

What is the meaning and mode of baptism?

The related Greek words *baptismos* (noun - the act of baptising), *baptisma* (noun - the result), *baptizo* (verb – to baptise) are complicated, having various meanings including: immersion, submersion, being overwhelmed, a purification rite, to dip, to dye, to draw water, to wash. In secular Greek writing the meaning includes the sinking of a ship or being bathed in blood in battle, neither of which imply immersion followed by emergence. In the NT we see items that are baptised which cannot be immersed, such as couches or small beds, In Mk 7:4 (Byzantine text, i.e. AV, NKJV) washing = *baptismos* and tables = couches or small beds. The very latest scholarship reveals that baptism is not primarily about the mode, but means ‘changing the essential nature of a thing’. Thus a ship is changed from being seaworthy to being a submerged wreck in baptism, while a worshipper or vessel is purified from being ceremonially unclean to holy in a religious baptism.

Thus Christian baptism regards the symbolic act that represents what happened when a sinner was cleansed from sin and purified by the work of the Spirit applying the value of Christ’s cross. The NT nowhere makes exactly clear how the application of water takes place. Presbyterians and Anglicans pour or sprinkle (aspersion) and apply the water to infants as well as confessing adults; Baptists, most evangelicals, Pentecostals and Charismatics only immerse. In historical terms, sprinkling/pouring has been in use for many more centuries than immersion.

The attempts of both sides to demand that only their mode is genuine fails to convince. Claims by Baptists that all the examples of water baptism necessitate immersion are confounded by Presbyterian writings (e.g. ‘going down into the water’ does not necessarily imply immersion but also kneeling and being poured upon). There is no absolute statement showing how it is done, and this must be by God’s express will that this is unclear in his word.

The interpretative basis for immersion, as dying and being raised, is also clouded. The chief texts (Rm 6:4 & Col 2:12) are not about water baptism at all, neither are they about justification; they are about the effects of being united with Christ that lead to sanctification. The chief imagery for conversion used in scripture is washing, and this is often described as an outpouring of the Spirit to cleanse (Isa 52:15; Ezek 36:25). Indeed, Heb 9:19-22 tells us that sprinkling is the chief metaphor for purification. There is a better case for pouring/sprinkling than immersion (but not for infant baptism).

So, no one can insist that a believer must be baptised in a certain way; it is up to the individual conscience. Pouring is more suitable in house churches and certainly for the old and frail, but immersion is also acceptable.

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