

## **“The Mode of Baptism”**

*Based on lectures delivered by theologian Robert L. Reymond on the mode of baptism at Knox Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.<sup>1</sup>*

How is water baptism to be performed? What is the proper mode of baptism?

1. Immersion followed by emersion (going completely down under the water and rising up from the water, as a symbol of burial and resurrection), or
2. Sprinkling and/or pouring of water

The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 28, paragraph 3, states that “dipping of the person into the water is not necessary, but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.”

A key contention held by Baptists is that the New Testament word translated “baptize” (Gk. βαπτίζω, baptizo) necessarily means “to immerse.” However, there are several New Testament contexts where the word *baptizo* must mean simply “to wash,” with no specific mode of washing indicated.

In Luke 11:38, we read that a certain Pharisee, “was surprised that He [Jesus] had not first ceremonially washed [literally “was not baptized”] before the meal.” Did this Pharisee expect Jesus to be immersed in water before every meal? Surely his surprise was provoked by Jesus not ritually washing His hands before eating, as was the criticism levied against Jesus by the Pharisees and scribes in Matthew 15:2 and Mark 7:3-4. It is most likely that this “baptism” was conducted by the pouring of water over their hands to wash them (cf. 2 Kings 3:11; Luke 7:44).

2 Kings 3:11 But Jehoshaphat said, “*Is there* no prophet of the LORD here, that we may inquire of the LORD by him?” So one of the servants of the king of Israel answered and said, “Elisha the son of Shaphat *is* here, who poured water on the hands of Elijah.”

Luke 7:44 Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped *them* with the hair of her head.

In Mark 7:3-4, we read, “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands [literally “baptize themselves”] in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash [baptize]. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing [baptizing] of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.” Does *baptizo* here mean that the Pharisees and all the Jews *immersed* themselves every time they returned home from the marketplace? Verse 4 refers to the ceremonial washing of “cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.” If the couches were sprinkled, it would be quite easy to baptize the “couches” or “beds,” but it would be quite difficult to immerse couches or beds in water.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more complete study on this topic, please consult Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 930-935.

In John 3:23, we read that “John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water [or “many springs of water”] there. And they came and were baptized.” This reference to *much water* does not necessarily have anything to do with the mode of baptism. In any large gathering of people, there would be a need of much water in order for the people to have sufficient water to drink for their sustenance. The streams of water in Israel which are formed from springs are usually relatively shallow; there is no reason to believe that this statement has anything to do with immersion under water.

Many Baptists will argue that the expressions “went down into the water” and “came up out of the water” used in connection with Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:9, 10) and that of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:36-39) indicate that immersion followed by emersion was the mode of baptism practiced in these instances. However, a careful reading of the text in both of these cases shows that the act of baptism was a separate act that *followed* the going down into and *preceded* the coming up out of the water.

Matthew 3:16 “When He had been baptized,  
Jesus came up immediately from the water.”

Mark 1:9-10 *that* Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan.  
And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting  
and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove.

Acts 8:38 “So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water,  
and he baptized him.”  
39 Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more;  
and he went on his way rejoicing.

These expressions do not allow us to definitely determine the mode of the baptismal act itself which occurred between the acts of going down and coming up.

Because the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost is described in terms of a “pouring out” (Acts 2:17-18, 33), because both John the Baptist (Matt. 3:11) and Jesus (Acts 1:5) call the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost a “baptizing” work by Jesus, and because both John and Jesus compare John the Baptist’s baptismal activity with Jesus’ baptismal activity, there is strong evidence that the mode of John’s earlier baptismal activity, like Jesus’, was by affusion or sprinkling.

We should note that some Pharisees asked John the Baptist, after he had denied that he was the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet, “Why then do you baptize?” (John 1:25). Where did these Pharisees get the notion that the Messiah would baptize? Without a translation such as “sprinkle” in Isaiah 52:15, there is no other prophecy in the Old Testament that expressly states this. This then suggests that John’s mode of baptizing was by sprinkling, because it was his activity that provoked the Pharisees’ question in the first place. They saw him sprinkling, and knowing of the prophecy in Isaiah 52:15, they asked him whether he was the Messiah.

The New Testament never describes the act of baptism itself as going down into or coming up out of the water. It is a distinct possibility that what made the Ethiopian eunuch even think of and request baptism in the first place, reading Isaiah 53:7-8 as he had been doing, was his having read just moments before the words of Isaiah 52:15: "So will [my Servant] sprinkle [that is, cleanse] many nations." He also may have been familiar with Ezekiel 36:25: "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean." The preponderance of evidence therefore suggests that the eunuch's baptism was accomplished by sprinkling. Finally, let us consider that the act of going down into the water, to the knees or thighs, would have been an appropriate procedure for a baptism by sprinkling or by pouring, making it much easier for the baptizer to raise the water from the water's surface to the top of the baptized person's head.

What about Saul (the apostle Paul), Cornelius, and the Philippian jailer? Were they baptized by immersion?

The baptism of Saul, the baptism of the household of Cornelius, and the baptism of the household of the Philippian jailer were each carried out within a home (Acts 9:11; 10:25; 16:32), and in the last case sometime after midnight but before dawn (Acts 16:33, 35). Thus, it is virtually certain that these baptisms would not have been by immersion, since few homes in those times would have had facilities for such an act (and again in the last case Paul would have hardly taken the jailer's household to a river after midnight). It is highly probable that all of these baptisms were performed by sprinkling.

