

# *The Mode of Baptism*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

### Personal Background

Both as a Southern Baptist and as a member of the Stone-Campbell Churches of Christ, I had been taught that the *only* acceptable mode for Baptism is *immersion* (*i.e.* total *submersion*). In fact, I was under the impression that those who baptized by other modes (*i.e.* by pouring or by sprinkling) *knew* that the Bible did not support their position but loved their own traditions so much that they preferred them to the Word of God. It was not until I began to study the Catholic faith that I learned differently.

### Importance of the Topic

The question of the mode of Baptism is an important one because Baptism is the door through which we pass in order to enter the Christian life. It is *the* Sacrament of Initiation into the new life in Christ. By faith we access God's grace in the waters of Baptism with the result being the washing away of all sin (both personal and original) and our new birth in Christ.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, any question concerning the proper way of administering the sacrament of Baptism is an important one. If, for example, Baptism *must* be administered by immersion in order to be valid, anyone baptized by pouring is under the delusion that they are a Christian when, in fact, they are not. Hence, again, the topic of the mode of Baptism is an important one.

### The Nature of the Controversy

**The controversy revolves, in large part, around the definition of the Greek word *baptizo* (the word from which the English word *baptism* is derived).** Therefore, the following *brief* study is intended to highlight some of the philological, Scriptural and historical facts pertinent to the word *baptizo* as it is used in reference to the Sacrament of Baptism and, thereby, demonstrate that Baptism by modes *other* than complete submersion have been acceptable from the earliest days of the Church. The scope of this

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<sup>1</sup> To speak of the *mode* of Baptism is to speak of the specific action employed in the sacrament (*i.e.* pouring, sprinkling or immersion).

<sup>2</sup> While the topic of this essay is not, properly speaking, the meaning of Baptism, listeners are invited to consider the following passages from Sacred Scripture (Mark 16:15-16, John 3:3-5, Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:26-27, Titus 3:5 and I Peter 3:21)

hour-long program is not such as to allow for an exhaustive treatment of the subject. Therefore, what is offered here is intended to simply *introduce* the listener to what, at the very least, should prove to be very interesting for those who choose to study the matter further.

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## ***Baptizo* in Classic Greek**

Most often, Christians who are strict immersionists take the tack that all "reputable" lexicographers and scholars agree with the immersionist's understanding of the meaning of *baptizo*. They often assert that it is nonsensical to speak of the *mode* of the word *baptizo* for, according to them, the word speaks of mode and mode only.<sup>3</sup> According to immersionists, the definition of *baptizo* demands that Baptism be by immersion and immersion only. However, that is simply *not* the case. In fact, when referenced to physical mode, *baptizo* does **not** usually indicate the act of dipping characteristic of Baptism as practiced by immersionists. In a study of 175 uses of *baptizo* in ancient Greek writings, Dr. T.J. Conant (a Baptist) translated *baptizo* with some form of the English word *dip* only ten times.<sup>4</sup> The following examples from Dr. Conant's study suffice to illustrate the point.

*"Polybius, History, book VIII, ch. 8,4. Describing the operations of the engines, which Archimedes constructed for the defense of Syracuse when besieged by the Romans, and with which he lifted the prows of the besieging vessels out of the water, so that they stood erect on the stern, and then let them fall, he says: 'Which being done, some of the vessels fell on their side, and some were overturned; but most of them, when the prow was let fall from on high, BEING SUBMERGED (BAPTIZED), became filled with sea-water and confusion.'"*<sup>5</sup>

*"Didorus (the Sicilian), Historical Library, book XVI. ch. 80. In his account of Timoleon's defeat of the Carthaginian army on the bank of the river Crimissus in Sicily, many of the fugitives perishing in the stream swollen by a violent storm, he says: 'The river, rushing down with the*

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, I can well remember believing—and teaching—that if the word *baptizo* was accurately translated in our English Bibles, they would have the word "immersion" in the place of "baptism" whenever the Greek word *baptizo* is used. However, this oversimplification is not supported by philological studies, history or the Scriptures.

<sup>4</sup> The Meaning and Use of BAPTIZEIN Philologically and Historically Investigated, for the American Bible Union by T.J. Conant, D.D. (New York: American Bible Union, 1877).

