

Study Leave Report On Baptism.

**by
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Baptism

Introduction

“Anyone who plunges into the troubled waters of the baptism debate needs to have some points of reference if he is not to be caught in the cross-current of opinion or drowned by the tidal waves of argument.”¹

Neil Dixon hits the nail on the head with his navigational caution to the would-be explorer of this originally simple, yet increasingly complicating, sacrament.

Issac Jolly sums up quite well the troubled journey the sacrament has had, “...perhaps no command of Christ has occasioned so much controversy, division, bitterness and mistrust as this one.”²

“...we need to look closely at our baptismal beliefs and practices so that we know, first of all, what we believe and why; and secondly, why others differ from us. But the issues are not just academic: they affect the lives of ordinary Christians and can play a big part, positive or negative, in the churches witness.”³

After looking at the works of some who have sought to explain, theologize, and rationalize this sacrament I have come to a primary conclusion that *simplicity is complicated by constant additions*.

In this study, I will endeavor to keep head above water and seek to identify points of reference, including that of origin; Old and New Testament practices; terminology and usage; early Church traditions; before attempting to set a course to the destination/purpose of the sacrament, namely, the believer’s identification with the Lord’s death and resurrection, and incorporation into His body – the Church, (see footnote: source - Directory for Worship Section 2.3).⁴

I admit that this study is minuscule in its plotted course and I believe that it needs to be if land is to be reached. I am endeavoring to stay on course, perhaps taking the most direct route. I acknowledge that in doing so there will be opinions, theories and works that will be overlooked.

Origins

While there may be no absolute way, mode, or practice of the sacrament agreeable to all in the Body of Christ, I do believe that God’s people, in all earnestness, have sought to be

¹ Dixon, Neil. *Troubled Waters* (London: Epworth Press, 1979) p.11

² Jolly, Issac. *Christian Baptism* (Auckland: The Executive of The Life and Work committee of the Presbyterian Church of NZ, 1920) p.47

³ Bridge, Donald & Phyper, David *The Water That Divides* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977) p.188

⁴ Baptism is the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ. Jesus through his own baptism identified himself with sinners in order to fulfill all righteousness (Mathew 3:15). Jesus in his own baptism was attested Son by the Father and was anointed with the Holy Spirit to undertake the way of the servant manifested in his sufferings, death, and resurrection. Jesus the risen Lord assured his followers of his continuing presence and power and commissioned them to go throughout the world teaching and baptising others in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The outpouring of the Spirit empowered the disciples to undertake a life of service and to be an inclusive worshipping community, sharing life in which love, justice, and mercy abounded.

as obedient to the Lord's commission as their understanding of it allows. And I guess this is where our dilemma lies. Perhaps due to lack of specifics regarding mode and practice of the sacrament, we, fallen as we are, in our best attempts to obey the Lord's command, have made a mess of it. Our practice is as diverse as we are.

A general definition for the word baptism is *a rite of washing with water as a sign of religious purification and consecration*. This rite was practiced frequently in the Old Testament. It signified purity or cleansing from sin and devotion to God. (I will look at specific meanings later).

Professor Oscar Cullman of Basel, wrote, "...baptism is an act by which God incorporates a person into the Body of Christ, the Church, and which as such, is not a mere picture of prevenient grace but an actual manifestation of it."⁵

Arthur Gunn cites various OT references⁶, and concludes that "It is clear that the Jewish rites of purification in the New Testament had their origin in these OT ceremonies..."⁷

James Chaney, in his dialogue-form work, outlined the link between the OT rite/ceremony of circumcision and the NT sacrament of Baptism, namely, what circumcision is to the people of God in the OT – Baptism is, in the NT.

