

Baptism in the New Testament



THE PROPER MODE OF BAPTISM

Two Key Questions



- **Proper subject: Who should be baptized?**
- **Proper mode: How should the subject be baptized?**

- **Three options:**

- **Paedobaptist:** Proper subject: Adult convert or the infants of believers. Proper mode: Sprinkling or pouring (and some would allow immersion for adult converts).

- **Orthodox:** Proper subject: Adult convert or the infants of believers. Proper mode: immersion only.

- **Credobaptist:** Proper subject: Believers only. Proper mode: immersion only.

The key word and challenges to interpretation



- The key word to consider is the verb “to baptize” which in Greek is *baptizo* [βαπτίζω]. There is also a related noun *baptismos* which means “baptism.”
- Credobaptists interpret the word to mean to dip or to immerse in water.
- This interpretation is challenged by some on at least two grounds:
 1. The verb does not mean literally “to immerse in water” but it refers to a spiritual transformation. They cite John’s words in Mathew 3:11 (cf. Mark 1:9; Luke 3:16; John 1:33):
“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and *with fire:*”
 2. Even if one grants that spiritual baptism was accompanied or followed by water baptism (a fact hard to ignore given Acts 8:36, 38-39; 10:46-48), some still deny that the Biblical contexts demand that we assume water baptisms were conducted by immersion. They argue instead that they might just have well been conducted by other means, like sprinkling or pouring.
- They then challenge the assumption that references to baptism in places like Acts refer to water baptism but suggest instead that they refer to “spirit baptism” (e.g., Pentecost converts in Acts 2:41; Paul in Acts 9:18)

Response: The linguistic argument



- The verb *baptizo* comes from the root verb *bapto* (to dip; for an example of its usage in the NT see Luke 16:24), and it carries forward the same basic meaning as its root. The ending “ize” has to sense “to make” so in modern English “to fertilize” means “to make fertile” or “to modernize” means “to make modern.” So *baptizo* has the causative sense “to make to dip” or “to immerse” which fits well with the descriptions of baptism where an officer baptizes a subject (e.g., Acts 8:38).
- NT Greek has specific verbs that describe various other actions like “to sprinkle [*rhantizo*],” “to pour [*ekcheo*],” “to wash [*nipto*],” but in every context where Christian baptism is described the verb used is *baptizo*.
- In OT Hebrew there is a specific verb [*tabal*] which means “to dip” or “to immerse.” It is often used to describe sacrificial ritual in Leviticus (cf. Lev 4:6; 14:6). When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek c. the second century BC in the Septuagint (LXX) this verb was typically translated with the verb *bapto*. However, in 2 Kings 5:14 the verb is translated *baptizo* in reference to Naaman’s “dipping” himself seven times in the Jordan.

Response: The distinction argument



- We grant that the verb *baptizo* also has a metaphorical or poetic meaning and usage in the NT. It clearly has this kind of meaning in Matthew 3:11/Mark 1:9/Luke 3:16/John 1:33. It is also used metaphorically by Jesus himself to describe his impending suffering on the cross (cf. Matt 20:22-23; Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50).
- The fact that it is used metaphorically in some contexts, however, does not preclude the fact that it is used concretely to describe the sacrament of baptism by means of water in other contexts (consider Paul's use of the verb in 1 Corinthians 1:14-17 where the reference is clearly to the administration of the sacrament of baptism). We must apply sound hermeneutical principles to rightly divide the word.
- We might draw a parallel to the command to observe the Lord's Supper with the literal elements of bread and cup till Christ comes (1 Cor 11:26; cf. Matt 28:19-20).

Response: The contextual argument



- We gather that baptism by immersion is implied by various contextual indicators in the Biblical descriptions of baptism:
- John was baptizing in the Jordan River, no doubt due to the ready access to a significant body of water (Mark 1:4-5).
- When Jesus is baptized he is described as coming “out of the water” (Matt 3:16).
- John is described as baptizing in Aenon near Salim “because there was much water there” (John 3:23).
- The Ethiopian Eunuch requests baptism upon arrival at a body of water (Acts 8:36).

