



Baptism: Immersion Only?

Although Latin-rite Catholics are usually baptized by infusion (pouring), they know that immersion (dunking) is a valid way to baptize. Fundamentalists, however, regard only baptism by immersion as true baptism, concluding that most Catholics are not validly baptized at all.

Although the New Testament contains no explicit instructions on how physically to administer the water of baptism, Fundamentalists argue that the Greek word *baptizo* found in the New Testament means "to immerse." They also maintain that only immersion reflects the symbolic significance of being "buried" and "raised" with Christ (see Romans 6:3-4).

It is true that *baptizo* often means immersion. For example, the Greek version of the Old Testament tells us that Naaman, at Elisha's direction, "went down and *dipped himself* [the Greek word here is *baptizo*] seven times in the Jordan" (2 Kgs. 5:14, *Septuagint*, emphasis added). But immersion is not the only meaning of *baptizo*. Sometimes it just means washing up. Thus Luke 11:38 reports that, when Jesus ate at a Pharisee's house, "[t]he Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash [*baptizo*] before dinner." They did not practice immersion before dinner, but, according to Mark, the Pharisees "do not eat unless they wash [*nipto*] their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they *wash themselves* [*baptizo*]" (Mark 7:3-4a, emphasis added). So *baptizo* can mean cleansing or ritual washing as well as immersion.

A similar range of meanings can be seen when *baptizo* is used metaphorically. Sometimes a figurative "baptism" is a sort of "immersion"; but not always. For example, speaking of his future suffering and death, Jesus said, "I have a baptism [*baptisma*] to be baptized [*baptizo*] with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50) This might suggest that Christ would be "immersed" in suffering. On the other hand, consider the case of being "baptized with the Holy Spirit."

In Acts 1:4-5 Jesus charged his disciples "not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, 'you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" Did this mean they would be "immersed" in the Spirit? No: three times Acts 2 states that the Holy Spirit was *poured out* on them when Pentecost came (2:17, 18, 33, emphasis added). Later Peter referred to the Spirit *falling* upon them, and also on others after Pentecost, explicitly identifying these events with the promise of being "baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:15-17). These passages demonstrate that the meaning of *baptizo* is broad enough to include "pouring."

Christian Baptism

The Fundamentalist contention that *baptizo* always means immersion is an oversimplification. This is especially true because in Christian usage the word had a highly particular meaning distinct from the term's ordinary, everyday usage.

The same principle can be seen with other special Christian terms, such as "Trinity" and "*agape*" (divine love), that were originally ordinary Greek words with no special religious significance. The earliest evidence of anyone referring to God as a "Trinity" is a letter by Theophilus of Antioch (*Ad Autolyicum* [A.D. 181]). Before the Christian usage, a "trinity" (*triad* in Greek) was simply any group of three things.

However, as Christians made theological use of the term, it quickly gained a new, technical sense, referring specifically to the three persons of the Godhead. When Christians professed that God is a "Triad," they did not mean a group of three gods, but one God in three persons. Here, an everyday word was being used in a special, theological sense.

The same is true of *agape*, originally a general term for any sort of "love" very much like the English word. But it quickly became used in Christian circles as the name of a common fellowship (love) meal among Christians (cf. Jude 12).

In the same way, *baptizo* acquired a specialized Christian usage distinct from its original meaning. In fact, it already had a complex history of specifically religious usages even before Christians adopted it. Long before Jesus' day, Gentile converts to Judaism were "baptized" as well as circumcised. Then John the Baptist performed a "baptism of repentance" for Jews as a dramatic prophetic gesture indicating that they were as much in need of conversion as pagans. Through these usages *baptizo* acquired associations of initiation, conversion, and repentance. Given this history, it was natural for Jesus and his followers to use the same word for Christian baptism, though it was not identical either to the Jewish baptism or to that of John. But it is completely misguided to try to determine the meaning of the word in its Christian sense merely on the basis of ordinary secular usage. It would be like thinking that the doctrine of the Trinity is polytheism or that the New Testament exhortation to "love one another" means only to be fond of each other. To understand what Christian baptism entailed, we must examine not what the word meant in other contexts, but what it meant and how it was practiced *in a Christian context*.

Inner and Outer Baptism

One important aspect of Christian baptism in the New Testament is the clear relationship between being baptized with water and being "baptized with the Holy Spirit", or "born again." This tract is primarily concerned with the *mode* of baptism, not its *effects* [Footnote: For more on the relationship between baptism and rebirth, see John 3:5; Acts 2:38, 19:2–3, 22:16; Romans 6:3–4; Colossians 2:11–12; Titus 3:5; and 1 Peter 3:21; and also the Catholic Answers tract *Baptismal Grace*.]; but even non-Catholic Christians must admit that the New Testament clearly associates water baptism with Spirit baptism and rebirth (even if they do not interpret this relationship as cause and effect).

Right from the beginning, as soon as the Holy Spirit was given on Pentecost, water and Spirit went hand in hand: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

In Acts 10:44, the first Gentiles to whom Peter preached received the Holy Spirit even before their water baptism. This is always possible, for God is free to operate outside the sacraments as well as within them. In this case it was fitting for the Spirit to be given before baptism, in order to show God's acceptance of believing Gentiles. Even under these circumstances, however, the connection to water baptism is still evident from Peter's response: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47).