"Circumcision was the rite of initiation into the church under the Old Testament dispensation. It was by this rite that men became Jews. Baptism is the rite of initiation into the church under the New Testament dispensation. It is by this rite that we become or are recognized as Christians. Secondly, their significance is the same. Circumcision was intended to signify purity of heart. A few passages will make this evident. Deuteronomy 10:16: 'Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked'. Deuteronomy 30:5: 'And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live'. Jeremiah 4:4: 'Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah, and inhabitants of Jerusalem'. Romans 2:28-29: 'He is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God'. Baptism signifies the same thing. As John says, 'There are three that bear witness in earth, the Water, and the Blood, and the Spirit; and these three agree in one'. The two former typify, and the last accomplishes, our cleansing. Thirdly, each sustains the same relation to the covenant of grace, that is, a seal to it."⁸

⁵ Booklet: *Baptism and Confirmation in the Presbyterian Church* (Christchurch/Dunedin: Presbyterian Bookroom, 1952) p. 3

⁶ Numbers 8:7; 19:11-13, 17-18; Exodus 24:6, 8; Leviticus 8:19; 14:6-7; 16:14; Psalm 51:7; Ezekiel 36:25-27; compare with Hebrews 9:13, 19, 21

⁷ Gunn, Arthur. *Biblical Baptism* (Auckland: G.W.Moore LTD, 1983) p.5

⁸ Chaney, James M. *William the Baptist*. (Michigan:Baker Book House, 1982)chp.10 (also online @ http://boston.server101.com/william_the_baptist.htm)

He also noted that though circumcision was gender specific, changing the seal of the covenant for the New (Baptism) enabled females to be full partakers of it.

1. *The seal of the covenant (circumcision) was, in its very nature, applicable only to males.*
2. *It was not applied to females of any age; and therefore women, individually or personally, were not members of the Church. They were regarded as represented by the males.*
3. *In the NT Church, with a change of seal, a seal applicable to them, we find it was applied to them, as we learn from the case of Lydia.⁹*

Griffith adds:

“Circumcision cannot be identified with baptism on a strict ‘this is that’ basis, and indeed the New Testament does not do so. Baptism is compared with the Flood (1 Peter 3:20-21) and with the crossing of the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:2), but never with circumcision. The analogy is a limited one only. And this is precisely what is found in the New Testament. Just as entry into the Jewish community was by birth (normally) and circumcision, so entry into the confessing Christian community is always by rebirth and baptism (Titus 3:5).¹⁰

Geoffrey Hart notes that the sign and seal of the new covenant as foretold in Jeremiah 31: 31-34, and in Ezekiel 36: 22-32, was to be baptism and was to replace the old covenant sign of circumcision, just as the Lord’s supper was to replace the Passover – but the character and efficacy of these signs were basically and essentially the same.¹¹

I do believe that the essence of what Chaney and Griffith presents lines up with NT theology. Exclusion became of a thing of the past, the veil that separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy of Holies was torn in two – top to bottom, at the time of Jesus’ death. The way to God almighty was made possible by the one who said, “I am the way.”¹² The people of God extended beyond the Jews to include Gentiles. Even in his life and death, Jesus, who is God in human-form, demonstrated this in that the most holy God was walking among sinful humankind, (not just Jews, or people in the church) touching and healing their diseases and illnesses, even touching their dead and giving them life, ultimately giving up his own life for them. He did not turn away a genuine cry or plea for help, even in response to the criminal’s cry on the cross he said, “*Today you will be with me in paradise...*”¹³

He was motivated by love and his actions displayed his grace. I see this as an excellent picture of God’s love and determination to have *all* his children home.

This covenant of grace involved inclusion/adoption into the family of God of which baptism is both a sign and seal.

⁹ Ibid., chp.10

¹⁰ Griffith, Terry *The Case for Believer’s Baptism* (Kingsway Publications: Eastbourne, 1990) p.25

¹¹ Hart, Geoffrey. *Right to Baptize: The Contemporary Dilemma* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1966) p. 24

¹² John 14:6

¹³ Luke 23:43

Mode

Arthur Gunn¹⁴, like many others, gives the threefold definition of the Greek *baptizo* as:

1. to immerse
2. to sprinkle
3. to wash

Sprinkling/Pouring

The on-going debate of whether to immerse, wash, or sprinkle are many, though there are very strong arguments for sprinkling and pouring. These are linked back to the Old Testament practices of washing and cleansing of objects and people. The method was either to sprinkle, wash, or pour. That which is cleansed is said to have been baptised.

