

The One Baptism (Ephesians 4:5) – Its “Mode”

To begin this article, let's note that talking about a “mode” of baptism is essentially a contradiction in terms. Those who speak of “modes” of baptism refer to different methods of “baptizing” such as sprinkling or pouring. The reason this is a contradiction in terms is because the original Greek word used in the New Testament simply meant “to dip, immerse, submerge, overwhelm.” There's no “mode” to that. When people in the first century wanted to obey the Gospel, they were immersed according to the very word used by Divinely inspired writers to record what they did.

As if the New Testament definition of the word itself were not enough, looking at the contextual usage of “baptize” in its various forms also shows that to baptize means to immerse. In Colossians 2:12 Paul wrote of being “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.” One would be hard pressed to argue that a corpse can be buried by pouring or sprinkling a handful of dirt on its head. According to this passage, baptism is a burial. Romans 6:3-5 adds support to this truth in saying, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.”

Not only do the definition and the contextual usage of the New Testament Greek word for “baptize” indicate that it is immersion, the grammatical usage of the term bears this out as well. In Acts 8:36-38 we read of this interaction between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch: “And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.” Of course, one obvious question to ask here would be, “Why would they both go down into the water if Philip was just going to pour some water over the eunuch's head?”

With such overwhelming support for baptism being immersion in the New Testament, we have to wonder how it ever came to be associated with sprinkling or pouring. In his excellent work, Handbook on Baptism (Gospel Advocate Company, Nashville, TN, 1950, pp. 191-216), J.W. Shepherd catalogued a variety of reasons that had been given over the centuries up to the time of the writing of his book for the changes in the “mode” of baptism. Here are a few of those reasons:

“In 1311 the Council of Ravenna (Catholic, mg) allowed free choice between immersion and aspersion (sprinkling, mg).” Bonet-Maury, Letter to Dr. Christian, in Immersion, pp. 133,134

“The danger of dipping in cold climates, may be a very good reason for changing the form of baptism to sprinkling.” Burnett, Exp. of the Thirty-Nine Art., p. 418

“Still the rubric of the Roman Rituale, which states that baptism can be validly given by immersion, infusion, or aspersion, is fully justified by tradition.” Catholic Dictionary, Art., Bapt., p. 60

“For several centuries after the establishment of Christianity, Baptism was usually conferred by immersion; but since the twelfth century, the practice of baptizing by infusion has prevailed in the Catholic Church, as this manner is attended with less inconvenience than Baptism by immersion.” Gibbons, Faith of Our Fathers, p. 318

“Thomas Aquinas preferred the more ancient custom (Summa, P. III. qu. 66, art. 6), because immersion reminded Christians of the burial of Christ; but he did not think it absolutely necessary.” Hagenbach, History of Christian Doctrines, Vol. II., p. 332

“This change in England and other Protestant churches from immersion to pouring and from pouring to sprinkling was encouraged by the authority of Calvin, who declared the mode to be a matter of no importance, and by the Westminster Assembly of Divines (1643-1652), which decided that pouring or sprinkling is ‘not only lawful but also sufficient.’” Schaff, Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, pp. 51,52,53

These quotations and many more that could be cited demonstrate that the addition of “modes” of baptism has nothing to do with Biblical authority and everything to do with convenience, personal choice and, eventually, human traditions. Mark it down that, “He that believeth and is immersed shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” (Mark 16:15).

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