

IS IMMERSION NECESSARY FOR BAPTISM?

Rev. William Shishko¹

You have finally gotten your Baptist friends to join you for worship. “Now they will hear a good Reformed sermon and experience real biblical worship conformed to the regulative principle!” you say to yourself.

The hoped-for Sunday arrives. You and your Baptist friends are seated and ready for worship. Then you notice in the bulletin that there is to be a baptism that day. Gulp! What will your friends say?

The minister performs the baptismal ceremony. His explanation of the meaning of the sacrament and the reason for household baptism is true to OPC form. A father and a mother have both come to faith in Christ, and they have three little children. The entire household is baptized. Inside, you are thrilled, and you can see the smiles on the faces of other church members.

But as you glance to the side, your friends look quizzical and somewhat uneasy. “Should be an interesting discussion at lunch,” you think to yourself. The rest of the service goes fine, but the cloud of the baptism hangs over your friends. You can tell.

At lunch, you somewhat uneasily broach the subject. “So what did you think of the service this morning?” you ask.

“Well, it was different,” one of your friends responds. “We’ve always been taught that baptism is by immersion. Why did your pastor sprinkle water on those people? That’s not baptism, is it?”

Putting aside for a moment the question of infant baptism (that’s the *next* thing your Baptist friends will ask about!), how do you answer the common (and often dogmatic) insistence that baptism is only by immersion? Are we not buried with Christ in baptism (Rom. 6:4)? Doesn’t the person baptized come up *out of* the water (Acts 8:39)? Doesn’t the word *baptize* mean “to dip or immerse,” and isn’t it true that the word never has any other

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meaning (as demonstrated by Alexander Carson in his classic defense of the Baptist view, *Baptism: Its Mode and Subjects*)? How do you salvage the meal and convince your Baptist friends that you really do believe what the Bible says about how baptism is to be administered?

The simple answer is that the word *baptize* does not mean “immerse”! Those who maintain that the Greek verb *bapto* means “to dip or immerse” are generally correct. (For example, the term is used in the Old Testament, as it is in classical Greek, for dipping hyssop or a finger in the blood used for sacrifice [e.g., Ex. 12:22; Lev. 4:6, 17; 9:9] or dipping one’s feet in the Jordan River [e.g., Josh. 3:15].) However, our word *baptize* translates the Greek word *baptizo*, not *bapto*. While *bapto* may mean “to dip or immerse,” *baptizo* does not refer to a mode, but to a process and an effect. While a baptism may include dipping or immersing, *baptizo* does not, in itself, mean “to immerse.”

OLD TESTAMENT BAPTISMS

Biblical baptisms focus on both *purification* (either actual or ceremonial) and *identification*. Most people (including your Baptist friends) are probably unaware of the fact that there were baptisms in the Old Testament. Hebrews 9:10 speaks of “various baptisms” (often translated “various washings”) that were part of the Old Testament economy. The writer refers to three of these ceremonial baptisms in verses 13, 19, and 21. In each verse (together with their Old Testament references), there is a clear picture of the process and the effect that constituted an Old Testament baptism.

In verse 13, the writer speaks of a baptism in which “the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, *sprinkling* the unclean, sanctifies for the *purifying* of the flesh.” This refers to Numbers 19:17–18. Here a clean person takes hyssop, dips it in a vessel filled with water and the ashes of a heifer that has been used as a sacrifice, and then sprinkles it on those persons or things that are to be cleansed ceremonially.

In Hebrews 9:19, we read that Moses “took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and *sprinkled* both the book itself and all the people.” This refers to Exodus 24:6–8, where again we see that the process of an Old Testament baptism was to dip the hyssop and wool into the blood and sprinkle it as a means of ceremonial purification.

Finally, in Hebrews 9:21, there is a description of a process by which Moses “*sprinkled* with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry.” Leviticus 8:19 and 16:14, 16 provide the background for this Old Testament baptism. The priest was to dip his finger in the blood of a bull used for sacrifice, and then sprinkle the blood on the mercy seat (representing atonement). This was a ceremonial means of removing the uncleanness of the children of Israel.

In every case the process of baptism included a dipping of the instrument used to baptize into a substance such as blood or water. The instrument was then used to sprinkle the person(s) or thing(s) to be baptized. This process had the effect of identifying the substance used for the baptism with that which was baptized. As a result, the people were regarded as ceremonially cleansed by that substance. The baptism was not the dipping, but the process of dipping and sprinkling according to God’s order.

