

The Sacraments: A Reformed Perspective

Chapter 6: The Mode of Baptism

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Among Christians there is not only a strong difference of opinion regarding who are the proper recipients of baptism, but also regarding the proper mode. Credobaptists insist that baptism is only properly administered by immersion in water, while paedobaptists teach that sprinkling or pouring is the biblical way to administer the rite. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that “dipping the person into water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.” (28:3).

Before we present the biblical case for pouring or sprinkling let us briefly consider the Baptist arguments for immersion. There are essentially three basic arguments. (1) According to ancient classical Greek literature the Greek word for baptize (*baptizō*) means “to dip, immerse, or plunge” something in water. Baptists will often quote from a Greek lexicon the *classic* usage of *baptizō* and then say, “Case closed.” (2) The prepositions associated with the context of baptism point to immersion. Mark says that the Jews were baptized “*in* the river Jordon” (Mk. 1:5). When Christ was baptized He was observed “coming up *out of* the water” (Mk. 1:10, NASB). After Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, “they came up out of the water” (Ac. 8:39). Further, some of the baptism narratives strongly point to immersion because of the need for great quantities of water. “Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there” (Jn. 3:23). “Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?’” (Ac. 8:36) (3) The symbolism of union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection points to baptism by immersion. Paul says that Christians were “buried with Him in baptism...raised with Him through faith” (Col. 2:12). In his discussion of sanctification the apostle writes, “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). Grudem writes, “When the candidate for baptism goes down into the water it is a picture of going down into the grave and being buried. Coming up out of the water is then a picture of being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life. Baptism thus very clearly pictures death to one’s old way of life and raising to a new kind of life in Christ. But baptism by sprinkling or pouring simply misses the symbolism.”¹

While at first glance these Baptist arguments sound impressive, a closer examination of these assertions will prove that these arguments are fallacious. Note the following.

(1) First, many people have been led astray by a superficial, incorrect understanding of the classical meaning of the word *baptizō* by Baptist writers. The foremost Baptist authority on this topic, Alexander Carson writes, “*BAPTIZO* in the whole history of the Greek language has but one [meaning].... It not only signifies to dip or immerse, but it never has any other

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 968.

meaning.”² This assertion has been thoroughly refuted by the scholar James W. Dale. Dale gives many examples from Greek literature where *baptizo* does not mean to dip or immerse. He writes, “Water poured into wine is said to baptize Bacchus... A drunken man is said to be a baptized man.... A man who drinks at the fountain of Silenius becomes a baptized man.... Cities, and all Asia, are represented as baptized by sleep, by the running away of bakers, by defeat in battle.... A person bewildered with questions is said to be baptized.”³ *Baptizo* can refer to different actions whether dipping, sprinkling, pouring or even metaphorical or non-physical actions that lead to different kinds of conditions. Regarding the common, mistaken notion of *baptizo* having only one meaning we need to heed the words of Calvin. He writes, “It ought not to have any weight with us that an opinion has long and extensively prevailed. We must learn to form our judgment from the matter as it stands, and not from mistaken opinions of men.”⁴

(2) Second, one must be very careful when appealing to the classic Greek usage of a word to give a *fixed* meaning to a word in the New Testament. It is not uncommon to find words in the Greek Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures) and the New Testament that have been taken from classical Greek and then used in a unique way by the inspired writers of the New Testament and the translators of the Septuagint. Common words are taken and modified to suit a religious purpose. No one would argue that common Greek words such as *Theos* (God), *agape* (love), *pistis* (faith), *sarx* (flesh) or *ouranos* (heaven) have the same meaning for a heathen and a Christian. They obviously do not. Such is also the case with *baptizo*. Fairfield writes, “Suppose it were necessary to employ some word to express the idea of ‘ceremonious religious cleansing in the use of water,’ and no word was found in classic Greek exactly expressing that idea, what is to be done? Just what was done in numberless other cases: SOME WORD MUST BE CONVERTED TO THAT USE.”⁵

In order to demonstrate that *baptizo* does not necessarily refer to immersion in Scripture but can also refer to a religious cleansing by pouring or sprinkling water, let us examine the use of this word in the Greek Septuagint (LXX),⁶ the apocrypha (the non-inspired books by the Jews in the inter-testamental period) and the New Testament.

a) In 2 Kings chapter 5 we read about Naaman the commander of the army of Syria who is ordered by Elisha to go and wash in the Jordan river seven times to cure his leprosy (v. 10). In verse 14 we read that he went down to the Jordan and dipped himself seven times in the river. In the Greek Septuagint version the word “dipped” (Hebrew, *tawbal*) is translated *baptizo*. Although the Hebrew word used, *tawbal*, in ordinary usage means to “dip” or “immerse” (which in this verse would support to a degree the Baptist position) there is a good reason to believe that for the translators the word *baptizo* was chosen because it better conveyed the idea of a religious purification or washing.

When the Jewish translators wanted to convey the idea of dipping they preferred the word *bapto*. Of the sixteen times *tawbal* is used in the Hebrew Scriptures, fourteen times it is translated *bapto* (e.g., In Lev. 14:6, 51, a living bird is dipped in the blood of a slain bird; Lev. 14:16, the priest dips his finger into oil; Ruth 2:14, “dip your morsel in the vinegar”); once

² Alexander Carson, *Baptism, Its Mode and Its Subjects* (Evansville, IN: The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1969), 19.