Levitical baptism was one of the most familiar ceremonies of the Jewish people at the time of Christ. The ceremonial cleansings entered into their everyday life, e.g. Mark 7:4 *“When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles”*; Luke 11:38 *“But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised”*; Hebrews 9:10 *“They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.”*¹⁵ These were usually administered by sprinkling.

Again the link to the OT can be seen in the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. The picture is that of the Israelites crossing on dry ground between two walls of water as the wind blew and rain showered/sprinkled down on them, hence, Ps. 77:17 *“The clouds poured down water”*¹⁶

Jolly goes on to say that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is:

- the real baptism of which the baptism of water is a symbol.
- spoken of in terms which exclude the conception of immersion. e.g., Acts 2:3, *“They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.”* Again, Joel 2:28, *“I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”*

This is a new insight for me, and while, with the backing of Scripture, Jolly makes a strong case, I do have a problem with his point that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the *real* baptism. The sprinkling/pouring of water on a person in baptism is as real as they

¹⁴ Gunn, Arthur. *Biblical Baptism* (Auckland: G.W.Moore LTD, 1983) p.5

¹⁵ Jolly, Issac. *Christian Baptism* (Auckland: The Executive of The Life and Work committee of the Presbyterian Church of NZ, 1920) p.7

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.10

come a physical reality, and I see the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a spiritual reality. Both are very real.¹⁷

The references to the Holy Spirit coming to 'rest on' or being 'poured out' rightly dismisses any notion of immersion. However, the Spirit comes and goes as He pleases. Who is to say that as the Spirit baptizes that one is not immersed in the Spirit? "*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*" (John 3:8)

Gunn lists 6 reasons why immersion would not have been the mode used for baptism in Acts 2:41:

1. *According to Jewish Law, to immerse a person for ceremonial purposes in a pool or tank of water would have made that water unclean and therefore useless for further immersions...*
2. *Even if they broke with Jewish custom, which is highly unlikely, the physical effort of immersing so many in a single day would have been too great for the apostles.*
3. *No place for immersion could have been found in a city notoriously short of water, a shortage made acute by the presence of vast numbers of Jews from other countries for the Feast of Pentecost, (Acts 2:9-11). (see footnote)¹⁸*
4. *Being the hot season (June), with the brook Kedron dry, what little water there was would be jealously guarded for ceremonial purification, cooking and drinking.*
5. *The hostile Jewish authorities (Acts 4:2), and the Roman soldiers on guard, would never have allowed this precious water supply to be fouled by the baptism of so many by immersion.*
6. *However, the most compelling reason for believing that sprinkling was the method used on the day of Pentecost is that sprinkling was always the Biblical method for purification. Moses, when inaugurating the Covenant between God and Israel, used basins of blood and sprinkled all the people, saying, 'behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you.' (Ex. 24: 8; Hebrews 9:19)¹⁹*

The Westminster Confession of 1647, chp.28, #3 states,

¹⁷ However, I acknowledge that there are those who don't think much of baptism other than its something that should be done because grandma says so.

¹⁸ 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. (source: http://www.catholic.com/library/Baptism_Immersion_Only.asp)

¹⁹ Gunn, Arthur. *Biblical Baptism* (Auckland: G.W.Moore LTD, 1983) p. 8-9

*Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.*²⁰

These are very strong statements for sprinkling/pouring as the original baptismal mode. As one who was sprinkled at baptism I am in two minds. Whilst I have always been comfortable with the way I was baptized, there is a part of me that wants to find out more. This study has set my mind at ease, but I also want to embrace *all* who have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit^ü regardless of what mode they were baptized in.

Immersion

Those of the immersion persuasion point to the baptisms recorded in the Gospels as out-right proof beyond reasonable doubt that immersion is the mode to be followed. The baptisms referred to are that of Jesus, and the Ethiopian eunuch.²¹ They hold that since Jesus and the Ethiopian eunuch both *öcame/went up out of the water,ö* that is a clear indication that they were immersed. Furthermore, both Philip and the eunuch *öboth went down into the water.ö*

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).

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, the 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) So baptizo can mean cleansing or ritual washing as well as immersion.