<sup>5</sup> Conant, *Ibid.*, page 2

*current increased in violence, SUBMERGED (BAPTIZED) many, and destroyed them attempting to swim through their armour.”*<sup>6</sup>

*“Diodorus (the Sicilian), Historical Library, book I, ch. 36. Describing the effects of the rapid rise of the water during the annual inundation of the Nile, he says: ‘Most of the wild land animals are surrounded by the stream and perish, being SUBMERGED (BAPTIZED); but some, escaping to the high grounds, are saved.’”*<sup>7</sup>

This is significant because, as stated earlier, the case made by immersionists rests primarily upon the “fact” that the classical definition of *baptizo* dictates the mode of dipping that they employ Baptism (*i.e.* to place completely under the water followed by immediate removal from the water). However, it seems that more often than not, *baptizo* indicates an immersion *without* dipping. In other words, the word translated “baptism” in the New Testament Scriptures, when indicating submersion or immersion, does not indicate the subsequent reemergence of the subject from the fluid (*i.e.* it does not usually indicate dipping but something more akin to drowning). Moreover, the Greek word that *does* signify the act of dipping (*i.e.* placing an object under a fluid followed by removal from the fluid) is the word *bapto*. While *bapto* is a cognate of *baptizo*, it is not the word that is translated “baptism” or “baptize” in the Sacred Scriptures. In fact, *bapto* quite often signifies dipping but *without* complete submersion as the following examples from the *Septuagint* and the New Testament Scriptures demonstrate.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Exodus 12:22**

*“And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, **dip** (LXX: *bapto*; Hebrew: *tabal*) it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin”.*

#### **Leviticus 14:6**

*“As for the living bird, he shall take it, the cedar wood and the scarlet and the hyssop, and **dip** (LXX: *bapto*; Hebrew: *tabal*) them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water.”*

#### **Leviticus 14:16**

*“Then the priest shall **dip** (LXX: *bapto*; Hebrew: *tabal*) his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand”.*

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<sup>6</sup> Conant, *Ibid.*, page 7.

<sup>7</sup> Conant, *Ibid.*, pages 7-8

<sup>8</sup> The *Septuagint* was the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures which scholars—both Catholic and Protestant—agree was the text most often quoted by Jesus and the Apostles. It is extremely valuable for showing how the Jews employed the Greek language. It is commonly abbreviate **LXX**.

## Numbers 19:18

*“A clean person shall take hyssop and **dip** (LXX: *bapto*; Hebrew: *tabal*) it in the water, sprinkle it on the tent, on all the vessels, on the persons who were there, or on the one who touched a bone, the slain, the dead, or a grave.”*

## Ruth 2:14

*“Now Boaz said to her at mealtime, ‘Come here, and eat of the bread, and **dip** (LXX: *bapto*; Hebrew: *tabal*) your piece of bread in the vinegar’”.*

## John 13:26

*“Jesus answered, ‘It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have **dipped** (*bapto*) it.’”*

In other words, *baptizo* (which is the word translated “baptism” in the New Testament Scriptures) while often signifying immersion does not usually signify a dipping action whereas *bapto* (the word most often translated “dip”) often indicates dipping without complete submersion. Therefore, even when physical action is involved in relation to a fluid, *baptizo*, in classical Greek literature, does not usually correspond to the action of Baptism by immersion as practiced by modern Christian immersionists.

Finally, *baptizo* is quite often used to refer not to a physical action at all but to an effect or the agency of effect (as the following examples demonstrate).

*“But he, **mersed** by anger, is subdued; and wishing to escape into his own domain is no longer free, but is forced to hate the object loved.” (*Achilles Tatius*)<sup>9</sup>*

*“The drink which **merses**” (*Seneca*)<sup>10</sup>*

*“On account of the abundant revenue from these sources, they do not **merse** the people with taxes.” (*Diodorus Siculus*)<sup>11</sup>*

*“Great at Salamis; for there, fighting, he **mersed** all Asia.” (*Heimerius*)<sup>12</sup>*

*“But when he does not so continue, being **mersed** by diseases and by arts of wizards.” (*Plotinus*)<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> John W. Dale, *Classic Baptism*, p. 287 (©1989, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers: Phillipsburg, NJ)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304

“*Mersed* by worldly affairs—we should struggle out and try to save ourselves, and reach the harbor.” (*Plutarch*)<sup>14</sup>

After nearly three hundred and fifty pages of detailed analysis of citations from classical Greek writings, Presbyterian scholar John W. Dale drew the logical conclusion: **“Whatever is capable of thoroughly changing the character, state, or condition of any object, is capable of baptizing that object; and by such change of character, state, or condition does, in fact, baptize it.”**<sup>15</sup>

Such is the use of *baptizo* in classical Greek literature. Now let us consider how the word is employed in Sacred Scripture.