³ James W. Dale, *Johannie Baptism: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word as Determined in Usage of the Holy Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, [1898] 1993), 98-99.

⁴ John Calvin as quoted by James W. Dale, 90.

⁵ Edmond B. Fairfield, *Letters on Baptism* (Boston and Chicago: The Pilgrim Press, 1893), 27.

⁶ The only other instance in which *baptizo* occurs in the Septuagint is Isaiah 21:4 where it is used figuratively to denote fear or terror.

tawbal is translated *moluno* which means “to defile” (In Gen. 37:31 Joseph’s brothers *defiled* his coat by dipping it in the blood of a goat); and once it is translated *baptizo* in the case of Naaman in the Jordan.

Why did they use *baptizo* when they virtually always used *bapto* to convey dipping into something? The likely reason is that Naaman had been commanded to *wash, bath* or *cleanse* himself in the Jordan by Elisha. Thus, the translators of the Septuagint choose the word *baptizo* over *bapto* because they were not concerned about conveying the idea of dipping in this case, but the idea of cleansing. “We cannot believe that they translated the same Hebrew word fourteen times by *bapto* and once by *baptizo*, by mere chance and without a reason.”⁷ When they wanted to convey the idea of defilement they choose *moluno* even though the word is not a literal translation of *tawbal*. Likewise, they choose the word *baptizo* over *bapto* in order to emphasize Naaman’s cleansing. “They knew that *baptizo* was understood by the Jews to mean ‘cleanse,’ and for that reason, and for no other, they use it in this one solitary case.”⁸

b) The Jewish authors of the uninspired *Apocrypha* (“In general it constitutes the excess of the LXX over the Hebrew Scriptures, with the material concerned being written during the last two centuries B.C. and the 1st century A.D.”⁹) help us understand the meaning of *baptizo* to the Jews immediately prior to the writing of the New Testament canon. What is particularly interesting regarding the *Apocrypha* is that its use of *baptizo* proves that the Jews of this period did not equate the term with immersion but with purification by poured or sprinkled water.

In the book of Judith we have the courageous exploits of a Jewish widow who through deceit assassinates the enemy commander Holofernes by beheading. She was allowed in the enemy camp on the pretext of betraying military secrets and because the commander was attracted to her outward beauty. What is germane to our topic is the description of her religious purification which uses the term *baptizo*. “Holofernes’ attendants brought her into the tent; and she slept until midnight. Shortly before the morning watch she got up and sent this message to Holofernes: ‘My lord, will you give orders for me to be allowed to go out and pray?’ Holofernes ordered his bodyguard to let her pass. She remained in the camp for three days, going out each night into the valley of Bethulia and bathing in [lit. at] the spring. When she came up from the spring, she prayed the Lord, the God of Israel, to prosper her undertaking to restore her people. Then she returned to the camp purified, and remained in the tent until she took her meal towards evening.” (Judith 12:5-9 NEB). The word for bathing here is *ebaptizeto*. The picture here in Greek is not that of a woman taking a bath in a pond, stream or lake but of a woman going to a small spring and using the pure water to wash herself. “It was at a ‘fountain’ (*pege*)—‘a spring’—not a lake. She purified herself *at* the fountain, not *in* it. The Greek preposition is *epi*.”¹⁰ Further, being a Jew it is likely that her purification took place under the eyes of a military escort. James W. Dale argues that this ritual washing could not have been immersion for a number of reasons. First, there is no doubt but that her washing was public. “It is in evidence that Holofernes, after he ‘took the fountains of their waters, *set garrisons of men of war over them.*’ (7:7) And it is in evidence, that the camp was just as close unto, or as deeply in, this fountain, as was the baptism of Judith. The very identical terms which bring her baptism into relation with the fountain, are employed to denote the relation of the camp to the fountain. ‘They

⁷ Edmund B. Fairfield, *Letters on Baptism*, 58.

⁸ *Ibid*, 59

⁹ R. K. Harrison, “Apocrypha” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 76), 1:205.

¹⁰ Edmund B. Fairfield, *Letters on Baptism*, 68.

encamped in the valley near Bethulia, *at the fountain—epi tes peges.*”¹¹ A godly Jewish woman would not take a bath in the presence of heathen men.

Second, even if the spring was large enough for Judith to immerse her body, she would not have taken a bath in their drinking water. Dale writes, “But Dr. Carson knows that she *dipped* herself, and Dr. Fuller knows that she *bathed* herself, and Dr. Conant knows that she *immersed* herself,—where? Why, in the fountain from which the Bethulians got their drinking water, and from which ‘the garrison’ guarding that fountain, got their water. Well, that is certainly a little remarkable, that a lady should go and ‘wash her entire person’ in a drinking fountain! However, these learned men say, that they know that she did it. We must, then, set down this lady Judith as remarkably solicitous for her own ‘purification,’ and remarkably regardless of the purification of the waters for those who drank after nightly washings!”¹²