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). 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."²²

²⁰ Booklet: *Baptism and Confirmation in the Presbyterian Church* (Christchurch/Dunedin: Presbyterian Bookroom, 1952) p. 2

²¹ Mark 1:10; Matthew 3: 13-16; Acts 8: 26-40

²² http://www.catholic.com/library/Baptism_Immersion_Only.asp Author: Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego

Arthur Gunn looks deeper into the original Greek,
“Regarding John’s method of baptizing, people are often confused by the Greek prepositions used in Matthew 3:16, translated, ‘when Jesus was baptized he went up...from the water.’ They think that the use of ‘up,’ in Greek ‘APO’ signifies immersion. It does not. ‘APO’ can never mean ‘out of’ but always ‘away from.’ ...It is also worthy of note that the original Greek word for immerse, ‘KATADUO,’ is never used in the Scriptures. This word means ‘to make to sink,’ ‘to go under,’ and would have been the word used if immersion were the mode used in baptism.”²³

Further, the Greek prepositions, $\epsilon\text{I}\Sigma$, meaning ‘into,’ and ϵK , meaning ‘out of,’ can also mean ‘towards’ and ‘away from’ respectively. So it can be said that those seeking baptism went ‘towards’ the water, (and perhaps got baptized by sprinkling) and afterwards went ‘away from’ the water – so, to say that immersion alone was the mode used, is questionable.

Baptism in the Early Church²⁴

It has been said that Church History is a friend of infant baptism.²⁵ Origen, writing around 240 AD, said, “**The Church received a tradition from the Apostles to give baptism to infants too.**”

“The Church order of Hippolytus, which originated in Rome about 215 AD, contains the directive, ‘First the little ones should be baptized. All who can speak for themselves should speak. For those however who cannot their parents or another who belongs to their family should speak.’”²⁶ (perhaps an early allusion to god-parents)

The rejection of infant baptism as a matter of principle first arose in the 16th century, as ‘a result of a new understanding of the individual person.’²⁷ This is highly significant because this challenge arose, not from new studies of Scripture, nor from a new discovery of apostolic practice, but from a new understanding of the nature of man. Hence, “Belief was seen in rationalistic and volitional terms, an act of the mind and the will. Because an infant cannot think or decide, it cannot have faith, and therefore it should not be baptized.”²⁸

Those who held this view thus saw fit to re-baptize those adults who were baptized as infants commenting that their first baptism was no baptism at all “on the grounds that they had not been truly converted when they were first baptized, so that it was therefore not a true baptism.”²⁹ The issue was whether some particular event in a person’s life was or was not a baptism at all – and thus whether or not he later is still in need of baptism or

²³ Gunn, Arthur. *Biblical Baptism* (Auckland: G.W.Moore LTD, 1983) p. 8

²⁴ http://www.catholic.com/library/Baptism_Immersion_Only.asp Author: Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego

²⁵ Booklet by Christenson, Larry. *What About Baptism?* (1973)

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11

²⁷ Schlink, Edmund. *The Doctrine of Baptism* (St Louis, Missouri, 1972) p. 136

²⁸ Christenson, p.12

²⁹ Buchanan, Colin. *One Baptism Once* (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1978) p. 18

not. Anabaptists, whose name means, *re-baptize*, also held and still hold this view. However, this view was regarded as heresy by the wider church and the Anabaptists came under huge opposition.

Further, *Two primary heretical arguments developed in opposition to infant baptism. The first, advocated by the early twelfth-century heretics, denied original sin and claimed that the infant was innocent and not in need of baptism. This doctrine was based on the Pelagian beliefs that Augustine had opposed in the 410s, and it reflected a positive view of the child's nature. In contrast, the second argument against infant baptism agreed with Catholic theology that the child was sinful—owing not to original sin but to an evil inherent to the material world—and therefore in need of baptism but that he could be baptized only after his own profession of faith. In this, a dualist doctrine based on Manichaeic traditions that saw an irresolvable conflict between the pure spiritual realm and the corrupt world of the flesh, the focus was on negative images of the child and of human nature. Orthodox writers were forced to navigate between the two heretical frameworks—neo-Pelagian and neo-Manichaeic—and the paradoxical imagery of childhood they evoked.*

