

## Action of Baptism

For many centuries there has been a great deal of debate over whether baptism requires one to be immersed in water or whether one could be baptized by having water sprinkled or poured over him. Many denominations have accepted sprinkling or pouring has an acceptable mode of baptism. The Catholic Catechism by Peter Cardinal Gasparri says: "To secure the validity of the Baptism the washing should be done, either by immersion in the water or by pouring the water, or again by sprinkling it..." (p. 158). The Methodists teach "Let every adult person and the parents of every child to be baptized have the choice of sprinkling, pouring, or immersion" (The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church, 1948, p. 470). Others proclaim "Baptism may be administered by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion, according to the choice of the applicant" (Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 1952, p. 31). The Presbyterians teach "Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person..." (Confession of Faith, 1883, p. 59).

Since baptism is clearly commanded throughout the New Testament all those who wish to be obedient to God and Christ should give this issue careful consideration.

### THE MEANING OF "BAPTISM"

The New Testament was written in Koine Greek. In order for us to understand the New Testament it was needful for the words to be translated from the Greek to their English counterparts. At the time of the King James translation (1611) the common practice was to substitute sprinkling and pouring for immersion. To translate it "sprinkling" or "pouring" would rule out immersion which was known to be the true Greek meaning. Thus, to avoid these difficulties they Anglicized the Greek word "baptizo". That is, they put the Greek word into English spelling by dropping the "d" and substituting the "o" with an "e" thus creating a new word: "baptize". By doing this, they effectively avoided translating the Greek word by only transliterating it into English.

It is true that Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language defines "baptize" as "to immerse in water, sprinkle or pour water on" (p. 118). However, dictionaries define a word according to its modern usage. It is a proper modern definition because of the doctrines of sprinkling and pouring in the religious world, today. Words change in meaning (cf. "gay") thus up-to-date dictionaries must give current meanings. Yet it should be noted that Webster does give the origin of baptism from the Greek word "baptizein" meaning "to immerse".

The only proper and exact place to look up the meaning of the New Testament word is in a Greek-English lexicon. Stoubrdza, a native Greek wrote, "The verb baptizo has only one acceptation. It literally and perpetually signifies to plunge. Baptism and immersion, therefore, are identical; and to say baptism by aspersion [a sprinkling, DRV] is as if one should say immersion by aspersion, or utter any other contradiction of the same nature." The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, says, "Dip, immerse, submerge, baptize" (Vol. 1, p. 144). Arndt

and Gingrich define it as "dip, immerse". In the massive Theological Dictionary of the New Testament is says "to immerse" (Vol. 1, pp. 529-545). We could site over a hundred lexicons which would say that "baptizein" means "to dip, dip under, plunge, immerse, etc." As a matter of fact, there isn't one lexicon of any reputation which translates it as "sprinkling" or "pouring". The Greek word for "sprinkle" would be "rhantizo" meaning "to scatter in drops" or "prochusis" neither of which is ever translated "baptize". Many elements are said to be sprinkled, such as, ashes, blood, oil, scarlet wool, hyssop, ashes of the red heifer, ashes of cedar wood, dust and clear water. However, nowhere in the Bible is water alone (nothing but water) ever said to be sprinkled upon anyone or anything. "Cheo" is the Greek word for "pouring". It means "to turn out in a stream". There are four other words for "pouring", but none of them mean "baptize". No reference on sprinkling or pouring even insinuates baptism. If the Holy Spirit desired to have water sprinkled or poured on us it would have selected the proper word to express that meaning. Yet, He chose a word which means "to immerse" to the exclusion of "to sprinkle" or "to pour".