Another example that is even more decisive than Judith is found in the Apocryphal book *Ecclesiasticus* or *The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach* which reads: “*Wash (baptizomenus)* after touching a corpse and then touch it again, and what have you gained by your washing” (34:25). Here the Jewish writer uses the word *baptizo* to refer to the purification rite of Numbers 19 which was sprinkling. “Whoever touches the body of anyone who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD. That person shall be cut off from Israel. He shall be unclean, because the water of purification was not sprinkled on him; his uncleanness is still on him.... But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself, that person shall be cut off from among the assembly, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD. The water of purification has not been sprinkled on him; he is unclean.” (vs. 13, 20). If a man touched a dead body he had to find a clean person who would take ashes of the heifer burnt for purification from sin, mix these ashes with running water in a vessel, take hyssop, dip it in this mixture and then sprinkle it on the unclean person (vs. 17-18). This sprinkling is to occur on the third and on the seventh day (v. 19). This baptism by sprinkling is specifically said by Scripture to make the unclean clean.

Baptist writers attempt to circumvent the import of these passages by pointing out that the purification ritual also includes an immersion. Verse 19 reads: “The clean person shall sprinkle the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, wash his clothes, and bathe in water; and at evening he shall be clean.” Does this passage indicate that the word baptism should only be connected with an immersion? No. It definitely does not for the following reasons.

First, Scripture specifically says that it is the sprinkling with ash mixed with water that makes the person clean. “He shall be unclean, because the water of purification was not sprinkled on him; his uncleanness is still on him....” “He has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD. The water of purification has not been sprinkled on him; he is unclean” (Num 19:13, 20). This

¹¹ James W. Dale, *Judaic Baptism: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word as Determined by Usage of Jewish Patristic Writers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, [1869] 1991), 355.

¹² *Ibid*, 358-559. But doesn’t the passage say that “she came up from the spring indicating she was in the water? No. Actually the language is consistent with her being at the spring not in it. Dale writes, “To enforce this interdict against pressing *anebe* into this water service, I would refer to Genesis 24:15, 16,—‘And behold Rebecca went out (*exeporeuto*) and went down (*katabasa*) by the fountain (*epi ten pegen*) and filled her water-pot, and went up (*anebe*).’ All the leading words in this reference are identical with those in the passage under consideration. The preposition indicating the proximity of Judith and Rebecca is precisely the same. The verb which expresses the movement of these females, after their respective missions to the fountain were accomplished, is the same. If that word did not bring Rebecca ‘out of the water,’ how will it bring Judith? If that word carried Rebecca up out of the lower ground of the fountain, why shall it not do the same kind office for her sister Jewess?” (*Ibid*, 260).

view is confirmed by the inspired author of Hebrews. “For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ...” (9:13-14).

Second, in this particular purification ritual the crucial element is the ashes of a heifer, a sacrificial animal. The sprinkling of the ashes mixed with a running or living water points to the expiation of sin by Jesus Christ.

Third, there is the distinct possibility that the pronoun “he” in verse 19 refers not to the person who touched a dead body but rather to a person who became unclean by touching the purification mixture. Verse 19 reads: “The clean person shall sprinkle the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he [i.e., the man who applied the mixture] shall purify himself, wash his clothes, and bathe in water; and at evening he shall be clean.” Note how verse 20 reverts back to the unclean man who touched the dead body: “But the man who is unclean...” “The original clean person, who had used hyssop upon the unclean, was regarded as so far infected that he was required to become disinfected by washing his clothes and bathing himself in water; and then he would be clean at evening.”¹³

Fourth, if we accept the interpretation which says that the washing of clothes and the whole body is part of this ritual or completes the ritual process, it still is not the central aspect of the ritual for it is done after the act which is specifically said to purify. It would appear that this washing is needed to remove the ashes which contain the blood of the heifer. In any case the most one could prove by appealing to this washing at the end of the process would be that baptism ought to be done by sprinkling and perhaps bathing in water as well. The fact that sprinkling is called a baptism cannot be denied without doing great violence to the common rules of language.

Fifth, the word used for “washing” does not necessarily mean washing by immersion. Joseph “washed” his face after weeping (Gen. 43:31). In Deuteronomy 21:6, certain persons are directed to “wash their hands over the heifer.”¹⁴ This was done by pouring not immersion (see 2 Kgs. 3:11). The same word in the Septuagint is used of washing Dorcas after death (Ac. 9:37) and washing the stripes of Paul and Silas (Ac. 16:33). One should not *assume* that bathing (especially in the desert during the wilderness wanderings) was always done by immersion.

Sixth, the connection of baptism (*baptizo*) to the mode of sprinkling is confirmed by Josephus the Jewish historian who not only was very familiar with Jewish laws and practices but was fluent in the Greek language. He writes, “*Baptizing* by this ashes put into spring water, they sprinkled on the third and seventh day.” [*Jewish Antiquities*, Book iv: Chapter 4]. Fairfield writes, “The Greek word which he uses is *baptizontes*. Putting the words of the Son of Sirach by the side of those of Josephus, who wrote about two hundred and fifty years later, it will be seen that the word *baptizo* had for many generations been employed by the Jews who were familiar with the Greek to express this idea of ceremonial cleansing by water. It had been so used for at least two or three centuries before Christ. If Christ had used it in any other sense, it would have been necessary for him to state that fact; they would not naturally have expected him to use the word in any other sense, nor would they have understood him if he had so used it.”¹⁵

c) The Baptist contention that *baptizo* and its cognate must always refer to immersion is thoroughly disproved by the use of the term in the New Testament. Note the following examples.