## ***Baptizo* in Sacred Scripture**

Immersionists often set up a straw man by arguing that the word *baptizo* and its cognates never mean “pour” or “sprinkle”. Such is a “straw man” because Catholics and other Christians who baptize by pouring (infusion) or sprinkling (aspersion) *never* have argued that the word *baptizo* literally means “pour” or “sprinkle”. That is *not* the question. **The question is this: how is the word *baptizo* used in the Bible?** We have already seen that in classical Greek usage, *baptizo* can—but does not necessarily—indicate submersion. Now what must be considered is its usage in Scripture.

There is no end to the number of examples that can be provided of words taking on connotations that are not identical with their original, literal meanings. Take, for example, the word *canon* (from the Greek κανών). The word originally indicated a physical object: specifically, a measuring rod. However, through development and usage it came to signify one’s sphere of activity or limits of authority (*e.g.* 2 Corinthians 10:13, 15) and, metaphorically, any rule of living or standard as such (*e.g.* Galatians 6:16 and Philippians 3:16). By extension, *canon* came also to be used in referring to an *authoritative list* (as in the case of the *canon* of Scripture). By the same token, *baptizo*, like all words, has undergone development in terms of its meaning and associated nuances. As the following citations from Scripture demonstrate, the Jews had come to use the word *baptizo* to refer to ceremonial washings and purification rites in general (*i.e.* washings that most often did *not* involve the physical mode of submersion but of pouring and sprinkling). In other words, both the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the *Septuagint*) and the Greek text of the New Testament use the word *baptizo* in ways that simply do not fit a rigid approach that limits the word to literal submersion.

### **Hebrews 9:10**

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306

<sup>15</sup> Dale, James W., *Classic Baptism*, p. 354 (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, NJ, 1989).

*“According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.”*

The word translated “*ablutions*” is a plural cognate of *baptizo*. The context clearly indicates that the ablutions being referred to are the various ceremonial washings of the Old Testament. Yet, as we look at those ablutions, we do not see submersions *per se* (at least not of the kind that Christian immersionists advocate).<sup>16</sup> In fact, in the verses that immediately follow, it is clear that the “ablutions” being referred to include purification rites involving sprinkling.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, what we see here is that the word “baptism” was being used to refer to purification rites and washings in general.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Mark 7:4**

*“And when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves”.*

The word translated “purify” is *baptizo*.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the text actually states that, after visiting the market place, the Jews refused to eat unless they first “*baptized themselves*”. Does this mean that whenever they went shopping they came home and literally submerged their entire bodies in water before eating? No. In fact, verse two reveals that the context of this statement was a controversy concerning the washing of *hands*. While it could well be that in washing their hands the Jews submerged or dipped their hands in water, verse four indicates that in so doing they were said to have “*baptized themselves*.” In other words, while only the hands were immersed, the entire person was said to have been “*baptized*” because the word *baptizo* was used by the Jews to refer to ceremonial purifications in general.

#### **Luke 11:38**

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<sup>16</sup> For example: **Leviticus 15:5** gives instructions concerning purification for those made unclean through contact with a man who has a “discharge”. The instructions call for those who are unclean to simply “*bathe*”. The Greek word employed in the *Septuagint* translation is *baptizo*.

<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 9:11-14 refers to “*the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer*”. The background for this purification rite is found in Numbers 19:1-22.

<sup>18</sup> These purifications of the Mosaic Law (e.g. Leviticus 14:4-7, Psalm 51:2, 7, *et. al.*) were seen by the Fathers of the Church as foreshadows or types of Christian Baptism. They varied in terms of their physical modes but their effect was the same: *cleansing*. For more on this see Dale (*Judaic Baptism*, pp. 169 – 217)

<sup>19</sup> *Textus Receptus* and *Byzantine Majority Text*.

*“The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner.”*

In all three major Greek texts (the *Textus Receptus*, the *Westcott-Hort* and the *Byzantine Majority*), the word translated “wash” is a cognate of *baptizo*. As in Mark 7:4, *baptizo* is used by the sacred writer simply to refer to ceremonial purification by means of washing (*i.e.* without any implicit reference to mode *per se*).

