

# Baptism

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[Numerous spelling and grammar corrections have been made – aal].

In the modern world there are three attitudes towards immersion in the Scriptures. One is that immersion alone is meant by the word “baptize.” The second is that the word means either immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. The third denies that immersion is Scriptural. It is not often that genuine scholars now go to the extreme of saying that immersion is not baptism. Dr. Shedd, in his *Commentary on Romans*,

endeavors to show that Paul, in Romans 6:4, did not connect baptism and burial.

But this species of exegetical gymnastics is so rare as not to be taken seriously by the student of Scripture.

There is a much larger number of writers who freely admit that immersion is the proper meaning of baptize, but who insist that another meaning is permissible also in special cases.

Hence, it is argued, one cannot properly insist on immersion alone as baptism.

Dr. A. Plummer is a fine example of this type of scholars who wish to find some Scriptural justification for modern practices in Christian worship. Writing in ***The New Hastings Dictionary of the Bible***, he says:

“The mode of using it was commonly immersion. The symbolism of the

ordinance required this. It was an act of purification; and hence the need of water. A death to sin was expressed by a plunge beneath the water, and a rising again to a life of righteousness by the return of light and air; and hence the appropriateness of immersion”.

That would seem conclusive, if he had not added: “But immersion was a desirable symbol, rather than an essential,” **mentioning the stock objections about household baptism.**

The Baptists are by no means alone in claiming that nothing but immersion is taught in Scriptures. In fact, the overwhelming bulk of modern scholarship is with the Baptist contention on this point. The trouble is not so much here, as in the conclusion from this fact. The Romanist will say: “Yes, but the church had the right to change the mode of the ordinance.” He

falls behind the doctrine of an infallible church. The appeal to Scripture does not reach him. The Lutherans, as do many other Paedobaptists, admit it freely, but affirm that the form is a matter of indifference, and claim that pouring and sprinkling are more convenient, and more suitable to modern conditions and customs. It is denied by them that the form is essential to obedience to this command. This is the position of the majority of Paedobaptists. The wise line of argument with those who hold this view is to show that the form is essential to the symbol, that the very idea of baptism is destroyed when the form is broken, that an ordinance is meant in the nature of the case to be unchangeable; in accord to make it clear, that one loves the Bible must follow the Bible teaching. It is just at this point that most of the irritation arises in the discussion of this

subject. In our view we assume that none is baptized at all who is not immersed on a profession of faith. This is considered arrogance by many who differ from us, and it is frequently said that we make immersion essential to salvation. If we expect to reach those who disagree with us, we must take pains to be understood, and to make it clear that our stress on immersion is not because we consider it essential to salvation, but essential to the ordinance. Baptism is not essential to salvation, but we insist that, when one is baptized, he should be really baptized. Baptists also feel very strongly the beauty of the symbolism of baptism as a death and resurrection. We are unwilling to see the pictured truth of the ordinance destroyed by the substitution of some other act. Besides, we contend that the command of Jesus cannot be obeyed unless the thing commanded by Him is done.

## The Substitution of Sprinkling for Immersion

It is a commonplace among scholars that the council of Ravenna in 1311 was the first council to put sprinkling on a par with immersion. This permission to use sprinkling, says *The Schaff-Herzog Cyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, “was favored by the growing rarity of adult baptism.” Up to this time, sprinkling was only allowed in the case of the sick, and gradually for infants. **It was the doctrine of baptismal regeneration that led both to infant baptism and sprinkling.** The belief that only the baptized were saved caused something to be done that would answer for baptism to insure salvation. Luther

took the side of immersion and tried to stem the tide toward sprinkling, but he failed. Calvin considered it a matter of indifference. Roman Catholics stand by the council of Ravenna. The Continental Anabaptists were divided as to immersion. Modern advocates of sprinkling stand for a rite that gained its triumph at the close of Middle Ages.

