

An Inquiry into Baptism



Sprinkling, Pouring or Immersion

WHICH SHALL IT BE?

By Jefferson David Tant

INTRODUCTION

Since the Bible teaches that baptism is an essential part of my relationship with Christ (Mark 16:16; Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3-5, etc.), then it behooves me to make sure that my baptism is pleasing to the one who has given the ordinance. It isn't to please family, my church or myself. I can only strive to please the Lord. "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still striving to please men, I should not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

The Bible teaches also that there is now but one baptism (Ephesians 4:5). The religious world now offers multiple types, from immersion in water to sprinkling of rose petals, to baptism on behalf of one's dead ancestors. Therefore, a decision and choice needs to be made concerning this.

Other factors that have a bearing include not only the *mode* of baptism, but also the *purpose*, the *proper subjects*, as well as the *element* in which baptism takes place. The Bible clearly teaches that only believing adults are to be baptized, and not infants. These topics need to be considered, but the purpose of this study is to inquire into the *manner* or *mode* of baptism, as to whether it shall be by immersion in water or by other means.

To the best of my knowledge, all of the scholars, historians, and others quoted herein are those who practice the sprinkling or pouring of water for baptism. I have purposely sought out no author who practices immersion, though there are thousands of reputable men who could be quoted who do practice immersion. The reason for this is that the *understanding* of those who *practice* sprinkling or pouring might effectively *contradict* their own *practices*. In other words, their understanding of what the scriptures teach shows the inconsistency of their practice. Furthermore, their works in support of immersion cannot be dismissed as the words of those who might be prejudiced by some church doctrine, or whatever, in favor of the practice of immersion.

This study is offered with the sincere desire that it may help us to a more perfect understanding of the Will of God.

-- JEFFERSON DAVID TANT

THE TESTIMONY OF THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

“John came, who baptized in the wilderness, and preached the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the country of Judea, and all they of Jerusalem; and they were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Mark 1:4-5).

NOTE 1: They came to the Jordan River. Such would hardly have been necessary if the baptisms were done by sprinkling or pouring. It would have been an inconvenience wholly without reason.

NOTE 2: The text says they were baptized of John in the river. It does not say *at*, but *in*.

“Jesus was baptized of John in the Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water....” (Mark 1:9-10).

NOTE: If He came *up out of* the water, it is obvious that He first went down *into* the water. Why did He do this, unless he practice was immersion?

“And John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there, and they came and were baptized” (John 3:23).

NOTE: If the scripture is not referring to immersion, then why the necessity of *much* water? Wouldn't a few drops of water do just as well? It says he was baptizing there *because* there was much water. The presence of much water was neither incidental nor accidental.

“And he (eunuch) commanded the chariot to stand still; and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away....” (Acts 8:38-39).

NOTE: It is obvious that immersion is implied in this passage, considering the going down into and the coming up out of the water.

“And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16).

NOTE: Here the washing of the flesh symbolized the washing of the soul. Which best represents the washing of the flesh: immersion, sprinkling, or pouring?

“We were buried therefore with Him through baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

NOTE 1: Which best represents a burial: sprinkling, pouring, dropping of rose petals, or immersion?

NOTE 2: Which best represents a resurrection: having water sprinkled on the head, or coming up from an immersion in water?

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

NOTE: In the figure given, we clothe ourselves with Christ, putting Him on as we would a garment. Since this is done in baptism, which best represents the surrounding of ourselves with Christ (putting Him on): immersion, sprinkling, or pouring?

“One Lord, one faith, one baptism...” (Ephesians 4:5).

NOTE: If there is only one baptism now, which shall we choose (of the three that are most popularly offered): immersion, sprinkling, or pouring?

“Having been buried with Him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12).

NOTE: (See comments on Romans 6:4).