The emphasis of these Old Testament baptisms was not on the mode of baptism, but on the effect: cleansing or purification. These baptisms did not represent something that people did, but something that God did in providing a cleansing from sin and guilt. Baptisms were his means of ceremonially providing such purification.

NEW TESTAMENT BAPTISMS

By now your Baptist friends may be somewhat upset. “But what does all of this have to do with baptism in the New Testament?” they will ask.

You might point out to them that the New Testament builds on the Old, and that it is important that we always define our terms biblically. (Besides, the book of Hebrews *is* in the New Testament!) Hebrews 9 (and the fuller Old Testament passages to which it refers) clearly describes baptisms. When New Testament baptisms are introduced, they are linked with these Old Testament baptisms.

For example, the debate between John’s disciples and the Jews in John 3:22–26 focuses on “purification” (vs. 25). New Testament baptisms, like the Old Testament ones, were understood as purification rites. The process of baptizing would certainly be the same in the New Testament baptisms as in the Old Testament baptisms, except, of course, that the only element used

in New Testament baptisms was water (see vs. 23). (Incidentally, the “much water” [or “many waters”] mentioned in this verse may well have been the “flowing water” (NASB) [or “living water”] mentioned in Numbers 19:17.)

In New Testament baptisms, then, the process of applying water to someone identifies the person baptized with the cleansing properties of the water. The emphasis is not on dipping or immersing (or on sprinkling or pouring), but on the *process* of identifying the one baptized with a cleansing provided by God himself.

This is why the Westminster Confession of Faith (28.3) correctly states that “dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.” There is no clear example of a person being baptized by immersion in the New Testament, but there is a biblical pattern for a minister baptizing by *dipping* his hand (or a utensil) in water and *sprinkling* (or *pouring*) that water on the one to be baptized. Baptisms in a Presbyterian church simply follow the pattern of baptisms described in the Scriptures.

BURIED WITH CHRIST

“But what about being buried with Christ in baptism?” your Baptist friends ask.

Your response is, quite simply, that water baptism hardly amounts to being buried in the earth or placed in a tomb!² Furthermore, biblical baptisms have the effect of identifying the one baptized with someone or something else (e.g., Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 1:13; 10:2). When one receives New Testament baptism, that person is identified with Christ in his life, death, resurrection, and reign. (That is why the New Testament often refers to Christians as being “in Christ.”) The one baptized is, by virtue of God’s covenant, identified with Christ, so that the person comes under the controlling influence of the only Redeemer of God’s elect.

“But what about the references to baptized ones going into and coming out of the water?” your friends ask, referring to such passages as Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, and Acts 8:38–39. “Doesn’t that *prove* immersion?”

² Editor’s Note: There is also a geographic misunderstanding about the nature of burial in the Middle East. Most internments take place in caves, thus burial is not as associated with “going down” as it is in Western culture.

Calmly answer that the Greek prepositions translated “into” and “out of” may also mean “to,” “toward,” or “unto,” and “from” or “away from.” In fact, in Acts 8, the Greek preposition *eis* is used eleven times, but only once (vs. 38) is it commonly translated “into.” In verses 3, 5, 16, 25, 26, 27, and 40, it is best translated as “to.” Similarly, we should understand that when Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, he went “to” the water, dipped his hand into it, and sprinkled the eunuch, identifying him with the Messiah and his cleansing work (see Isaiah 52:15, a passage that the eunuch would have just been reading, cf. Acts 8:30–33). Or, they may have stepped into and out of the water, without anyone being immersed.

You may wonder whether all of this is so important. Must we really be so picky about the mode of baptism? Don't both the Baptist and the Presbyterian ways of baptizing accomplish the same thing?

The answer, according to our confessional standards, is that *we* do not make an issue of the mode of baptism! As we read above, “dipping of the person into the water is not necessary.” Our friends who maintain that baptism requires immersion are not only making a false assertion based on the incorrect assumption that *baptizo* and *bapto* mean the same thing, but are also binding people to believe something that is not given in Holy Scripture. That is a serious error (see Deuteronomy 4:2). It is precisely because we really do believe what the Bible says about the way baptism is to be administered that we do not insist upon immersion as the mode of baptism, but maintain, rather, that it is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.