*In arguing that it was improper to baptize infants, heretics stressed not simply the infant's ignorance but also his inability to learn. They quoted the words of Jesus: "Go out into the world and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (**Euntes in mundum, Docete omnes gentes, baptizantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus sanctus** [Matthew 28:19], hereafter referred to as **Docete**). Again, Cathars interpreted these words narrowly and focused their attention on the primary verb, the imperative **Docete**, "teach." At issue here was the nature of catechism (religious instruction before baptism), the rudiments of which orthodox Catholics taught to the infant novitiate. Heretics ridiculed this practice, asking, "How can they be baptized...who cannot be instructed?"³⁰*

For the orthodox writers however, baptism was proof of God's mercy and concern for children. Infant baptism therefore did more than complete the child's incomplete faith. It completed God's plan of salvation for the most helpless members of society. In his role as paternal protector, God has offered to assist the defenseless and most needy, those Children of God who were children literally. Infant baptism was thus a sign of and testimony to divine compassion, the love of a father for his children.³¹

However, there continues to be requests for re-baptism from those who perhaps feel that their baptism at infancy was not valid because they had no knowledge and understanding of what had taken place, and that they did not respond as an adult would in the baptismal ceremony. Then there are those in this same group who have a deep sense of God leading them to seek believer's baptism.

How do we respond to such requests from members in our own congregations? I have a suggested procedure on page 14, and this prayer to be used as part of the ceremony:

³⁰ <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/maclehose/maw02.html>

³¹ <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/maclehose/maw02.html>

Lord, you know the heart of [name the person]. You know whether or not his previous baptism was valid. If it was, then accept this baptism as an expression of his desire to make sure that everything is exactly right in his relationship with you. But if something was lacking in his first baptism, then accept this as his submission to Your will so that he might be your faithful child.

Further, Acts 19: 1-7, sees Paul interacting with John the Baptist's disciples. He does not reject their baptism, and he speaks highly of John's ministry. However, their baptism was evidently inadequate and needed to be completed by being baptized into the name of Jesus (v.5). Similarly, an infant baptism need not be renounced in order to receive believer baptism.³²

Why have I offered these? Because I believe God's grace is bigger than we have ever imagined, bigger than our understanding, or lack of, bigger than our rights and wrongs, bigger than our practices, for these are all *ours*. We may not always get it right, we may trip up now and then, which is all the more reason why we should put ourselves in the mercy and grace of God. We are fallen after all.

Second, in this day and age, we struggle even in the interpretation of Scripture. As we study the works of those who have gone before, we tend to side with a view that we agree with and stick to it through thick and thin, disregarding all other possible areas of thought.

Third, I have noticed that once a view is firmly held then all other views are considered wrong, and feelings and expressions of judgment are directed towards those who don't agree. Such is humanity!

John Roxborough wrote, *"Our views are affected by many things, including our personal journey in faith and the social setting of our churches. It is not unknown for people to be baptised as infants, seek immersion after a conversion experience in their teenage years, and when they become parents want to affirm the place of their own children in the Kingdom by having them baptised. People whose background has only been in one tradition sometimes find it hard to understand those from another, and an effort is needed to get past the stereotypes."*³³

It is important to note that the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand has authorised the reaffirmation of baptismal vows by immersion, and this provision is quite widely used. Jim Wallace's [Orders of Service.pdf](#) includes a liturgy for this purpose.³⁴

³² Griffith, Terry *The Case for Believer's Baptism* (Kingsway Publications: Eastbourne, 1990)

³³ Roxborough, John. <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/4869.0.html#c16266>

³⁴ <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/4868.0.html>

Pouring 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.³⁵ 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.

In the light of these works, it would seem that the mode of baptism was adaptable with regard to sprinkling and pouring, due to the limited availability of the precious commodity of water. It seems that the water used ranged from *running* or *'living water'* which was the preference, to any *other* water that might be available. The question then has to be asked, "What if water was plentiful? Would the mode have been adapted in those early times to include immersion? If this had been the case, it would then render the issue of mode a *non-issue*. If the early Church adapted the use of water one way because of its limitedness, would they not also change that usage if water was in abundance?"