TESTIMONY OF THE GREEK LEXICONS, DICTIONARIES, ETC. on “βαπτίζω” (baptidzo)

1. *1. to dip repeatedly, to immerse, submerge.....2. to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water...3. to overwhelm...*
(GRIMM’S GREEK-ENGLISH LEXICON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, translated, Revised, and Enlarged by Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D. [A standard reference work recognized in both Europe and America to be an outstanding work]).
2. *1. to dip, immerse, sink; 2. To overwhelm...3. To perform ablutions, wash oneself, bathe....4. of ablution, immersion, as a religious rite, to baptize...* **(A MANUAL GREEK LEXICON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, G. Abbott Smith, D.D., D.C.L., LL.D.)**
3. *to dip, immerse, or plunge into water.* **(Parkhurst)**
4. *to immerse, to sink.* **(Robinson)**
5. *to dip repeatedly.* **(Liddell and Scott)**
6. *1. of Christian baptism; this, according to the view of the apostles, is a rite of sacred immersion, commanded by Christ, by which men confessing their sins and professing their faith in Christ are born again by the Holy Spirit into a new life, come into the fellowship of Christ and the church* **(GRIMM’S GREEK –ENGLISH LEXICON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, op. cit.)**

COMMENT: *Of literally scores of such authoritative works, Greek dictionaries, lexicons, etc., I have never heard of even ONE that defines “baptize” or “baptism” as sprinkling or pouring. Indeed, there are other works in the Greek language that denote these actions. The word “ραντίζω” (rantidzo) means “to sprinkle,” and the words “εκχεω” (ekcheo) and “βαλλω” (ballo) may be translated as “to pour,” but these words are never used in reference to baptism in water in the New Testament.*

It is of more than passing interest to note that in Luke 16; 24, the rich man asked if Lazarus might “dip the tip of his finger in water.” The word “dip” there is translated from the Greek “βαπτω” (bapto), the form from which we get “baptize.” Would one be led to think that the rich man simply asked from Lazarus to sprinkle some water on his finger, or for Lazarus to immerse the end portion of his finger in water, that it might give some relief to the parched mouth of the rich man? I think the latter would be obvious, and so did the translators.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE ENCYCLOPAEDIAS

Baptism: ...”when in the ceremony the candidate for baptism is submerged under the water, he is thereby buried with Christ and dies with Him; i.e., this submersion in water is, for the Apostle, not merely a symbol of purification, not only a symbol of being buried, but a real act of wonderful effect. The candidate for baptism experiences actually and genuinely the death of Jesus in his own body, and is likewise actually laid in the grave, as Jesus lay in the grave... When he emerges again from the water, the resurrection of Christ becomes his.” (**“Baptism.”** ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA)

Baptistery:”the round church of Santa Costanza, in Rome, built probably as a tomb for the daughter of Constantine, was also used in early times as a baptistery. Following this tradition, baptisteries throughout the early Church were separate buildings, circular or polygonal in plan, up to the 9th or 10th century. When the change from immersion to sprinkling as the method of baptism rendered large baptisteries unnecessary, the baptistery became a mere chapel within a church.” (**“Baptistery.”** ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA)

Baptism--that is dipping, immersion, from the Greek word *baptizo*.” (**“Baptism”** ENCYCLOPAEDIA AMERICANA)

“The first law for sprinkling was obtained in the following manner: Pope Stephen II, being driven from Rome by Adolphus, King of Lombards, in 753, fled to Pepin, who a short time before had usurped the crown of France.

While he remained there the monks of Cressy, in Brittany, consulted him whether in case of necessity, baptism poured on the head of an infant would be lawful. Stephen replied that it would, yet pouring and sprinkling was not allowed except in cases of necessity.

It was not until the year 1311 that the legislature, in a council held at Ravenna, declared immersion or sprinkling to be indifferent. In Scotland, however, sprinkling was never practiced in ordinary cases until after the Reformation—about the middle of the 16th century. From Scotland it made its way into England in the reign of Elizabeth I, but was not authorized in the Established Church.” (**“Baptism.”** EDINBURGH ENCYCLOPAEDIA)

COMMENT: The encyclopedias note the original practice of immersion. Please keep in mind that the ordinance authorizing the change was granted by the Pope of Rome, not Jesus Christ.

A little known (yet documented) fact of history is that the Church of England (1534), the Presbyterian (c.1540), and the Congregational (soon after) churches all practiced immersion for about 100 years, or until the Westminster assembly in 1643. At that time, a number of bishops, seeing how much more convenient sprinkling was, came before Parliament insisting that “the devil of immersion ought to be legislated out of the realm it is so troublesome.”

“The Westminster assembly convened July 1, 1643. Very naturally the question was brought before this august body of divines, ‘Shall we continue the practice of immersion or shall we adopt sprinkling instead?’ When it came to a vote, twenty-four voted to continue the ancient and apostolic practice, and twenty-four voted in favor of sprinkling. Dr. Lightfoot was chairman, and it was his duty to give the deciding vote. He cast his vote in favor of sprinkling.” (EDINBURGH ENCYCLOPAEDIA, Vol. 3, p 236.)

