

THE BIBLICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM BY IMMERSION

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The Mennonite Brethren confession of faith begins, We believe that Christians should obey their Lord's command to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To qualify for baptism, one must repent of sin and trust Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord. *We practice water baptism of the believer by immersion* (italics mine). Baptism symbolizes death to sin and resurrection to the new life in Christ and the receipt of the Holy Spirit.

Obviously, immersion is not the only mode by which the church has baptized through the centuries. We will leave aside, however, the whole debate of infant baptism versus believer's baptism. But, even those communions which practice believer's baptism differ as to whether immersion, pouring, or sprinkling best represents the New Testament pattern. My aim is to show what biblical motifs and symbols inform the practice of baptism by immersion.

The verb, *baptidzo*, was widely used in the New Testament period, both in the pagan and Jewish worlds. The Jewish antecedents include three references in the Greek Old Testament which involve a ceremonial act of washing: 2 Kings 5:14 (Naaman), Judith 12:7 (Judith), and Ecclesiasticus 34:25, which contains a general reference to washing after contact with a corpse. The New Testament writers exploit these scattered references to great advantage.

The noun, *baptisma*, is not found in pre-New Testament literature. Perhaps the New Testament

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writers used this unusual term to distinguish the Christian rite from the Greek mystery cults and Jewish ceremonial washings.

John the Baptist's baptizing activity is pictured as inaugurating the new age of the gospel. Mark, particularly, points to this, as he includes John's work under the "beginning of the gospel" (1:1-8). John baptized those who were Jews by birth; his Jewish contemporaries applied it to proselytes. His baptism involved confession of sin. It was unrepeatable and was closely linked to That One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mk. 1:7,8) and would shield the baptized one from the fires of impending judgment (Lk. 3:7-9).

John probably baptized by immersion. The language suggests this: Jesus was baptized by John "into the Jordan" (Mk.1:9); there is a reference to "much water" (John 3:23), an unnecessary comment if some other mode were in vogue. Finally, Jesus is said to have "come up out of" the water (Mk. 1:10; Matt. 3:16).

The mode of John's baptism is important since it is by his hands that Jesus is baptized. In his baptism, Jesus identifies with the common people (Lk. 7:29,30) who come to John in their need and by this act approves John's ministry and baptism. Indeed, Jesus points to John's authority and work as precedent and parallel for his own authoritative actions (Mk. 11:27-33).

So crucial to an understanding of Jesus' mission is his baptism that he can categorize his whole life's work under the rubric 'baptism' (Mk. 11:28,39; Matt. 20:22,23; cf. Lk. 12:50).¹ In John Robinson's words,

Jesus' acceptance of baptism at the hands of John is . . . the beginning of that baptism of vicarious suffering which could only be completed in the Cross. . . . The baptism is the anticipation of the Cross, in which Jesus in Jordan fore-suffered all, and as such it gives to the Cross and all that lies between the two events its own character of a baptism.²

It appears that Jesus' working definition of baptism in this context involves the idea of immersion. The thought is that he will be overwhelmed by the angry waters of chaos swirling about him during his ministry on the Cross. To attribute a "pouring" or "dipping" nuance to the term would seem to weaken the intended effect of the saying. That is to say, Jesus would be fully immersed, albeit only momentarily, in the powers of sin and darkness. His subsequent resurrection would become a resurfacing to new life from the waters of the dark abyss.

Jesus' actual water baptism and the interpretation of his whole ministry under the figure of baptism become a model in the early church of what happens as believers are baptized. In the Acts of the Apostles, baptism is administered "in the name of Jesus Christ" (2:38; 10:48) or "into the name of the Lord Jesus" (8:16; 19:5). "Name" stands for or is identical with "person." One has, therefore, to do with an identification between the believer's baptism and the primal baptism, that is, Jesus' life's work, death and resurrection.³ It would follow that the mode by which Jesus was baptized would continue to be the normative mode in the early church. This, indeed, is the case, although it is notoriously difficult, in some cases, to determine precisely

which mode was employed.⁴ Acts 7:38,39, however, is a clear reference to immersion: Philip and the eunuch “went down into the water.” Afterwards, they “came up out of the water.” The Greek verbs represent the same technical terminology used to depict Jesus’ own baptism at the hands of John (see Matt. 3:16; Mk. 1:10).

There is little information as to the method of baptism used in the Pauline churches. There is, however, such a close relationship between the example of Jesus and the experience of the believer that it is difficult to distinguish the one (objective) Christ-event from the other (subjective) believer-event, as in Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “And such were some of you but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (I Cor. 6:11).⁵

The key Pauline baptismal text is Romans 6:3-5:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Here baptism and the ancillary motifs of death, burial, and resurrection in both their objective and subjective senses are welded together. The form of water baptism is not the primary issue here.⁶ Nevertheless, the whole point of the shared experience of the believer *assumes* the sort of literal descent into and ascent out of water represented by immersion. Only on this assumption can there be said to be a precise correspondence between Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection and that of the baptizand.

In short, one may say that the traditional ideas associated with baptisms and ceremonial washings in Judaism, namely, those of dedication, initiation, or purification, are most clearly symbolized in the New Testament if one assumes immersion as the usual method of baptizing.

This collection of ideas is at times closely linked, in Paul, with the “putting off” of old garments and the “putting on” of new clothes. In Galatians 3:27 he states, “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.” In some of the contexts of the “putting off” and “putting on” texts, there is a reference to a death to the old life and the beginning of a new life, as especially related to Christ’s death, all in the larger context of baptism:

In him you were also circumcised, in the *putting off* of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:11, 12).

REFERENCES

- 1 The fact that "cup" is used as a synonym for "baptism" in these references suggests an obvious association with Jesus' suffering mission. One recalls the instances in the Old Testament where "cup" describes Yahweh's eschatological judgment (e.g., Lam. 4:21; Isa. 51:17).
- 2 John A.T. Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 162.
- 3 Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1964), p.99; G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 100.
- 4 However, Martin (op.cit., p. 101) says bluntly: "The church's mode follows that of the Jewish tebilah at proselyte baptism, namely, immersion."
- 5 See also Col. 2:11-15; Eph. 2:25-27.
- 6 E.g., Marcus Barth, "Baptism" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), p. 87, says: "The use of the formula 'buried . . . with (Christ) by . . . baptism' . . . does not describe the form but the meaning of the rite, because Christ was not buried in water." The reason he proffers seems to the present writer to be at once both gratuitous and a half-truth. Jesus was, in fact, buried in water in a physical way in his baptism and in a metaphorical way throughout his ministry. The complementary truth is that Eph. 5:26 and Titus 3:5,6, with their references to "washing," may not be references to actual baptisms either. On this level, then, the immersion/pouring (or sprinkling) debate results in a stalemate.