¹³ Edmund B. Fairfield, *Letters on Baptism*, 75-76.

¹⁴ See James W. Dale, *Judaic Baptism*, 117-119.

¹⁵ Edmund B. Fairfield, 81-82.

First, in Luke 11:38 we encounter the aorist passive indicative of *baptizo* (*ebaptisthe*) to describe the extra-biblical Pharisaical tradition of a religious hand washing before meals. “He [Jesus] went in [to a certain Pharisee’s house] and sat down to eat. When the Pharisee saw it, he marveled that He had not first *washed* before dinner.” Earlier in His ministry in Galilee the Pharisees had strongly criticized the disciples for eating with unwashed hands (Mk. 7:2-5; Mt. 15:2ff.). Because this hand washing was a religious ordinance made up by the Pharisees to “fence the law” and was not taught anywhere in Scripture, Jesus and the disciples refused to take part in it.

What is particularly interesting regarding these washings is that it is almost certain that they were done by pouring. John Murray writes, “It is distinctly provided in the Talmudic tractate *Yadayim* that water was to be poured over the hands to the wrist. Chapter II, Mishnah 3, reads as follows: ‘Hands become unclean and are made clean as far as the wrist. How so? If he poured the first water over the hands as far as the wrist and poured the second water over the hands beyond the wrist and the latter flowed back to the hands, the hands nevertheless become clean.’ It would appear that Edersheim is correct when he says, ‘Accordingly, the words of St. Mark can only mean that the Pharisees eat not “except they wash their hands to the wrist.”’¹⁶

If we interpret the Greek word *pugmei* as *with the fist* (instrumental case) we still have a baptism or cleansing by pouring and rubbing, not immersion. Lane writes, “The washing was accomplished by pouring water on the hands, and this fact excludes all suggestions of immersing the hands from Mark’s reference in verse 3. The evangelist correctly specifies that a *handful of water* was required. The position of the hand was cupped, with the fingers flexed to allow the water to pass between them so as to reach all parts of the hands. By cupping the hand the entire hand could be washed with a very small quantity of water.”¹⁷ When considering this ritual washing we need to keep in mind that: (1) Water in Palestine is not abundant. It was valuable. (2) The ritual washings occurred very frequently. Thus, a method had to be used that conserved water. (3) For ritual cleansings the Jews preferred running, moving or living water. (i.e., poured or sprinkled water.) (4) The water used could only be used once. They could not take a bowl full of water and have 10 people take turns dipping their hands in the same bowl. Each person had to have *unused* “clean” water. Pouring a little water on a cupped hand that could be rubbed over the entire hands satisfied the requirement for washing with a minimal amount of clean water.

The Middle Eastern practice of the nineteenth century before the introduction of plumbing may be illustrative of what occurred in earlier times. Fairfield writes, “The method of washing the hands at the present day [c. 1890] as I found it in Syria and in Turkey is very suggestive of what there is every reason to believe was the custom in all Bible lands and Bible times. If you enter a house, the servant appears with a washbowl and pitcher. But you are never expected to pour water into the bowl and wash, as our habit is. The empty bowl is put in a place convenient for you to hold your hands over it. The attendant then pours the water on your hands, and you wash them with soap or without, and the dirty water falls into the bowl. It would shock every Oriental idea were you to dip your hands into the bowl unless you were without possible

¹⁶ John Murray, *Christian Baptism*. Murray quotes from *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Tohoroth* (London: The Soncino Press, 1948, 552; and, Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (New York: 1910), 2:11.

¹⁷ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 246. It is very interesting that some of the early copyists substituted the Greek word *rantisontai* meaning “they sprinkle” for *baptisontai* “they wash” in Mark 7:4 (see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1871, 75], 93. John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 18.). This substitution means that these early Alexandrian copyists likely regarded *baptizo* and *pantizo* as synonyms. They believed that the ritual purification was accomplished by sprinkling, not immersion.

means of doing otherwise. The water poured from the pitcher becomes ‘running water,’ and your hands are cleansed in that way.”¹⁸

Second, when the author of Hebrews defines baptisms or purifying he refers to sprinklings not immersions. As the author of Hebrews is demonstrating the superiority of the new covenant over the old he refers in chapter 9 to “various washings” (*diaphorais baptismois*, v. 10) of the old economy which have been superseded by Christ (see Heb. 9:1-16). The word used *baptismois* (literally, “baptisms”) is defined for us in the context (vs. 13, 19, 21) where the author describes at least three kinds of ritual cleansings from the Mosaic law.

In Hebrews 9:13 he combines two rituals. “For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh...” The first refers to the ritual on the Day of Atonement where the sacrificial blood is *sprinkled* on the mercy seat and before it (Leviticus 16:15); and, then on the altar seven times (16:19). He then refers to the purification ritual where a clean person takes ashes from a sacrificial burnt heifer, mixes them with water and *sprinkles* the mixture on the unclean person with hyssop. These old covenant rituals point to the atoning death of Christ which truly expiates sin, propitiates God and purifies hearts to serve the living God.