## **The Greek Church**

**The Greek Christians did not accept the decision of Ravenna, and did not cease the practice of immersion.** This is a very striking testimony to the meaning of baptize, since the Greeks are credited with knowing the meaning of words in their own language. It is true, they practice triple immersion, but this fact has no bearing on the question of immersion or sprinkling.

## The Early Fathers

There is such a wealth of testimony here that one hesitates what to use. I have before me, as I write, ***The Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Period from 140 BC to AD 1100***, by Prof. E. A. Sophocles, himself a native Greek. This book is the standard authority for this period of the Greek language, and is invaluable in the study of ecclesiastical terms. He, in accordance with all Greek lexicons, gives “dip, immerse, plunge” as the meaning of the word. He refers to Barnabas, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Cyril, Gregory, Epiphany, etc... to prove the mode. Moreover, Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermes both speak of “going down into the water” and “coming up out of the water.” Tertullian uses the Latin word “merit,” “to plunge.”

When the Teaching of the Twelve came to light, there was much ado made because this document of the second century permitted pouring when immersion could not be done. This is true. Already, the doctrine of baptismal regeneration had arisen, and so much stress was laid upon baptism that when there was not enough water for immersion, pouring was allowed. But this is not the Scripture teaching. No such emphasis is laid upon baptism by the New Testament. Moreover, in the Teaching of the Twelve, when pouring is allowed a different word is used from “baptizo.” The word used is “ekcheo,” a word never used in the New Testament in connection with baptism. Now the fact that “ekcheo” is used for pouring, as distinguished from “baptizo,” proves that “baptize” does not mean pour.

## Ancient Greek

“Baptizo” is not used as often as “bapto” from which it is derived. But each means to dip, to plunge. Both words are used in figurative expressions also, as all words are. One can be plunged in grief, immersed in cares, etc. ***Liddell and Scott’s Standard Greek Lexicon*** (seventh edition) gives not a single example that permits pouring or sprinkling. What the precise difference is between “bapto” and “baptize” has not been determined. In practical usage no real distinction can be observed, except “baptize” is more common in later Greek; “bapto” is the earlier idiom. We have the same situation concerning “raino” and “rantizo,” to sprinkle. The ancient Greeks used “raino,” and later Greek used its derivative, “rantizo,” but with no real difference in sense.

## Contemporary Greek

The Biblical Greek is based on the Universal Dialect, which was occasioned by the spread of the Macedonized Attic by the conquests of Alexander the Great, Plutarch, Dio, Cassius, Lucian, Philo, Josephus, Polybius, Diodorus, Strabo, all use “baptizo,” and all use it in the sense of dip. These writers wrote in the language which lay immediately behind Biblical Greek, and were in a sense contemporaries of Biblical Greek. Plutarch speaks of dipping (“baptize”) himself into the lake. Josephus (*Antiquities* XV.,3,3) tells of young Aristobulus, brother of Mariamne, who went swimming with some of Herod’s servants. At the proper time, in the dark of the evening, they “dipped him as he was swimming,” and so he was

drowned. The word “baptize” is here used for “dipped.”

## ***The Septuagint***

Both “bapto” and “baptize” are used in the ***Septuagint*** translation in literal and figurative senses, but always with the sense of dip. In 2 Kings 5:14, we read of Naaman: “Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan.” There the Septuagint uses “baptize” for “dipped.”

## **The New Testament**

The New Testament is based immediately on the Dialect. Prof. Sophocles (***Lexicon for Roman and Byzantine Periods***) says of “baptize”:  
“There is no evidence that Luke and

