

The Mode of Baptism

From Strong's systematic theology:

- “Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water, in token of his previous entrance into the communion of Christ's death and resurrection...”
- “John's baptism was essentially Christian baptism, although the full significance of it was not understood until after Jesus' death”
- “This is immersion, and immersion only”
 - First, from the meaning of the word “Baptizo”
 - Second, From the use of Baptizo with the preposition “in” and “into”
 - From figurative allusions: “The ark whose sides were immersed in water saved Noah...” “Three things were used in the ritual of Moses and Aaron: oil, blood and water. Oil was poured, blood was sprinkled, and water was used for complete ablution.
 - The other proofs are the use of the early church, and the use of the Greek Church. Although the practice of the early church is helpful and edifying, it is not infallible, and immaterial to this discussion.

These arguments are the ones primarily used by immersionists. The immersionist insists that the essence of Baptism is the symbol of union in the death and resurrection of Christ, which they get from Rom. 6:1-4 and Colossians 2:12. All other modes are not truly baptism, and are to be rejected. If one is not immersed (taken down under the water, and raised up again), one is not truly baptized and must be baptized again.

The arguments against sprinkling proceed from the view that the Reformed have merely succumbed to the view of the Roman Catholics, and have not purged out the whole lump. Therefore, I will look at scripture and scripture alone. Not lexicons, not the practice of the early church, and not the writings of Medieval Jewish philosophers, but scripture itself. Scripture itself gives us the proper mode of baptism, and that mode is sprinkling.

Answer:

1. Christian baptism signifies and seals union with Christ by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit – this includes his death and resurrection, but so much more.
 - a. If John's baptism was essentially Christian baptism (which we all confess), and if Christian baptism is only and always a sign of the union with the death and resurrection of Christ, then it is not possible for John's disciples to have been baptized at all
 - i. Jesus' death and resurrection were “mysteries” until revealed by the Spirit. Therefore their baptism would have been a baptism in ignorance. This, a Baptist does not allow.
 - ii. The Pharisees statement “Why are you baptizing if you are not the Christ?” is then meaningless. They were expecting Christ to baptize, but had no concept of a suffering saviour.
 - iii. John's answer that he was baptizing with water to point to the one who would baptize with the Holy Ghost would then be meaningless.
 - b. Throughout scripture, which we have seen in the previous studies, baptism was a sign of the blood of Christ and the Holy Ghost cleansing us from all sin.
 - i. NEVER is a believer immersed in the Holy Ghost, or the blood of Christ. The Holy Ghost ALWAYS descends, or is poured out, and the blood is always sprinkled.
 - ii. Ezek. 36 connects the purification ceremony of the Old Testament (sprinkling) with the work of the Holy Ghost cleansing us from sin in the new.
 - c. This work of the Holy Spirit and the cleansing of the blood of Christ was shown in a picture in the purification ritual of the Old Testament. Although Strong quotes several sources (extra-biblical) that insist that immersion was the ONLY way to properly do the ceremony, this is not the biblical view. The ritual in the Bible ALWAYS was to immerse the hyssop and sprinkle on that which was to be symbolically purified. (Numbers 8:7; Numbers 19)

2. As to the point that the word baptizo only means to immerse, this cannot be shown from scripture.
 - a. There would have been complete mystification from John, the people, and the Jews if he was immersing. There is no biblical example of anyone being immersed, and no instructions to immerse. There are a few extra-biblical references, but since they are not scripture, they are not authoritative.
 - b. When John explained that he was only “baptizing with water” but one after would baptize with the Holy Ghost, this was immediately understood by those who heard him. If it was not understood, it would have been a pointless sign. Nowhere does a ceremony of immersion speak of the coming of the Holy Ghost.
 - c. Nowhere does immersion speak of any promise of God, but Peter refers to a promise in Acts 2:38
 - d. Romans 6:1-4 – there is no mention of water. Paul is not speaking of the rite, but of that which the rite promised – that is, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, uniting us to Christ. If we are truly Christians, then we have been united to Christ and cleansed from our sins by the Holy Spirit, as was signified in our baptism. Therefore, we have buried our sinful nature in his burial, and have been raised with him unto newness of life. This is the same point in Colossians 2:12
 - e. Hebrews 9:10 speaks of various “baptisms”. If this means immersions, you are faced with an impossible task of finding various immersions which were figures of the work of Christ. If, however, the word means “ritual purification by sprinkling or pouring”, there are many of those types in the OT
 - f. In Mark 7:4, mark speaks of the practice of ritual purification of the Pharisees that went far beyond the requirements of the law. Nowhere in the Old Testament was the immersion of vessels and tables (couches) commanded. It is impossible to believe that the Pharisees, who were fanatical in outward observance of the law, would have practiced something that was obviously a departure from outward observance (compare Matt. 23:23)

If, however, the word “baptize” meant a ritual purification by the sprinkling of clean water, pointing to the inward cleansing of the Holy Ghost, these difficult passages are immediately clear.

- g. John 3:23 – John switches location to Aenon, because there was “much water” there. The Greek “water” is in the plural, which makes the translation “many waters”. This also fits the name of the place, Aenon (springs). There is no indication of any body of water larger than the Jordan for immersing, but if there were many different springs, it would be more suited to the figure of cleansing if the water was flowing and clean, as the law required.
 - h. It is highly unlikely that the Romans and the rulers of the Jews would have tolerated 3000 people immersing into their water supply as a ritual of a religion that they had condemned.
 - i. Ananias told Paul to stand up to be baptized.
3. As to the word “into” (as in, they went down into the water -Acts 8:38), if ‘into’ here only means complete immersion in the water, then the text requires that Philip AND the eunuch both go under the water.
 - a. As to the word “out of” referring to the baptism of Jesus, it does not indicate total immersion. It merely means that he was in the water – ankle deep, knee deep – we don’t know because it ISN’T IMPORTANT and came out of it again.

To summarize:

1. The essence of baptism is not the figure of being buried and risen with Christ, but cleansing from sin by the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the essential thing is the application of clean water
2. The word “baptize”, can mean to immerse, but in the bible there is not one clear indication that this is what actually took place. On the contrary, since John testified that he was baptizing to symbolize the remission of sins and the cleansing and purifying work of the Spirit, the sprinkling of clean water WAS clearly the symbol.
3. 1 John 5:7, the spirit, the water and the blood all testify the same truth, that we are delivered from the bands of death and united into Christ, thereby overcoming the world.