In Hebrews 9:19 he refers to another *sprinkling*: “Moses...took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people.” Here the author of Hebrews refers to Exodus 24:6-8 where Moses dipped wool and hyssop into the sacramental blood mixed with water and then *sprinkled* it upon the covenant people. They were ceremonially cleansed by *sprinkling*.

In Hebrews 9:21 he continues with his description of the Exodus 24 ritual, “Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry.” “[T]he fact that the people as well as the altar was to be sprinkled with blood indicates that even the keeping of the words and laws was to be based on the sacrificial blood.... The blood cleansed so that the ‘hearing’ and ‘doing’ became possible.”¹⁹

When the author of Hebrews wanted to contrast the ceremonial purifying of the Old Testament dispensation with the true spiritual purification of Christ’s blood which is one of the things that baptism signifies and seals, he pointed to purifying by sprinkling not immersion. *Baptismois* or baptisms, then, can be done by sprinkling. Murray writes, “Baptism symbolises, represents, and seals the application to us of the blood of Christ for the removal of the guilt of sin. The figure used in the New Testament for this application of the blood of Christ is that of sprinkling (Hebrews 9:13, 14, 22; 10:22; 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:2). It would be strange if the baptism with water which represents the sprinkling of the blood of Christ could not properly and most significantly be performed by sprinkling. It cannot be too frequently insisted that according to Scripture cleansing from the guilt of sin is adequately and effectively administered by the mode of sprinkling...”²⁰ If the Baptist position were true, then the different baptisms referred to in Hebrews 9:10 would all have to be baptisms or cleansings by immersion. But the exact opposite is the case. Baptist arguments are arbitrary and completely ignore the context or the examples set forth in chapter nine. Baptist writers are forced by their own presuppositions to ignore the clear teaching of Scripture.

Third, when God baptizes His people with the Holy Spirit He does so by *pouring* not by immersion. This point is established from the account of baptism with the Holy Spirit in the book

¹⁸ Edmond B. Fairfield, 107.

¹⁹ W. H. Grispen, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 239.

²⁰ John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 24.

of Acts as well as other texts which anticipate this baptism or look back to this baptism. Acts 2:1-4, 18 and 33 read, “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound *from heaven*, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.... *I will pour out My Spirit* in those days.... Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, *He poured out* this which you now see and hear.”

The Bible teaches that after Jesus’ redemptive work (His humiliation) He would be glorified and exalted. This exaltation included the resurrection, the ascension, the enthronement at the right hand of God the Father and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the church. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit is anticipated in the gospels where Jesus tells the disciples that “It is to your advantage that I go away.... If I depart, I will send Him [the Holy Spirit] to you” (Jn. 16:7; cf. 14:16-18). The language of anticipation indicates that the disciples will not be dipped in the Holy Spirit, but rather the Holy Spirit *will come upon* the apostles. Luke 24:49 reads, “Tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high [i.e., from heaven].” Acts 1:8 says, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” “The verb is *eperchomai* and conveys the notion of ‘coming down upon.’”²¹

After the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter two, the disciples looked back to that event as the set pattern for all subsequent Spirit baptisms. Therefore, when Luke, writing by divine inspiration, makes a historical comment as to why Peter and John need to lay hands on the Samaritans he writes, “For as yet He [the Holy Spirit] had *fallen upon* none of them. They had only been baptized [with water] in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16).” When Peter preached to the Gentiles, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word” (Ac. 10:44). Thus, the Jews who were with Peter were amazed, “because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also” (Ac. 10:45). Then the Jews said, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized [*baptisthevai*] who have received the Holy Spirit *just as we have*” (Ac. 10:47)? When Peter recounted these astonishing events to the disciples in Jerusalem he said, “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit *fell upon them* [the Gentiles], as upon us at the beginning” (Ac. 11:15). (Interestingly, the apostle Paul, writing many years later after the events at Pentecost, still referred to the “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit. “...He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom *He poured out on us* abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior” [Tit. 3:5-6]).

If the Baptists were correct that baptism was only by immersion then would not the historical account in the book of Acts be quite different? Instead of the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples (Ac. 8:16; 10:44; 11:15) or coming on them (Ac. 1:8; 19:6), would it not rather say that the disciples were falling into or coming upon the Holy Spirit of God? Would not Luke’s account say that the disciples were dipped or immersed into God’s presence instead of saying the Holy Spirit was poured out (Ac. 2:18, 33; 10:45)? The Baptist position explicitly contradicts Scripture. But, what of the Baptist contention that the 120 disciples were immersed by the Spirit in the upper room? This silly argument is refuted by the fact that it “was not the rushing might wind that filled the house – but the sound.”²² Further, even if the Holy Spirit did fill the room, the account plainly says that the mode was pouring from heaven. If the Baptist took his own

²¹ Ibid, 23.

²² Edmund B. Fairfield, 198.

argument seriously and not as a clever subterfuge, then would he not place the new Christian in an empty tub and then pour water into it until the recipient was immersed?