In 1644, Parliament acted upon this, repealing the laws enjoining immersion, enacting in their place laws enjoining sprinkling. Those who were not sprinkled were to be treated as outlaws.

THE TESTIMONY OF HISTORIANS

“It is without controversy that baptism in the primitive church was administered by immersion into water and not by sprinkling; seeing that John is said to have baptized in Jordan, and where there was much water, as Christ also did by his disciples in the neighborhood of these places. Phillip also **going down into the water baptized the eunuch.**” (Ecclesiastical History, Chapter I, Sec. 138.)

“Immersion and not sprinkling was unquestionably the original form. This is shown by the very meaning of the words *baptizo*, *baptisma*, and *baptismos*, used to designate the rite.” (HISTORY OF THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH, Schaff, p. 488.)

“The practice of the Eastern Church, and the meaning of the word, leave no sufficient ground for question that the original form of baptism was complete immersion in the deep baptismal waters.” (History of the Early Church, Stanley, p. 34.)

“The Greek Church in all its branches does still use immersion, and so do all other Christians in the world, except the Latins. All those nations that do now, or formerly did submit to the Bishop of Rome, do ordinarily baptize their children by pouring or sprinkling. But *all other Christians in the world*, who never owned the Pope’s usurped power, do and ever did *dip* their infants in the ordinary use. All the Christians in Asia, all in Africa, and about one-third in Europe are of the last sort.” (History of Infant Baptism, Wall, Vol. II, p. 376, 3rd edition.)

“In this century (the first), baptism was administered in convenient places without the public assemblies, and by immersing the candidate wholly in water.” (Ecclesiastical History, Mosheim. Century I, Part II, Chapter 4.)

“From the thirteenth century sprinkling came into more general use in the West. The Greek Church, however, and the church of Milan still retained the practice of immersion.” (History of Doctrine, Hagenback. Vol. ii, p.84, note I.)

The first record of pouring or sprinkling is that of Novatian in 251 A.D. Eusebius, the father of church history, describes it: “He (Novatian) fell into a grievous distemper, and it

being supposed that he would die immediately, he received baptism, being besprinkled with water on the bed whereon he lay, if that can be termed baptism.”

COMMENT: We could go on for page after page citing such quotations, but these will serve our purpose of establishing the unanimity of thought on the part of historians. One might wonder how the word “baptize” ever came to be used in the English text, rather than the translation “immerse” or “dip”. Perhaps a bit of historical background will be of interest.

*When King James I (Church of England) authorized the translation of the Bible, which was completed in 1611, he gave the scholars some fourteen rules to follow. Two of those rules were: 1. “Old ecclesiastical words must be kept, as, the word ‘church’ must not be translated ‘congregation’ etc.” 2. The ordinary Bible, read in the church, commonly called the Bishop’s Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the originals will permit.” (See **Lewis’ History of the English Translation of the Bible**)*

It was during this time that the controversy over immersion vs. sprinkling was heating up, and it was in this atmosphere that the King James translation was done. Some of the Bishops had gone before Parliament affirming that “the devil of immersion ought to be legislated out of the realm, it (was) so troublesome.” When these men came to the word βαπτίζω, they had a problem. If they were to translate the word by its accepted meaning of immerse or dip, it would effectively serve to “legislate the devil of immersion” into the realm, rather than legislating it out.

They decided not to translate the word at all, but rather transfer it from Greek into the English language. They dropped the Greek letter omega (ω) at the end of the word, replacing it with the English letter “e.” So from baptizo in the Greek we have baptize in English. Therefore, the Bishops did not translate the word at all, but left it in the Greek to cover up their pious fraud. Those who could read could then assign whatever meaning they wanted to this new English word.

As earlier indicated, all historians of whom I am aware are unanimous in their statements concerning the practice of immersion by the early church, which, we remember, was under the direct and inspired guidance of the apostles.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

Basil the Great, A.D. 370: “The bodies of those baptized are as if buried in the water.”