Furthermore, the author of Hebrews characterizes all of the ceremonial washings of the Old Testament as baptisms or "ceremonial washings" (Heb. 9:10). The sprinkling of those who were ceremonially unclean with the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer (9:13), Moses' sprinkling of the scroll and all the people with the blood of calves mixed with water and scarlet wool (9:19), and his sprinkling of the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies with blood (9:21)—all these sprinklings were baptisms. Combined, the approximately sixty references to various sprinklings in the Old Testament, according to the author of Hebrews, may all be described as "baptisms" (βαπτισμοίς, Hebrews 9:10)!

The writer to the Hebrews and the apostle Peter both speak of Christians as being "sprinkled" with Christ's blood:

Hebrews 10:22: "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts *sprinkled* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

Hebrews 12:24: "[You have come] to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of *sprinkling* that speaks better things than *that of* Abel."

1 Peter 1:2: "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and *sprinkling* of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied."

The author to the Hebrews clearly regarded the Christian's "sprinkling" with Christ's blood—the New Testament fulfillment of the Old Testament typical sacrifice—as a spiritual "baptism" as well. And just as surely, "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” (Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 24).

Christ’s baptismal work (cf. Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 2:33; 1 Cor. 12:13), by which He baptizes the elect by or with His Spirit, is invariably described in terms of the Spirit “coming upon” (Acts 1:8; 19:6), being “poured out upon” (Acts 2:17, 33), or “falling upon” (Acts 10:44; 11:15). Note also Romans 5:5: “God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” What work does the outward ordinance of baptism signify and seal if not the Savior’s spiritual baptismal work? After all, no other saving work is termed “baptism” in the New Testament epistles. Therefore, if the ordinance of baptism is to signify Christ’s baptismal work, which is uniformly described in terms of affusion, then it follows that the ordinance should reflect the affusionary pattern of Christ’s baptismal work.

### Conclusion

*There is not a single recorded instance of a baptism in the entire New Testament where immersion followed by emersion is the mode of baptism.*

The Baptist practice of baptism by immersion is simply based on faulty exegesis of Scripture. The ordinance should not be represented as signifying Christ’s burial and resurrection (aspects of the *accomplished* phase of His saving work, which the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper memorializes) but rather His baptismal work (the *applicational* phase of His saving work).

In conclusion, the Westminster Confession of Faith is correct, when it states that “dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is *rightly* administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.”

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### Additional Scriptural Evidence for Sprinkling as the Mode of Water Baptism

**1 Corinthians 10:1-2:** “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”

We learn from the apostle Paul that “baptism” is not something that just appeared with John the Baptist and later Jesus. It has an Old Testament history. According to the New Testament, the Israelites were “baptized into Moses” in the cloud that accompanied the tabernacle by day and in the sea, as they crossed the Red Sea on dry ground.

What was the mode of this old covenant “baptism”? The answer must be a sprinkling of water. The children of Israel passed on dry ground through the midst of the sea (Exod. 14:16), while the Egyptians were drowned under the water.

Exodus 14:21-22: “Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go *back* by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea into dry *land*, and the waters were divided. So the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry *ground*, and the waters *were* a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.”

This baptism must have been some sort of mist or sprinkling of water.

Likewise, the cloud that accompanied the Israelites (Exodus 13:21) would have produced a sprinkling or pouring of rain but definitely not a flood or immersion.

Thus, the New Testament explicitly defines water baptism as by sprinkling.

**1 Peter 3:20-21:** “who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while *the* ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us -- baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

The apostle Peter compares the redemption of Noah and his family on the ark to a “baptism” in water. How were they baptized? Not by immersion. The entire lost world was drowned under the water. But Noah and his family were safely in the ark, only sprinkled or sprayed by a mist from the sea.

Again, the New Testament tells us that the water baptism of God’s people is by sprinkling.

Isaiah 52:15: “So shall He sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him; For what had not been told them they shall see, And what they had not heard they shall consider.

As Dr. Reymond noted, the Ethiopian eunuch had been reading Isaiah 53 when he asked Philip to explain the meaning to him.

Acts 8:35-38: “Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. 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?” Then Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.”

Dr. Reymond said, “It is a distinct possibility that what made the Ethiopian eunuch even think of and request baptism in the first place, reading Isaiah 53:7-8 as he had been doing, was his having read just moments before the words of **Isaiah 52:15**: “So will [my Servant] sprinkle [that is, cleanse] many nations.” He also may have been familiar with **Ezekiel 36:25**: “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean.”

So here we have a New Testament baptism, which it would appear was performed by sprinkling. And why not sprinkling?

The New Testament book of Hebrews refers to various “washings” (Gk. βαπτισμοῖς, baptismois—baptisms!, Hebrews 9:10). In some of these “baptisms,” Moses would sprinkle blood to cleanse and purify. And Moses even sprinkled the cleansing blood on the people. So when Jesus commanded a baptism with pure water, is it not to be sprinkled upon His people?

**Hebrews 9:19-22:** "For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This *is* the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you." Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission."

Water baptism is a new covenant sacrament, but it has old covenant roots. New covenant baptism is the "circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:11) or Christian circumcision.

When we consider the meaning of the word "baptism," based on the usage in the New Testament, we are forced to conclude that water baptism should be performed by the sprinkling of pure water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.