The disciples had absolutely no problem associating water baptism with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Peter said, "Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (Ac. 11:16; cf. Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8; Jn. 1:26). Thus we need to ask a few very pertinent questions: How would the New Testament apostles have understood the term *baptizo*? Would they have baptized with sprinkling/pouring or by immersion? The answer to this question is not hard to discern if we look at what the disciples would have examined to determine the answer. Note the following considerations and review.

(a) The apostles would surely have known about the old covenant promises and prophecies which spoke of forgiveness, regeneration and the baptism of the Holy Spirit by *pouring* or *sprinkling*. Proverbs 1:23, "Surely I will pour out my spirit on you." Joel 2:28, "I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh." Isaiah 32:15, "Until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high." Ezekiel 36:25-26, "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you." Isaiah 52:15, "So shall He sprinkle many nations."

(b) The disciples would have been familiar with the various cleansing, purifications or washings by *sprinkling* in the Mosaic law. There was the *sprinkling* of blood on the altar and the people (Ex. 24:6-8; 29:16; Lev. 1:5, 11; 3:2, 8, 13; 5:9; 7:2) around the altar; the *sprinkling* of blood and oil on Aaron and his sons (Ex. 29:21); the *sprinkling* of blood seven times before the LORD, in front of the veil of the sanctuary (Lev. 4:6, 17). There was the *sprinkling* of blood and water in the cleansing ritual regarding leprosy (Lev. 14:4-8; 51-57). There was the *sprinkling* of blood on the mercy seat and before it for atonement (Lev. 16:14, 15, 19). There was the special cleansing of the Levites by the *sprinkling* of water (Num. 8:7); the purification by *sprinkling* water mixed with the ashes of the heifer for the man who is unclean (Num. 19:9-21). Given all these passages one should not be surprised that the author of Hebrews chose the three *sprinkling* rituals as diverse baptisms (Heb. 9:13, 19, 21).

(c) The first Jewish believers probably knew of the example of bathing or purification by *pouring* or *sprinkling* in the Apocryphal sections of the Septuagint (e.g., Judith 12:5-9; Ecclesiasticus 34:25) where *baptizo* was used. They certainly knew about the Pharisaical practice of baptizing their hands by *pouring* water over them (Mk. 7:2-5; Lk. 11:38; Mt. 15:2ff.).

(d) The first disciples experienced the baptism with the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son *pouring* the Spirit out of heaven upon the church (Ac. 2:1-4, 18, 33; cf. 1:8; 10:44, 47; 11:15, 16; 19:6; cf. Lk. 24:49; Tit. 3:5-6).

Given the incredible amount of evidence from the Old Testament, the inter-testamental literature and the New Testament itself regarding pouring and sprinkling coupled with the fact that baptism signifies and seals forgiveness of sins, regeneration, purification and the baptism of the Holy Spirit all of which were symbolized or took place by sprinkling or pouring, it would be extremely unlikely (a virtual impossibility) that the disciples would baptize by immersion instead of pouring or sprinkling.

Fourth, there is circumstantial evidence that favors pouring or sprinkling over immersion. How, for example, were the first great multitudes of believers "immersed" in Jerusalem? On the day of Pentecost "about three thousand" people were baptized (Ac. 2:41) and only a few days later another five thousand were converted (Ac. 4:4). Although it may be possible that such large numbers were immersed, given the circumstances, it is very unlikely for a number of reasons.

First, Jerusalem and Israel was a very dry arid climate in which water was a precious commodity. “There is no natural body of water there or near there. ‘The Brook Kedron’ is ordinarily an almost dry water course.”²³ A trickle of water in a creek bed was unsuitable for immersion. Further, the ancient Jews did not have modern plumbing or running water in their homes as we do. The only suitable facilities in Jerusalem for immersion at that time would have been the reservoirs of pure water for drinking and cooking. The authorities and the population at large would have been outraged if three thousand dirty pilgrims were being immersed in their drinking water with their filthy clothes on. The converted Jews themselves, many of which were residents of Jerusalem, would not have polluted their own precious water source. It is possible that a rich believer volunteered the use of his bathtub. Some of the rich upper class people did have tubs and did have the funds to pay servants to transport water to their lavish homes for bathing (2 Sam. 11:2). Even if a rich believer invited the converts over to his home to be immersed in his tub: how was the water to be replenished? Clothes absorb a great deal of water and the disciples were not baptizing naked women; and, how did they have time to baptize so many people? If we allow two minutes per baptism it would take *one hundred hours* to baptize three thousand people. Even if all twelve apostles had bath tubs and were baptizing the new converts in different houses it still would have taken nearly eight and a half hours to baptize the multitudes. If baptism was performed by sprinkling, then a very large crowd could be baptized in a relatively short period of time.

Second, the three thousand converts were not carrying an extra change of clothes with them. If they were immersed then there would have been a lot of people walking around in soaking wet clothes, which would have been both uncomfortable and inconvenient. A sprinkling with water from a branch with hyssop would not have been a problem.