Pagans also had ritual cleansing ceremonies.³⁶ That which set the early Church aside from the rest was the divine content of their practice. Much debate (and controversy) has focused on the *how* of the sacrament, especially the physical actions to be undertaken. When it comes to the authoritative part of the sacrament, that is, in whose name one is to be baptized, there is considerably less argument. Why? "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Jesus clearly states this in His commission to His disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," (Matt. 28:19).

An additional observation here is that Jesus was very specific about whose *name* the disciples were to baptize believers in. There appears to be no specifics regarding mode. Why? Because there was no need for it, everybody knew what baptism was and how to

³⁵ Catholic Theological terms: (source: Connell, Francis J. *Rebirth of the Soul: The Sacrament of Baptism* New York: The Paulist Press, 1939)

Proximate matter = water for baptism

Total immersion of the body = immersion

Pouring = infusion

Sprinkling = aspersion

³⁶ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, Ch. 5 [Non-Christians] ascribe to their idols the imbuing of waters with the self-same efficacy [of purification]. For washing is the channel through which they are initiated into some sacred rites of some notorious Isis or Mithras. Moreover, carrying water around, and sprinkling it, they everywhere expiate country seats, houses, temples and whole cities: at all events, at the Apollinarian and Eleusinian games they are baptized; and they presume that the effect of their doing that is their regeneration and the remission of their penalties due to their perjuries. Among the ancients, again, whoever had defiled himself with murder, was wont to go in quest of purifying waters. (Source: http://www.medmalexperts.com/POCM/pagan_origins_baptism.html)

administer it. It was a practice that was as common in the early Church as it was in the pagan world.

Purpose

Identification with Christ's death and resurrection, and incorporation into his Body – the Church – what does this mean?

The symbolism of baptism declares that three things happen to believers who are baptized: (1) they die with Christ to their old self; (2) they rise with Christ to become a new creature; and (3) they are incorporated in their new life with a living community which looks for the coming of the Lord (Romans 6:1-11).

The Directory for Worship clearly outlines this and there is not much more I can personally add, except to say that as one who was sprinkled in baptism at the age of 9, I had an overwhelming (spiritual) sensation of being welcomed and included into the universal Body of Christ even though I did not know much about it then. I remember being humbled by that realization and knowing within myself that something special had just taken place. I remember a physical softening on my forehead where the water had been applied. I mentioned it to my mother who was generally at a loss to explain it. She put it down to the fact that the water was *'blessed water.'* But, on that day, July 6th, 1975, I was sealed for the Body of Christ, and my living-out of that reality – continues.

2.3.2 Dying and Rising in Baptism³⁷

In Baptism, we participate in Jesus' death and resurrection. In Baptism, we die to what separates us from God and are raised to newness of life in Christ. Baptism points us back to the grace of God expressed in Jesus Christ, who died for us and who was raised for us. Baptism points us forward to that same Christ who will fulfill God's purpose in God's promised future.

2.3.4 Inclusion in the Covenant of Grace³⁸

As circumcision was the sign and symbol of inclusiveness in God's grace and covenant with Israel, so Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with the Church. As an identifying mark, Baptism signifies

- i. the faithfulness of God,*
- ii. the washing away of sin,*
- iii. rebirth,*
- iv. putting on the fresh garment of Christ,*
- v. being sealed by God's Spirit,*

³⁷ Directory for Worship <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/978.0.html#c4485>

³⁸ Directory for Worship <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/978.0.html#c4485>

- vi. adoption into the covenant family of the Church,
- vii. resurrection and illumination in Christ.

The body of Christ is one, and Baptism is the bond of unity in Christ. As they are united with Christ through faith, Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place. Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome.

Setting a Course

Bridge & Phyper³⁹ present a helpful way forward by following the model of the Council of Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 15. The argument was that Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses, (v.5).

So “*the apostles and elders met together to consider*” the matter, and “*much discussion*” was had, (vs. 6 & 7). Verse 12, “*The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul...*” not easy to do when convictions are firmly held.