### DENOMINATIONAL SCHOLARS ON THE MEANING OF "BAPTISM"

Many denominational scholars proclaim that baptism is immersion and not sprinkling or pouring. This is astonishing when one considers the fact that all the men quoted below were either founders or members of denominations which practiced "sprinkling" or "pouring" instead of "immersion". Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran Church wrote, "Baptism is a Greek word, and may be translated 'immerse'. I would have those who are to be baptized to be altogether dipped". The founder of Presbyterianism, John Calvin said, "The very word 'baptize', however, signifies immerse, and it is certain that immersion was the practice of the ancient church" (Calvin's Institutes, Vol. 3, p. 343). The Methodist church was founded by John Wesley who wrote, "We are buried with Him. Alluding to the ancient manner of baptizing by immersion" (Wesley's Notes). Sprinkling and pouring is practiced by the Episcopalians, yet two of their most renowned scholars said, "This passage (Rom. 6:4) cannot be understood unless it be borne in mind that the primitive baptism was by immersion" (Conybeare and Howson, Life and Epistles of St. Paul, vol. 2, p. 169). These honest men paid greater attention to the truth in their studies of the Scriptures than they did the practices of their own denominations.

### HISTORY OF SPRINKLING AND POURING

If lexicographers, scholars and church historians proclaim that baptism means immersion then where did sprinkling and pouring come from? In a word, they originated out of tradition. In 251 A.D. a man by the name of Novation lay sick in bed unable to get up for immersion, and was thus sprinkled with water, but only upon the promise that if he were to recover he would be immersed. Later, having fully recovered, Novation refused to be immersed in water. When he was seeking the office of bishop many were against his ordination because he had been "Merely sprinkled and had not been wholly immersed in water, in the ancient

method" (Historical Commentary, Mosheim, vol. I, p. 62). Thus came sprinkling as Novation's innovation of baptism.

Historically, it took many years for sprinkling and pouring to gain wide acceptance. According to Brenner, the Catholic scholar, "For thirteen hundred years was baptism an immersion of the person under water". Official recognition wasn't given to sprinkling until 1311 A.D. at the Council of Ravenna, "Baptism is to be administered by trine immersion or aspersion [sprinkling, DRV]". Scandal helped widen the rift between the Roman and Eastern Catholic church. The Eastern Church would not accept the Western practice of sprinkling or pouring instead of immersion. Thus, they tended to reject all those not truly baptized. Deylingius says, "The Greeks retain the rite of immersion to this day, as Jeremiah, the patriarch of Constantinople, declares" (Booth on Baptism, p. 93). Evidently the Greek Orthodox Church had a better understanding of their native tongue. If Greeks don't know the meaning of the Greek word "baptizo" then who does?

During the Reformation period the Protestants began to accept sprinkling and pouring along with immersion.

### BIBLE EXAMPLES OF BAPTISM

All the examples of baptism in the New Testament clearly demonstrate immersion in water, never the sprinkling or pouring of water upon the candidate for baptism.

**The Baptism of Christ.** Jesus came to be baptized by John the Baptist. John had been sent to baptize with (eis, into) water (Mark 1:8). He was baptizing people in the Jordan (v. 5). His baptism required "*much water*" the water having been baptized (Mark 1:10). Thus, John's baptism clearly required that Jesus be immersed. According to *The Emphasized New Testament: A New Translation* by J. B. Rotherham "John the Immerser" baptized Jesus.

**The Baptism of the Eunuch (Acts 8:36-39).** Again, immersion is implied as the action of baptism. First, "*they came unto a certain water*" (36). Next, they "*went down both into the water*" (38). Third, Philip "*baptized him*" (38). Finally, they "*came up out of*" the water (39). It is argued that they traveled in an area called "*desert*" according to verse 26. Thus, Philip must have sprinkled water upon the Eunuch for there is not enough water for immersion in a desert. Yet, "*desert*" does not necessarily refer to barren waste. Jesus stopped at a "*desert place*" to feed the 5,000. They sat down in "*much grass*." This place was not barren, but an unpopulated area describing the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. W. E. Vine defines "*desert*" as "an uninhabited place, in contrast to a town or village...It does not always denote a barren region, void of vegetation; it is often used of a place uncultivated, but fit for pasturage" (p. 289). It is also, argued that immersion cannot be demanded in baptism because there is a lack of water in the desert and in the frozen far north for immersion. Yet, how many people live in a desert or far north? What do they drink? What do polar bears, seals, etc. swim in? Ice can be broken and has been for others to be immersed. A better question is: where are you right now? Are you in a desert or the far north or south pole? If not, than these hypothetical arguments would not

keep you from being immersed.