There are other examples that pose problems for the Baptist position. Erickson writes,

There are indications that the means used in New Testament times was not, could not have been, exclusively immersion. For example, would John have been physically capable of immersing all those who came to him? Did the Philippian jailer leave his post in the prison to go where there was sufficient water for immersion? Was water brought to Cornelius’s house in sufficient quantities for immersion? When Paul was baptized, did he leave the place where Ananias found him? These are questions which suggest that immersion may not have been practiced in every case.²⁴

Shedd writes, “In the account of the baptism of Cornelius and ‘all his house’ (Acts 10:2, the phraseology implies that the baptismal water was brought into the room. ‘Can any man forbid the water (*to udor*), that these should not be baptized?’ Acts 10:47. This phraseology would be unnatural, if the water in question were in a river, pond, or reservoir; but natural, if it were in a vessel. No one would ‘forbid’ the Hudson or Connecticut River. It is improbable, that within the precincts of the jail there was either a stream or reservoir of water sufficient for immersing, in the dead of the night, ‘the jailer and all his.’”²⁵ Although these examples are circumstantial; nevertheless, they support the strong, irrefutable evidence presented earlier.

²³ Ibid, 141.

²⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1095.

²⁵ William T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:584.

Other Baptist Objections

(1) One of the major Baptist objections to sprinkling is the idea that immersion perfectly represents union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Passages such as Romans 6:3-5 and Colossians 2:12 are appealed to as proof texts for such a view. There are a number of problems with such an interpretation.

First, it assumes that Paul is making some kind of statement on the mode of baptism when he is only discussing the implications of union with Christ for definitive sanctification and a new holy life. The apostle does not say anything about being buried in water or being baptized into water. Rather he affirms that we have been baptized into Christ's death, burial and resurrection.

Second, it ignores the parallel terms in the immediate context of the Romans 6 passage that cannot be adequately symbolized by immersion. The apostle not only says that believers have been "buried with Christ (v. 4) but also "crucified with Him" (v. 6) as well. It was during our Lord's vicarious suffering on the cross that the guilt of sin was expiated and the liability of punishment was removed. There is not a mode of baptism whether sprinkling, pouring or immersion that literally pictures the crucifixion. Thus, once again, Paul is not arguing for a mode that *literally* portrays a crucifixion and burial. Further, Jesus did not arise out of the dirt in the same manner a person comes up out of the water in immersion. The Messiah was placed in a stone tomb; that is, a cave structure carved into the side of a rocky cliff (Mt. 27:60; Mk. 15:46; Lk. 23:53; Jn. 19:41). One could even roll a stone up against the opening. Jesus walked out of the tomb. He did not come out of the top of it like someone coming up out of a hot tub or swimming pool. Obviously, Baptists are reading into Romans 6 what is simply not there.

Third, baptism is a sign of many things that are included in our union with Christ: the cleansing from sin, regeneration, definitive sanctification, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. As noted above, there are no modes of baptism that can adequately convey through symbolism every facet of Christ's redemptive work. Interestingly, circumcision, and its counterpart baptism, is most often associated with regeneration in Scripture which is the beginning point of the application of redemption to the sinner.

Fourth, the portions of Scripture that are related to mode clearly point to sprinkling or pouring (e.g. Ex. 24:6-8; 29:16, 21; 3:2, 8, 13; 5:9; 7:2; 16:14, 15, 19; Num. 8:7; 19:9-21; Pr. 1:23; Joel 2:28; Isa. 32:15; 52:15; Ez. 36:25-26; Ac. 1:8; 2:1-4, 18, 33; 10:44, 47; 11:15, 16; 19:6; Tit. 3:5-6; Heb. 9:13, 14, 22; 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:2; etc.). Therefore, one should not use a statement that is not even discussing mode to overturn clear passages of the Bible that are.

(2) Another common Baptist argument is based on prepositions associated with baptism. Baptists will argue that the Greek word *en* means *in* and thus point out that *in* water implies immersion. Matthew 3:11 reads: "I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance" (ASV). This argument is fallacious for a number of reasons.

First, Matthew uses the same preposition (*en*) with both water and the Holy Spirit. Luke omits the *en* when referring to water and has *en* with reference to Spirit baptism. If *en* must be translated *in* and *in* implies immersion, then the disciples in Acts 2 would have to be immersed in the Holy Spirit. But how did Christ baptize the disciples? As we noted earlier, He poured the Spirit out on them (Ac. 2:17, 33) and the Spirit fell on them (Ac. 10:44; 11:15). If *en* does not mean *in* or imply immersions with reference to the Spirit, then it does not necessarily imply immersion with reference to water.

Second, the preposition *en* does not always mean *in*. Fairfield writes, “The preposition *en* often means ‘with.’ It is so translated in our Common Version more than a hundred times. Take one verse as a sample to illustrate its use in expressing, as the grammar says, ‘the manner, means, or instrument.’ It is found in 1 Cor. 5:8: ‘Let us keep the feast not *with* old leaven, neither *with* the leaven of malice and wickedness, but *with* the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.’ Three times in this verse *en* is translated ‘with.’ No English scholar, I think, would translate it another way.”²⁶ Blass and Debrunner write, “In the genuinely instrumental sense the dative has been sharply curtailed in the NT by the use of *en*.... (1) The following take *en* besides the simple dative: (a) ‘with the sword’..., (b) ‘to season with something,’ (c) ‘burn with fire’..., (d) ‘baptize with,...’”²⁷

Third, in both Mark 1:8 and Luke 3:16 the word *en* does not even occur. Instead the word for water (*hydati*) is an instrumental dative which can only be translated *with water*. Given the fact that Mark 1:8 and Luke 3:16 are parallel passages with the Matthew 3:11 passage, the Matthew 3 verse 11 should also be translated “with water.” To do otherwise would violate standard hermeneutical principles as well as simple logic.