## ***Baptizo* and the Sacrament of Baptism**

As we have seen, *baptizo* is a highly nuanced word that *cannot* be regarded as always indicating a literal, physical submersion. In fact, the word was used by the Jews and the inspired writers of the Scriptures to refer to ceremonial washings in a very general sense (*i.e.* regardless of physical mode). Therefore, when we arrive at the subject of the proper mode for the sacrament of Baptism, we should not be surprised to find that the Scriptures do not explicitly prescribe a particular mode. In fact, while the Scriptures command us to baptize and provide us with several descriptions of the *effects* of Baptism, they do not provide *any* instructions as to *how* to actually baptize.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the earliest written instruction that we have on how to actually baptize is found in the first century document known as the *Didache*.<sup>21</sup>

*“And concerning baptism, baptize this way: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.”*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Immersionists often cite the Baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38-39) as a Scriptural example of how to baptize. Therein we read: “*And they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.*” Immersionists focus on the words, “*they went down...he baptized him...they came up*”. However, the going down and coming up do not indicate Baptism by submersion because ***both*** Philip and the eunuch “*went down*” and “*came up*”. In other words, the picture is one of both Philip and the Ethiopian going down (*i.e.* from the chariot) to a pool of water (of unspecified depth) for the purpose of baptizing the eunuch. However, the mode of Baptism is not specified. In pointing to this example immersionists are begging the question as to what is meant by the word “*baptized*”.

<sup>21</sup> Also known as the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, the *Didache* was composed between 70 and 100 A.D. (*The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1908), Volume IV, *Didache*). It is a short treatise that was highly regarded by the early Church.

<sup>22</sup> *Didache*, chapter 7.

Herein we find solid evidence that the early Church regarded Baptism by pouring to be acceptable (which also fits what we have seen regarding the usage of the word *baptizo* in Scripture). Moreover, whether by immersion or by pouring, early Christian Baptism—according to the historical testimony of the *Didache*—involved either a *triple* immersion or a *triple* pouring (which is, in fact, the practice of the Catholic Church to this day).<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the archaeological evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the early Church accepted Baptism by either pouring or a form of immersion that did not involve total submersion (in which case “immersion” is to be loosely understood as referring to a thorough washing or wetting as indicated by the classical and Scriptural examples already considered). This evidence takes the form of artistic depiction and the design of baptismal fonts or pools. In this regard, consider the following.

*“Nearly 400 examples of ecclesiastical fonts belonging to the period 230-680 A.D. have been located... Only a very few of the early fonts could have been used for total immersion even supposing they were filled to capacity. Most depths range from about 35 cm (14 inches) to a little over a metre (40 inches), but typically 60 cm (2 feet), half the depth commonly considered necessary for immersionists today.”*<sup>24</sup>

*“The fonts discovered show that the general practice was for the candidate to enter the bath by (usually) two steps, and stand in water up to his ankles, knees or loins. His head was then dipped in a basin arrangement called the laver, or else the water was simply poured. Drawings on the walls of the catacombs and elsewhere back into the second century show a similar mode.”*<sup>25</sup>

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Do modern Protestant Christians who baptize by immersion follow the practice of the early Church and use a triple immersion? No, they do not. In fact, when I once asked an immersionist preacher about this he dismissed the point as being nothing more than a *cavil* (*i.e.* a false or frivolous objection). However, the point is not a frivolous one. In fact, it points to a very serious issue: namely, that of *authority*. In other words, in view of the fact that the word *baptizo* (as employed by the Jews and the sacred writers) does not—of itself—prescribe a particular mode of washing, and in view of the fact that the Scriptures do not provide any explicit instructions on *how* to baptize, how do modern “Bible Only” Christians know that they are baptizing properly?

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<sup>23</sup> “Baptism is performed in the most expressive way by triple immersion in the baptismal water. However, from ancient times it has also been able to be conferred by pouring water three times over the candidate’s head.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1239)

<sup>24</sup> Rowland S. Ward, *Baptism in Scripture and History: A Fresh Study of the Meaning and Mode of Baptism* (Victoria, Australia: Rowland S. Ward, 1991), page 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 44.

The point I am making is simply this: Baptism, like all matters pertaining to the practice of the Christian faith, boils down to *authority*. As Chapter Twelve of this book demonstrates, the “Bible Only” approach to authority is deeply flawed, unworkable and, in the final analysis, decidedly unscriptural. The Scriptures themselves point us to the Church as “*the pillar and support of the truth*”.<sup>26</sup> In regard to Baptism, the constant teaching and practice of the Church *from the beginning* has been to recognize *both* immersion and pouring as valid modes for the sacrament. Therefore, while immersionists sincerely believe that they are standing solidly upon the Word of God, the practice of recognizing *only* those baptisms that are performed by total submersion is, in the final analysis, a *tradition of men* and completely foreign to the apostolic Deposit of Faith.

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<sup>26</sup> 1 Timothy 3:15