Barnabas, A.D. 119: “We indeed go down into the water. Again, “Blessed are they, who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water.” (**Epis. XI, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, p. 144**)

Origen, A.D. 184-254: “Man, therefore, through this washing is buried with Christ; is regenerated.” (Comment on Matthew)

Gregory, A.D. 240: “He who is baptized in water is wholly wet.” Again, “Immerse me in the streams of Jordan, even as she who bore me wrapped me in the children’s swaddling clothes.” (Ante Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, p. 70)

Chrysostom, A.D. 347: “To be baptized and to submerge, then to emerge is a symbol of descent to the grave, and of ascent from it.” (*Hom. 40 in I Corinthians 1.*)

Canon of the Council of Calcuth, A.D. 816: “Let the presbyter also know, that they may not pour the holy water over the infants’ heads, but let them always be immersed in the font.”

Comment: The early church fathers lived and wrote while the Greek was still a living language, and history furnishes us with not even one example in all their writings where baptizo is ever used as meaning sprinkle or pour.

Even in later years, after infant baptism had been introduced, immersion was yet the practice, as evidenced by the decree of the Council of Calcuth in 816 A.D.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE SCHOLARS

MacKnight (Presbyterian): “In baptism the baptized person is buried under the water. Christ submitted to be baptized, that is, to be buried under the water.”

Luther (Lutheran): “Baptism is a Greek word and may be translated immerse. I would have those who are to be baptized to be altogether dipped.”

John Wesley (Methodist): “Buried with Him into baptism—alluding to the ancient manner of baptizing by immersion.”

Wall (Episcopalian): “Immersion was in all probability the way by which our blessed Savior, and for certain the way the ancient Christians, received their baptisms.”

Brenner (Catholic): “For thirteen hundred years was baptism an immersion of the person under water.”

Calvin (Presbyterian): “Whether the person baptized is to be wholly immersed, and that whether once or thrice, or whether he is only to be sprinkled with water, is not of the least consequence: churches should be at liberty to adopt either, according to the diversity of climates, although it is evident that the term baptize means to immerse, and that is was the form used by the primitive church.” (INSTITUTES, 4:15:19)

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, article on “Baptism (Non-Immersionist View)”, Vol. I, p. 388-394.

1. Immersion: “It may be admitted at once that immersion, where the whole body including the head is plunged into a pool of pure water, gives a more vivid picture of the cleansing of the soul from sin; and that complete surrounding with water

- suits better the metaphors of burial in Rom. 6:4 and Col. 2:12, and of being surrounded by a cloud in I Cor. 2.”
2. Affusion: “The two usages (immersion and affusion-JDT) which were recognized and prescribed by the beginning of the second century may have been in use throughout the apostolic period although definite information is lacking.” (Typist’s note: Affusion is pouring of water over the body or parts of the body).
 3. Aspersions: “It was in the early centuries exclusively reserved for sick and infirm persons too weak to be submitted to immersion or affusion. There is evidence to show that those who received the rite in this form were somewhat despised {.....} it was long of commending itself to minister and people, and did not attain to almost universal use until the thirteenth century.”

Professor Moses Stuart: “Baptizo means to dip, plunge, or immerse into any liquid. All lexicographers and critics of any note are agreed in this.” (**ESSAY ON BAPTISM, p. 51. Biblical Repository, 1833, p. 298.**)

“Catholics are fully aware that the early practice of the Church (cf. the baptism of Christ, Matt. 3:16; Mark 1: 10; that of the eunuch, Acts 8:38-39, and St. Paul’s symbol of burial and resurrection, Romans 6:4, Col. 2:12) was to immerse, and that this custom prevailed in both East and West in the solemn administration of the sacrament till the end of the thirteenth century.” (**Question Box, 364, 1913 edition.**)

Bishop Bossuet, celebrated French Catholic: “To baptize signifies to plunge, as is granted by all the world.” (**Stennett and Russen, p. 174.**)

Calvin (Presbyterian) “The Church hath granted to herself the privilege of somewhat altering the form of baptism, retaining the substance, that is, the words.”

COMMENT: Surely there is no need to go on, page after page, citing such quotations from men of learning, recognized by their peers and others. Calvin’s remarks were most enlightening. In the first reference, he admitted that it “is evident that the term baptize means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the primitive church.” But this is of no consequence to him as churches “should be at liberty” to make their own laws, as his second quote infers.

Is there to be no respect for the laws of Him who is “King of Kings”, nor for the meaning of the words spoken by the only One who can save us—Jesus Christ?