Response: Other arguments



- Jews practiced immersion for ritual washing. See ancient *mikvehs*.
- The Orthodox church has been the ancient guardian and preserver of the Greek language and they continue to practice baptism by immersion.
- The emergence of baptism by modes other than immersion in the Western church probably coincides with the emergence of infant baptism and the desire to provide a safer and more pragmatic mode.

John Dagg's conclusion



- John Dagg (1794-1884) was a Baptist theologian who wrote on baptism in his *Manual of Theology*:
- *The correctness of our deduction is confirmed by the circumstances which attended some of the baptisms recorded in the Bible. The forerunner of Christ is called "the Baptist," because he administered this rite. He was sent to baptize, and it must be supposed that he understood the meaning of the word. Now, if a small quantity of water will suffice, why did John resort to the Jordan for the administration? The reason must have been that which the inspired historian has expressly assigned for his baptizing in Enon, near to Salim; namely, "because there was much water there." The people were baptized by John in the Jordan. In this river our Lord was baptized, and his own example explains the meaning of his command.*
- *The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is very circumstantially described. The style in which he travelled forbids the supposition that he had no drinking vessel, in which a sufficient quantity of water might have been brought into the chariot to wet the hand of the administrator. But, if they chose not to perform the rite in the chariot, there was certainly no need for both of them to go into the water, if the mere wetting of Philip's hand was sufficient. Why did they both go into the water? and why did the sacred historian so particularly state this fact? "They both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and they both came up out of the water." These circumstantial facts are described in language which no one ought to misunderstand, and which no one ought to overlook, who desires to know his duty.*
- *The Greek language continued to be spoken for many years after the times of the apostles. During all this period they, to whom the word baptizo was vernacular, understood it to signify immerse; and immersion has always been the practice of the Greek church to the present day. The Greeks must have understood the meaning of their own word. The Latin fathers also understood the word in the same way; and immersion prevailed in the western as well as in the eastern churches, until near the time of the reformation. Affusion was allowed instead of immersion, in case of sickness; but it was accounted an imperfect baptism.*

Spurgeon's Baptist Catechism



- *Q 75 . What is Baptism?*
- *A. Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, instituted by Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19), to be to the person baptised a sign of his fellowship with him, in his death, and burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3; Col. 2:12), of his being ingrafted into him (Gal. 3:27), of remission of sins (Mk. 1:4; Acts 22:16), and of his giving up himself to God through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4-5).*
- *Q 76. To whom is Baptism to be administered?*
- *A. Baptism is to be administered to all those who actually profess repentance towards God (Acts 2:38; Matt. 3:6; Mk. 16:16; Acts 8:12, 36-37; Acts 10:47-48), and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and to none other.*
- *Q 77. Are the infants of such as are professing to be baptised?*
- *A. The infants of such as are professing believers are not to be baptised, because there is neither command nor example in the Holy Scriptures for their baptism (Exod. 23:13; Prov. 30:6).*
- *Q 78. How is baptism rightly administered?*
- *A. Baptism is rightly administered by immersion, or dipping the whole body of the person in water (Matt. 3:16; Jn. 3:23), in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, according to Christ's institution, and the practice of the apostles (Matt. 28:19-20), and not by sprinkling or pouring of water, or dipping some part of the body, after the tradition of men (Jn. 4:1-2; Acts 8:38-39).*

Pastoral Implications



- Is baptismal mode an unimportant matter?
- We do not believe that baptism is a work that saves (Eph 2:8-9).
- We must hold, however, to some theology of baptism and practice it in some manner.
- Study reveals a vital connection between the issues of subject and mode.
- Is infant baptism a legitimate baptism?
- Would we accept someone into membership who has experienced believer's baptism but by a mode other than immersion?