

Baptism: Sprinkling or Dunking

Jon Mitchell

The Bible makes it very clear that baptism is essential to obtain salvation and become a disciple of Jesus Christ ([Mark 16:16](#); [Acts 2:38; 22:16](#); [Matt. 28:19-20](#); [Gal. 3:26-27](#); [1 Pet. 3:21](#)). Therefore, it is necessary for us to determine the proper mode of baptism, especially since various religious bodies in Christendom define baptism in different ways. Some pour or sprinkle water on people's heads and say they've baptized them; others completely immerse them in water and define that as baptism. Which of these is correct? Or, are both of them correct? Does it really matter?



How does the Bible show baptism occurring?

God told us in his Word that ***“every word of God is tested...”*** ([Prov. 30:5](#)), and we are not to add to or take away from his Word ([Deut. 4:2](#); [Prov. 30:6](#); [1 Cor. 4:6](#); [Rev. 22:18-19](#)). Therefore, determining the proper definition of baptism is just as important as recognizing that it is scripturally necessary for salvation and forgiveness of sins. After all, if God told us to baptize with a specific act in mind and we do something different, we have not actually obeyed him and thus our eternal salvation is in jeopardy ([Heb. 5:9](#); [Matt. 7:21-23](#)).

With this in mind, we must remember that in the first century AD when the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the New Testament ([2 Pet. 1:20-21](#); [Eph. 3:1-5](#); cf. [2 Tim. 3:16-17](#); [1 Cor. 14:37](#)), their words were written in Greek. The Greek words they used which in English we read as “baptize” and “baptism” are [baptizo](#) and [baptisma](#). Note the similarities between these Greek words and the English words “baptize” and “baptism.” These similarities exist because “baptize” and “baptism” are not actually TRANSLATIONS of the Greek words, but instead are TRANSLITERATIONS (where Greek letters in a word are simply given their English equivalents.) To confirm the actual meanings of *baptizo* and *baptisma*, we must go to authorities on the Greek language.

Greek linguistic authorities such as Thayer, Liddel & Scott, Sophocles, Cremer, and Vine all define “baptize” (*baptizo*) and “baptism” (*baptisma*) as “to immerse, to plunge, to dip,” “...consisting of the processes of immersion, submersion and emergence.” Not one standard Greek lexicon defines *baptizo* as “to sprinkle” or “to pour.” In fact, there are

completely different Greek words for “pouring” ([ekcheo](#)) and “sprinkling” ([rhantizo](#)). No, the proper definition of baptism is immersion. When we understand this, it makes the biblical figures of speech used to describe baptism much clearer. When Paul says that we are **“buried”** with Christ in baptism ([Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12](#)), that imagery makes more sense when correlated with actually burying someone in water via immersion rather than sprinkling them with water. How many of us would sprinkle some dirt over someone’s coffin and conclude that we’ve buried them? Furthermore, understanding baptism to be immersion in water also gives logic to the actions committed by those who baptized others in the Bible. For example, John the Baptizer (Immerser) chose to baptize at Aenon near Salim...why? The Scriptures specifically give the reason: **“...because water was plentiful there...”** ([John 3:23](#)). If baptism is sprinkling a few drops of water over someone’s head, why would John need to go where there was a lot of water? A single glass of water would be sufficient to sprinkle at least one hundred people. However, one would need a lot of water in order to dip someone’s entire body into it, especially if you needed to do so with hundreds of people.

In addition, consider the actions of Philip and the Ethiopian when Philip baptized him. The Bible says that upon finding water and confessing his faith in Christ, the Ethiopian **“commanded the chariot to stop, 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 carried Philip away...”** ([Acts 8:38-39](#)). If baptism is defined as Philip sprinkling a few drops of water over the eunuch’s head, why would both of them go down into the water and come back out of the water? Why would even one of them need to go down into the water? They both could have stood on the shore while Philip reached down and got his hands sufficiently wet enough to sprinkle some water on the eunuch’s head. In fact, why would the Ethiopian even need to leave the chariot? Philip could have left the chariot, come back with a handful or cupful of water from the oasis, and sprinkled some drops on the eunuch’s head right there in the chariot. However, since baptism required Philip to fully immerse the Ethiopian’s body in water, it makes sense that they would both leave the chariot, go down into the water before baptism, and come up out of the water after baptism. With this in mind, note that Jesus, upon being baptized by John, was also said to come up out of the water ([Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:9-10](#)), thus showing that our Lord himself was immersed in water when he was baptized.

Therefore, we must remember whenever we read in our English Bibles the words “baptize” and “baptism” that we are read transliterations of the original Greek words rather than the actual translations which only mean “to immerse” and “immersion,” transliterations that were made most likely to avoid offending those in the religious world who practice pouring or sprinkling instead of immersion. However, the priority of true followers of Christ is to avoid offending God rather than men ([Gal. 1:10](#)). To know exactly what his will is, we must use the actual definitions of the words the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the New Testament to use. May we set aside our fallible human wisdom which puts the actual commandments of God on the back burner in favor of keeping the traditions of men ([Matt. 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13](#))! Instead, let us keep the actual commandments of God and thereby prove our love for him is true ([John 14:15; 15:10, 14; 1 John 5:3](#)).