Still later in Acts, when Paul found people who did not have the Spirit, he immediately questioned whether they had received Christian water baptism. Upon learning that they had not, he baptized them and laid hands on them, and they received the Spirit (Acts 19:1–6).

These passages illustrate the connection between water and Spirit first made by Jesus himself: "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Earlier we saw that the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" was depicted as "pouring." But these passages show that the "baptism" or "pouring" of the Spirit is itself closely related to water baptism.

This provides some balance to the Fundamentalist argument that only baptism by immersion adequately symbolizes death and resurrection with Jesus. It is true that immersion *best* represents death and resurrection, bringing out more fully the meaning of the sacrament than pouring or sprinkling (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1239). (Immersion is actually the usual mode of baptizing in the Catholic Church's Eastern rites.) On the other hand, *pouring* best represents the *infusion* of the Holy Spirit also associated with water baptism. And all three modes adequately suggest the sense of cleansing signified by baptism. No one mode has exclusive symbolical validity over the others.

Physical Difficulties

After Peter's first sermon, three thousand people were baptized in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41). Archaeologists have demonstrated there was no sufficient water supply for so many to have been immersed. Even if there had been, the natives of Jerusalem would scarcely have let their city's water supply be polluted by three thousand unwashed bodies plunging into it. These people must have been baptized by pouring or sprinkling.

Even today practical difficulties can render immersion nearly or entirely impossible for some individuals: for example, people with certain medical conditions—the bedridden; quadriplegics; individuals with tracheotomies (an opening into the airway in the throat) or in negative pressure ventilators (iron lungs). Again, those who have recently undergone certain procedures (such as open-heart surgery) cannot be immersed, and may not wish to defer baptism until their recovery (for example, if they are to undergo further procedures).

Other difficulties arise in certain environments. For example, immersion may be nearly or entirely impossible for desert nomads or Eskimos. Or consider those in prison—not in America, where religious freedom gives prisoners the right to be immersed if they desire—but in a more hostile setting, such as a Muslim regime, where baptisms must be done in secret, without adequate water for immersion.

What are we to do in these and similar cases? Shall we deny people the sacrament because immersion is impractical or impossible for them? Ironically, the Fundamentalist, who acknowledges that baptism is commanded but thinks it isn't essential for salvation, may make it impossible for many people to be baptized at all in obedience to God's command. The Catholic, who believes baptism confers grace and is normatively necessary for salvation, maintains that God wouldn't require a form of baptism that, for some people, is impossible.

Baptism in the Early Church

That the early Church permitted pouring instead of immersion is demonstrated by the *Didache*, a Syrian liturgical manual that was widely circulated among the churches in the first few centuries of Christianity, perhaps the earliest Christian writing outside the New Testament.

The *Didache* was written around A.D. 70 and, though not inspired, is a strong witness to the sacramental practice of Christians in the apostolic age. In its seventh chapter, the *Didache* reads, "Concerning baptism, baptize in this manner: Having said all these things beforehand, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water [that is, in running water, as in a river]. If there is no living water, baptize in other water; and, if you are not able to use cold water, use warm. If you have neither, pour water three times upon the head in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." These instructions were composed either while some of the apostles and disciples were still alive or during the next generation of Christians, and they represent an already established custom.

The testimony of the *Didache* is seconded by other early Christian writings. Hippolytus of Rome said, "If water is scarce, whether as a constant condition or on occasion, then use whatever water is available" (*The Apostolic Tradition*, 21 [A.D. 215]). Pope Cornelius I wrote that as Novatian was about to die, "he received baptism in the bed where he lay, by pouring" (*Letter to Fabius of Antioch* [A.D. 251]; cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6:4311).

Cyprian advised that no one should be "disturbed because the sick are poured upon or sprinkled when they receive the Lord's grace" (*Letter to a Certain Magnus* 69:12 [A.D. 255]). Tertullian described baptism by saying that it is done "with so great simplicity, without pomp, without any considerable novelty of preparation, and finally, without cost, a man is baptized in water, and amid the utterance of some few words, is sprinkled, and then rises again, not much (or not at all) the cleaner" (*On Baptism*, 2 [A.D. 203]). Obviously, Tertullian did not consider baptism by immersion the only valid form, since he says one is only sprinkled and thus comes up from the water "not much (or not at all) the cleaner."

Ancient Christian Mosaics Show Pouring

Then there is the artistic evidence. Much of the earliest Christian artwork depicts baptism—but not baptism by immersion! If the recipient of the sacrament is in a river, he is shown standing in the river while water is poured over his head from a cup or shell. Tile mosaics in ancient churches and paintings in the catacombs depict baptism by pouring. Baptisteries in early cemeteries are clear witnesses to baptisms by infusion. The entire record of the early Church—as shown in the New Testament, in other writings, and in monumental evidence—indicates the mode of baptism was not restricted to immersion.

Other archaeological evidence confirms the same thing. An early Christian baptistery was found in a church in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, yet this baptistery, which dates from the second century, was too small and narrow in which to immerse a person.

...from Catholic Answers

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+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, August 10, 2004