“If such an attitude was appropriate even in the presence of apostles, how much more is it desirable in any effort to resolve the baptismal problem, bedeviled as it is by centuries of tradition and dispute.”⁴⁰

Discussion, debate, and might I add prayer and discernment of God’s will...is a good and wise process to follow. It goes without saying that the pastor and his/her elders, who have spiritual oversight of the congregation, need to be active in those gifts of the Spirit that serve this purpose. God still speaks to His people today, including those not on the eldership or leadership. It is true that we hear and/or experience God differently. As leaders, I believe one of our important tasks is to discern God’s voice either directly, or from His Word, or from His people. There is a great sense of confirmation of a God-given word when a pastor and his/her elders seek God in prayer, discern together, reach unified agreement, and God blesses the occasion.⁴¹

After their discussion/debate, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas related their experiences in ministering to the Gentiles. The lessons learnt were:

1. God was at work in sovereign power, giving His Spirit to people whose description did not fit in with preconceived ideas
2. The basis on which He worked was “grace received through faith.” Understandably, this surprised many of the Jewish Christians

Throughout the debate, the apostles and disciples kept one great principle in mind, “*We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved...*” (v. 11)

³⁹ Bridge, Donald & Phyper, David *The Water That Divides* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977)

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 192

⁴¹ We, at Church on The Way in Tapanui, seek to follow this process not just on issues regarding baptism, but also on discerning God’s will and direction for the Church.

So the centrality of grace was crucial then and needs to continue to be so in our discussions/debates today regarding baptism.

“If the practice of baptism obscures the message of the willingness of God to forgive and renew those who do not deserve and cannot earn His favor, then that practice must be wrong.”⁴²

Furthermore, *“If differences of opinion about baptism lead different groups of Christians to deny acceptance with them of people who have been accepted by God, then Christians are being more particular than God himself.”⁴³*

The last part of this quote *“being more particular than God himself”* carries connotations of being nit-picky and fussy *“the over-meticulous crossing of the t̄ and dotting of the i,ö which itself can be off-putting because it closes more doors than it opens. We need to bear in mind that it is by God’s love and grace that we are accepted by God, and that to take on that whole concept requires faith on our part. Yes, it is true that we don’t deserve His love and mercy, and our human intellect would tell us that what we don’t deserve we don’t get. God is certainly not being hard on us *“we’re being hard on ourselves!**

The Lord’s brother, James’s contribution links the OT promises boldly and firmly with the current activity of God.

After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages. (Acts 15:16-18) quoting Amos 9:11-12). He brought a bold, Scriptural and prophetic voice into the debate.

“A prophetic voice is needed, which can point out the sweep of God’s purposes as revealed in Scripture, and boldly apply it to the contemporary situation, in the light of what God is seen to be doing.”⁴⁴

A Suggested Procedure

When the pastor or the elders are approached by potential candidates for baptism, (or re-baptism) and the meaning of baptism is conveyed and the candidate is willing to proceed, I propose the following process for the pastor and his/her elders.

⁴² Bridge & Phyper, p. 193

⁴³ Ibid., p. 193

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 194

1. Pray ó ask for God's will and leading; ask for the gift discernment.
2. Share any word, insight from your time of prayer.
3. Keep in mind the centrality of grace in and through this whole process when considering the candidate. In pastoral care, each candidate will have his/her own understanding (rightly or wrongly) about what baptism is, what it does, and what it symbolizes. Listen and guide with a pastoral heart.
4. Consider what is happening in the Body of Christ. Are there any movements towards baptism? Is this a genuine move of God, or is it a current trend, or both? Discern.
5. Do some Biblical research, interpretation, and application. Boldness can come from well researched study.

CONCLUSION

I have discovered that there are strong arguments for pouring and sprinkling as the original modes for baptism both from the Old Testament and the early Church practice. This was because water was a precious commodity and not to be wasted or defiled. There were also different grades of water used, ranging from the preferred running/*living* water, to the lower grade ó still water. I asked that if water was plentiful, would the mode include immersion? If it did, this would then render the issue of mode, a non-issue. I stressed the importance of the name in whom one is baptizedí the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I also stressed the importance of the centrality of grace when considering a candidate for baptism, and I have provided a suggested procedure for this.

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