the original (and exclusive) meaning of the word. As further proof, the Greek Church – who obviously know their own language – exclusively immerses.
- 6) Early church leaders who sprinkled did not consider it “baptism”, but rather unworthy of even the name.
- 7) Eight examples of baptism in the New Testament necessarily exclude every “mode” of baptism except immersion.
- 8) Other “modes” of baptism are necessarily divisive as only immersion is universally-accepted among all believers as an acceptable form of Christian baptism.

In conclusion, “sprinkling” is definitely in the Bible, but it also definitely has nothing to do with Christian baptism. “Sprinkling” - logically, historically, linguistically, and Scripturally – is not a “mode” of baptism at all. In fact, there are no “modes” of baptism – there is just immersion. The plain, simple meaning of the word is only immersion,

backed by every possible Scriptural, historical, linguistic, and logical approach.

The church of Christ universal can never hope to be united when the imaginations of men necessarily divide those who sincerely wish to follow the Word of God as He has prescribed versus others who wish to veer from it to the right or the left. Veering from God's specific commands is strictly warned about in the Scriptures many, many times: Deuteronomy 4:2, 5:32, 17:11, 28:14; Joshua 1:6, 23:6; 2 Kings 22:2; 2 Chronicles 34:2; Proverbs 4:27, 30:6; Zechariah 12:6; Revelation 22:18+19.

Baptism has been corrupted by our enemy, right along with the Lord's Supper and all of its man-made changes. Is it any surprise that our enemy has specifically targeted the two ordinances our Lord and King left behind, that are specifically designed to put us into contact with His saving blood? (For Baptism see Acts 2:38, Galatians 3:27, Romans 6:3+4, Colossians 2:12; for Communion see John 6:53-57; 1 Corinthians 10:16-18, among other examples)

May we go back to the Bible – every time! – for our understanding of any divine topic. If, or ever once we do, Christ will have His bride as He wants and expects her (Revelation 21:2). May we live to please Him, who died for us, and not men and their traditions that divide His church! Even Jesus warned about traditions that cause disobedience to Him (Matthew 15:3, 6; Mark 7:5-13; Colossians 2:8). Instead, let us cling to the traditions of God which lead to life from the Word of God! (1 Corinthians 11:2)