All of these proofs for “with” raise the following question. Would it make sense for a person to say, “I will immerse you *with* water?” Would not a better translation be “I will cleanse you or purify you with water.” The word baptize is suitable as long as we understand that baptize does not always refer to immersion but can also refer to cleansing by sprinkling or pouring. A comparison of the baptism with the Holy Spirit (which was by pouring) and the Greek grammar involved in these passages renders the Baptist argument null and void.

But (some may ask) doesn’t the fact that John the Baptist chose the Jordan river (Mt. 3:6; Mk. 1:5, 9) and Ainon near Salim because of the abundance of water in those places (Jn. 3:23) point in the direction of immersion? Furthermore, doesn’t Matthew even say that John was *in* the Jordan (Mt. 3:6) which implies immersion? No, not necessarily. Even if we ignore the abundant evidence presented thus far that supports pouring or sprinkling, these passages are not detailed or specific enough to support either position. For example, Murray notes that even if John baptized by sprinkling large quantities of water, an *isolated* location would still have been necessary because of the huge crowds of people that came to him. He writes,

We know only too well that in Palestine water supplies were jealously prized and guarded, and we know how friction sometimes developed over the use of water supplies. To say the least, it would have been prejudicial to John’s ministry for him to have baptised except where there was abundant water. Large multitudes came to John’s baptism. It would have been disrupting to a local community and an interference with their needs for large multitudes to congregate around limited water supplies. Apart from actual water used for baptism, it would have been interference amounting to impropriety to deprive people of ready access to the water supply requisite for their daily needs.

Again, apart from the consideration of the water used in baptism and apart from the impropriety of interference with the needs of a local community, it would be necessary to seek a place of much water in order to meet the needs of those who congregated. Oftentimes the people who came to John’s baptism came long distances. In many cases it is altogether likely that animals were used for conveyance. Those who came would therefore need water for their

²⁶ Edmund B. Fairfield, 123-124.

²⁷ F. Blas and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of The New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 198.

own use and for the use of the animals they may have brought. It is obvious that a place of much water would be indispensable.²⁸

But what about the fact that John was in the Jordan River? Why would he be in the river if he were not immersing the subjects of baptism? One cannot prove immersion from these statements because: (a) The prepositional phrase “in the Jordan” was a common manner of expressing location. To an ancient Jew “in” geographically can have the same meaning as “at.” (b) Even if John was standing in the river (Mark 1:9 has *eis* “into” not *en*), this information does not say anything about mode. If John was baptizing by sprinkling and thousands of people were coming to him to be baptized, then it would make perfect sense for John to stand in the water and have people come to him in the water. This procedure would not only save a great deal of time but it would avoid turning the bank of the river into a muddy quagmire. (c) If John baptized Jesus in the exact same manner as he did the multitudes, which is extremely likely, he probably did it by pouring or sprinkling which was God’s prior method of representing the anointing of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament the anointing of the high priest (Ex. 29:7; Ps. 133:2), and the kings (e.g., Saul, 1 Sam. 10:1; David, 1 Sam. 16:3; Jehu, 2 Kgs. 9:3) was by pouring oil over the head. The consecration of the high priest and his sons was by the sprinkling of the anointing oil and blood upon them and their clothes. At His baptism our Lord was anointed with the Spirit beyond measure (Jn. 3:34; Ac. 10:38). Which mode corresponds more with reality, pouring/sprinkling or immersion?

Another passage that Baptist apologists refer to is Acts 8:38-39 where it says that both Philip the evangelist and the eunuch (the subject of baptism) went down “into the water” (*eis to udor*) and then came up “out of the water” (*ek tou udatos*). It is argued that going down into the water and then coming up out of it sound just like the ritual of immersion. The problem with this common Baptist argument is: a) It has Philip immersing himself as well as the eunuch (“both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water.... They [i.e., both men] came up out of the water”) which is very unlikely and absurd. b) If Philip wanted to baptize the eunuch by pouring or sprinkling and didn’t happen to have a branch with hyssop lying around, the easiest way to accomplish this task was for both men to step into the water so Philip could cup some water in his hands and pour it or sprinkle it on the head of the eunuch.

But (some may ask), if baptism could be accomplished by sprinkling why didn’t the eunuch give Philip his water pouch so that Philip could sprinkle him immediately in the chariot. The problem with this objection is: a) It is an argument from silence. We do not even know if the eunuch had water available. b) Even if the eunuch did have a water pouch, it is unlikely that he would allow Philip to pour it over his head when traveling in the desert. The case of the Ethiopian eunuch simply does not contain enough information to establish mode. For the purposes of establishing divine warrant for a practice the only safe thing to do is to rely on the clearer passages of Scripture.

A study of the relevant material regarding *baptizo*, the methods of cleansing in the Old and New Testament (as well as the inter-testamental literature), the manner in which God anoints and baptizes His people as well as the historical examples in the book of Acts all support the Reformed position that baptism ought to be performed by pouring or sprinkling.

²⁸ John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 28.