Paul and the other writers of the New Testament put upon this verb meanings not recognized by the Greeks.” The word assumes a technical application to a special ordinance in the New Testament, but the act used as an ordinance is the original and persistent meaning of the word. The Jews had ablutions before John the Baptist introduced the ordinance of baptism. Some of those ablutions were immersions, but there is no evidence that the Jewish Proselyte baptism of later times (which was also immersion) existed before the time of Christ. In Luke 11:38 we are told that the Pharisee marveled at Jesus because “He had not first washed before dinner.” The word for wash is “baptizo,” and refers to the Pharisaic scrupulosity about ceremonial defilements. To make sure of ceremonial purity, a whole bath was felt to be necessary. In Mark 7:4 we read

that when they come “from market, except they wash, they eat not.” There again “baptize” is used for wash. Some ancient documents here read “rantizo,” sprinkle, showing clearly that “baptize” and “rantizo” mean different things. The reading “rantizo” doubtless arose from the difficulty felt by those not Jews in thinking that everybody would go to the trouble of taking a bath after coming from the market before meals. In Luke 16:24 “bapto” is translated dip, “that he may dip the tip of his finger in water.” “Baptizo” is used in the figurative sense in the New Testament, but always in harmony with the original and literal meaning of the word.

The baptism of death, of fire, of the cloud, of the Holy Spirit, all preserved the same imagery of the literal usage. The way to learn the real meaning of a word is not from the metaphor, but from

the literal sense. We have seen from the use of the word “baptize” in Greek writers of all ages, from the time of Homer till Modern Greek, that “bapto” and “baptize” mean to dip. So then, the presumption is all in favor of this idea in the Bible, unless the connection makes it impossible, and renders a peculiar sense proper which does not elsewhere exist. We have seen that the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament “bapto” and “baptize” mean to dip or immerse in a literal and figurative sense. What, then, is the sense when “baptize” is used for the ordinance of baptism? We observe at once that “rantizo”, to sprinkle, and “eccheo,” to pour, or both used in the New Testament, but never in connection with the ordinance of baptism. The word “baptize” is consistently used throughout. We should expect “baptize” to have one meaning, since we have observed this

to be true of it elsewhere. This one meaning should run through all the figurative uses of the word also. We suggest that one use successively, pour, sprinkle, immerse in every instance in the New Testament where the word baptize, or baptism, occurs. The result will completely remove pour and sprinkle from serious consideration.

**Dip or immerse will suit every time.**

The circumstances surrounding the ordinance of baptism naturally suggest immersion. Jesus went down into the water. And came up out of the water (MAR 1:10).

The baptism took place while down in the water. If the word “baptize” elsewhere always means immerse, certainly there is nothing here to make it otherwise. The New Testament descriptions of various baptisms suggest an immersion. Moreover, Paul

has drawn a picture of what baptism is like. In Romans 6:4 he tells us that baptism is like death, burial and resurrection. (See also COL. 2:12). The very symbolism of baptism demands going down into and rising from the water. It is impossible to picture burial and resurrection by pouring or sprinkling. Immersion does do it, and nothing else does. The argument is complete, as complete as it is possible to make any argument. No real objection can be found in Scriptures. The number baptized at Pentecost does not show immersion to be impossible. Baptist missionaries among the Telugus have duplicated this experience several times. Jerusalem was well-supplied with large pools, and always had plenty of water. The baptism of the jailer at Philippi is entirely possible. It is not stated when the baptism took place. Baptism by immersion is common in

jails now. Water can be found in plenty when it is wanted. But, one many say, suppose water could not be found, then what? Do nothing. Baptism is not essential for salvation. A man in a desert can wait till he gets out of the desert, if he ever does. If we do not know that Jesus was immersed in the Jordan, we do not know anything about the Bible.

## **What Will You Do?**

If Jesus was immersed, you should wish to be immersed also. You ought not to be willing to do something else. If He went all the way from Nazareth to the Jordan to be immersed by John, we ought not to say anything about convenience now. It is not a question of what we would rather do. Jesus was immersed. Will you be content with doing something else for your own

convenience, and offer that to Him for obedience? It is not a question of salvation, for we are not saved by baptism. But why do anything if you are not willing to do what Jesus did, and what He commands? He has commanded us to be immersed. He had nowhere commanded pouring or sprinkling.

