

Mode of Baptism

Go ye therefore,
and teach all
nations, baptizing
them in the name

of the Father, and
of the Son, and of
the Holy Ghost.
Matthew 28:19

How well do you know what you believe and why about the mode of baptism?

Mode of Baptism

In recent years we have heard little teaching from church leaders on this subject. As a result, we are gradually being influenced by strong (although wrong) teaching regarding immersion as the Scriptural method. Some even assume without historical evidence, Scriptural or otherwise, that immersion is the original or primitive mode of baptism.

We must face seriously and honestly the teaching of the Scriptures with reference to both water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism. At the time of Jesus' ascension His command was, "Go ye therefore, and teach [make disciples of] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). He also said just before ascending, "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1:5).

Water baptism is symbolic of Holy Spirit baptism. It is an outward rite or ceremony of an inward work of grace already accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Peter said it is "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God" (1 Peter 3:21). One is qualified for water baptism

who has faith in Jesus Christ for salvation and whose spiritual experience is one of identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Paul speaks of Holy Spirit baptism in Romans 6, not of water baptism.

To be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ is to declare our loyalty to Him. We take His name (Christian) upon us and become His disciples. He is our Teacher, our Lord, and Master. Paul speaks of those who were disciples, but who no longer “hold [fast to] the Head”—Christ is no longer Lord in their lives. (Colossians 2:19).

Both Old and New Testaments speak of the baptism of the Spirit as a pouring out of the Spirit upon the believer. God said through the Prophet Joel, “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh.” Peter on the Day of Pentecost quoted Joel and said, “This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel . . . I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh.” Luke, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote concerning the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius, “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost **fell on** all them which heard the word . . . **on** the Gentiles also was **poured out** the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 10:44, 45). The symbolism of Acts 2 was that of “tongues like as of fire” on the head of each one. The Holy Spirit came upon them; they were not immersed in

the Spirit. The Holy Spirit clothed Himself with the disciples and they became His dwelling place.

Those who insist the Greek word must be translated as baptized *into* the Holy Spirit instead of *with* the Holy Spirit, find themselves in a ridiculous and ludicrous position. That preposition could never be consistently translated *into*. It is reasonably and correctly translated many other ways in the New Testament. In the case of Philip and the eunuch, they both went down *to* the water and both came up *from* the water. The word translated *out of* in Acts 8:39 is translated *from* 186 times in the New Testament.

The New Testament was not written in some Holy Ghost language, but in the common (Koine) Greek of that time. Jesus used words with their common meaning. He calls the outpouring of the Holy Spirit a baptism (Acts 1:5). In Mark Chapter 7 He refers to the Jewish ceremonial cleansings as baptisms (translated "washing" in KJV). The ceremonial cleansings were sprinklings. Tables were not immersed (Mark 7:4). In the case of the hands, water was poured from an earthen vessel upon the hands. The manner of purifying was from waterpots, not tanks or pools (John 2:6).

Peter, after preaching to Cornelius and seeing the Holy Spirit poured out on the Gentiles,

said, "Can any man forbid water?" for baptism. The expression naturally suggests bringing a small quantity of water and would imply baptism by pouring or sprinkling.

Paul refers to Israel's experience passing through the Red Sea and says, they were "all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:2). Both Exodus and the Psalms describe the event as the waters being divided and standing as an heap on either side while Israel passed through on dry ground (Exodus 14:29). The baptism was not by immersion, but possibly by pouring or sprinkling (Psalm 77:17). The Egyptians were immersed (Exodus 14:27, 28; Psalm 106:11), but Israel was not.

There are four Greek words which mean immersion, and the Holy Spirit did not use one of them, even once. If God intended baptism to be by immersion, He could easily have indicated it by the use of one of those terms. He did not!

When Brother A. D. Wenger, a former Bible school president, visited the catacombs of Rome, he was shown the oldest known representation of Jesus' baptism. The pictorial scene indicated pouring rather than immersion. When the guide was asked for a representation of baptism by immersion, he said, "There is none."

One theologian commenting on mode of baptism says, "Neither John's baptism nor any other baptism mentioned in the New Testament was administered by immersion. All the evidence is to the contrary, often overwhelmingly so." Another says, "There is no evidence whatever that anyone was ever, in Bible times, put under water to be baptized." All the pictorial and archeological evidence available concerning mode of baptism was compiled by Clement F. Rogers, M.A., in *Baptism and Christian Archeology*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1903. He began his investigation with the belief that pouring was at least allowed at times. He ended it with the conviction that no other method was adopted until early middle ages. The most ancient portrayals of baptism indicate pouring.

A few years ago the writer had the privilege of sharing in a baptism for a babe in Christ who was on her deathbed in the hospital. Her pastor, an immersionist, was not able to grant her request for baptism, but had grace enough to ask us to administer the rite for him. Three days later the woman passed to her reward with peace of mind and with faith in Jesus.

Let us not misinterpret the Word in Romans six and make it a symbol of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. It is symbolic of the Holy Spirit's work in us. For Christ

it was a physical death, burial, and resurrection. For us it is the death and putting away (burial) of the sinful nature and a spiritual rising, a new nature imparted, resulting in a new life. Paul is speaking of that which only the Holy Spirit can do in us. Only the baptism with the Holy Spirit can bring us into a right relation with God through Jesus Christ. Water baptism by pouring symbolizes this regenerative outpouring of the Holy Spirit on penitent believers.

—David E. Showalter