THE TESTIMONY OF THE COMMENTATORS

“This passage cannot be understood unless it be borne in mind that the primitive baptism was by immersion.” Romans 6:4.

“The candidate says to himself, ‘Now I enter into fellowship with the death of Christ; I am to be buried with Christ in the *immersion*, and in the *emersion* I rise with Christ to newness of life.’ **Commentary on Romans, Meyer, Romans 6:4.**

“Here is a plain allusion to the ancient custom of baptizing by immersion; and I agree with Koppe and Rosemuller that there is reason to regret it should ever have been abandoned in most Christian churches, especially as it has so evident a reference to the mystical sense of baptism.” (**Rscens. Synop. Bloomfield, Romans 6:4.**)

“Verse 4: *We are buried with Him by baptism into death.* It is probable he that the apostle here alludes to the mode of administering baptism by *immersion*, the whole body being put *under the water*, which seemed to say the man is *drowned*, is *dead*; and when he came up out of the water, he seemed to have a *resurrection* to life. *The man is risen again; he is alive!*” (**Commentary on Romans 6:4, Adam Clarke [Methodist Protestant Church], 1836**)

“4. Therefore we are buried {...}. It is altogether probable that the apostle in this place had allusion to the custom of baptizing by immersion. This cannot indeed be proved, so as to be liable to no objection: but I presume that this is the idea which would strike the great mass of unprejudiced readers.” (**Commentary on Romans 6:4, Albert Barnes [Presbyterian]**)

COMMENT: *These commentators, along with multitudes of others recognized as scholarly men, were all of denominations that did not practice immersion. Their statements, though, show their understanding of what the New Testament teaches, even though they did not choose to follow this teaching in their personal lives and although there is evidence that some of them were immersed.*

It is interesting to note the comment of Barnes that immersion “is the idea which would strike the great mass of unprejudiced readers.” In other words, just the simple, unadorned word conveys the idea of immersion. But if minds have been prejudiced by custom, tradition, or creeds of man, the conclusion might be different.

CONCLUSION

Although volumes could and have been written on this subject, perhaps it has been helpful to sift through the multitude of materials and collect some of the more significant and cogent thoughts for consideration.

Is it not noteworthy that the combined testimonies of authorities in the Greek language (the language of the original writings of the New Testament), of Biblical scholars and commentators, of Church historians, of the Church Fathers, of the encyclopedias, and of the Biblical text itself ALL agree? They all agree that the apostolic teaching was immersion, that our Lord himself was immersed, that the early Christians practiced immersion, and that sprinkling as a substitute was not generally accepted until the thirteenth century.

Therefore, if I am convinced that baptism is an essential part of my obedience to the Lord, and I have a choice in the matter, which should I choose—that which all the evidence recognizes is the Biblical practice (immersion), or that which has been invented

by men through the passing years (sprinkling or pouring)? Remember the words of the Lord, “In vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men” (Matthew 15:9). Furthermore, Jesus said, “Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Jesus said, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved...” (Mark 16:16). If, as the evidence supports, a correct translation of that verse is “He that believes and is immersed shall be saved...” (and there have been some translations on the market so reading), then what hope is there for those who have obeyed “He that believes and (is sprinkled) shall be saved...” If we are at liberty to change the *manner* (immersion to sprinkling), then why cannot we give approval to those who have changed the *element* (water to rose petals)? Or even to those who have changed the command *itself* to, “He that believes and is (not) baptized shall be saved?”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Have I been baptized into Christ for the remission of my sins according to the Biblical pattern? (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:4) __Yes __No
2. If I have had sprinkling or pouring administered to me, do I have any assurance from the Lord that this is acceptable to Him? __Yes __No
3. If baptism is an essential part of my salvation, can I have fellowship with a denomination or church that does not teach or practice the “teaching of Christ” in this regard? __Yes __No
4. Can I afford to allow men to tell me which of the Lord’s commands are important and which are unimportant? __Yes __No
5. Is it permissible for anyone to change or alter any of the teachings of the Word of God? (Galatians 1:6-8) __Yes __No
6. If it is possible to change the mode of baptism, would it be permissible to change the element? For example, an Oklahoma church baptizes by sprinkling rose petals. __Yes __No
7. If you answered “yes” to 5 and “no” to 6, then how do you explain the difference?

--Jefferson David Tant
jdtant3@juno.com