**The Baptism of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9, 22).** When the Lord appeared to him, Saul asked what he must do. The Lord sent him to Damascus to wait there for further instructions. Saul stayed on a street called Straight in the house of Judas, fasting and praying in blindness for three days. The Lord sent Ananias who came and said *"Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord"* (22:16). Why did he have to arise? Sprinkling and pouring takes place in a kneeling position. Saul arose to go be immersed.

**The Baptism of the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:23-34).** First, Paul and Silas spoke to *"all that were in his house"* (32). Next, *"he took them the same hour of the night, washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway"* (33). Finally, *"when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them"* (34). Sprinkling or pouring would not require leaving and returning to the house, yet immersion would.

**Baptism is a Birth of Water (John 3:1-5).** Nicodemus came to Jesus by night to question who He was. Jesus said, *"most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Nicodemus said to Him, *"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"* Jesus answered, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."* (3-5). "Born" is to be understood figuratively. In order for one to be born out or delivered from water he must first be in water. Thus, to be *"born of water"* requires immersion.

**Baptism is a Burial (Romans 6:2-5; Colossians 2:12).** Paul in explaining the purpose of baptism in relation to Jesus Christ, wrote, *"or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life"* (Rom. 6:3,4). The word "burial" is from the Greek word "thapto" which is used in direct reference to the burial of Christ in I Corinthians 15:4. Christ was buried in a stone hewed sepulcher with a rock rolled to seal the entrance. Christ was covered to the extent that Jonah was enclosed in the sea creature (Matthew 12:41). Immersion is a likeness of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Christ's body was not sprinkled with dirt nor was dirt poured upon it. His body was completely covered or surrounded in the grave in which it was laid. Thus, a complete covering or surrounding or placing in is required for burial. Since baptism is a burial in water, immersion is commanded.

Once there was a little boy who went to church with his mother. The preacher read from the Bible that baptism is a burial. Later in the service he baptized a man by sprinkling water upon his head. A couple of weeks later the boy's little dog died. His mother told him to go out in the back yard and bury his dog. As she watch from the kitchen window, she observed him pick up a hand full of dirt and sprinkled it upon the dead dog. When he return to the house she rebuked him saying, "Did you bury the dog as I had asked you"? "Yes, mother" he replied. "No you didn't. Now go out there in bury the dog" she commanded. Once more she

watched as he did the same thing. When he return, his mother scolded him saying, "Now you didn't bury the dog. I watched you. All you did was sprinkle a little dirt on him." Her son explained, "but, Mama. Baptism is a burial and at church the preacher only sprinkled water on the man."

Paul told the saints at Colossae that they were *"buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead"* ( Col. 2:12).

#### CONCLUSION

Does sprinkling, pouring or immersion meet the Bible requirement for baptism? Bible baptism requires: water (Ac. 10:47); much water (John 3:23); going down into the water (Acts 8:38); coming up out of the water (Mark 1:10; Acts 8:39); a burial (Romans 6:3,4); a resurrection (Romans 6:5; Colossians 2:12); a washing of the body with water (Hebrews 10:22) and a birth of water (John 3:5). Only immersion meets all the requirements. Sprinkling and pouring are inadequate substitutes for immersion, and even worse, they are additions to the Word of God (Rev. 22:18,19).

If you have not been immersed in water you have not been baptized. If you have not been baptized you have not been saved. Jesus Christ said, *"he that believes and is baptism will be saved, he that does not believe shall be condemned"* (Mark 16:16). If you had water sprinkled or poured upon you instead of being immersed in water, will you not contact us today so we may assist you in being scripturally baptized in water?

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## Is it Sprinkling, Pouring or Immersion?



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**Service Times**  
**Sunday**  
Bible Study.....9:30 am  
Worship Service.....10:30 am  
Worship Service.....5:00 pm  
**Wednesday**  
Bible Study.....7:30 pm

By Daniel R. Vess