

Free! Take one!

That They all May Be One

John 17:21



Chapter ten

Sprinkling, Pouring, or
Immersion?

Clarence W. Fell

Chapter Ten

Sprinkling, Pouring, or Immersion?

Baptism is one of the most controversial subjects in Christianity. In this chapter we focus in on a solid Bible foundation to learn what the Bible reveals about baptism. We are not interested in the theories of modern religion, but rather we want a clear Bible foundation to base our practice of baptism on.

The debate about whether to immerse, pour, or sprinkle cannot be settled by taking a popular vote. If we did take such a vote, the issue still would not be settled. The losing side would reject the results and the controversy would still rage on. Our situation would be exactly the same as before the vote was taken.

The debate cannot be settled by following our emotions. People on both sides of this issue feel they are right. If feeling correct proves a person is correct, what do we do about people who feel correct but hold opposing positions? Two conflicting positions can't both be right at the same time. While emotions do have a place in Christianity, the place of emotions is not to settle doctrinal matters. Unfortunately, some people will let their hearts decide their position even though Proverbs 28:26 warns, *"He who trusts in his own heart is a fool."* We can't follow our heart. We must build on a solid Biblical foundation. Giving into our hearts only creates more confusion.

The debate cannot be settled by following preachers or other religious leaders. Some people rely on others to settle this matter, but this approach does not settle it. There are preachers on both sides of the issue. Some insist that immersion is the only way to practice baptism. Others insist that sprinkling or pouring are also acceptable.

Obviously, both sides cannot be right. Tragically, some people are making the mistake of blindly following blind leaders (Matthew 15:14).

The debated cannot be settled by following family tradition. Some people follow their family tradition and don't ask any questions. They simply trust that if their great grandfather, grandfather, and father did it, then it must be right. This does not resolve the issue because generations of great grandfathers practiced opposing traditions.

The idea of using a popular vote, emotions, preachers, or tradition to settle this issue falls short on a much more serious level. Doctrinal issues are not settled by these methods. Doctrine is settled in heaven by the will of God, which He has revealed in His word.

David wrote, *"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"* (Psalm 119:105).

Solomon wrote, *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death"* (Prov. 14:12).

Jeremiah wrote, *"O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps"* (Jeremiah 10:23).

These verses show us that there is only one foundation to build our hope on. That foundation is the Word of God. The Bible is the only place to find a safe answer. We dare not rely on any other source. We must search the Scriptures and humbly follow the Scriptures.

This humble little chapter will not settle the debate and bring all the opposing sides together. The country will not unite on the basis of this information. Not even a single state, county, city, or community will reach agreement based on this presentation. The only thing this booklet can do is help you settle this matter in your mind. This information can be instrumental in helping you decide where you should stand on this subject. You can come away from this chapter knowing why you believe

what you believe. You can have absolute confidence that your position is based on a solid Bible foundation. With these thoughts in mind, let us turn our attention to the Bible and see what the Word of God reveals.

Matthew 3:13-17

The practice that the New Testament describes quickly becomes evident in this first passage. Matthew wrote, *“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.”* Let’s first ask the simple question, was the water brought to Jesus or did Jesus go to the water? In this text Jesus went to the water. John the Baptist did not carry around a container of water to baptize people, but rather the people went out to him to be baptized.

Notice also that, *“Jesus came up immediately from the water”* (Matthew 3:16). In order for Jesus to come up from the water it is necessary that He first go down into the water. If we are to follow the example of Jesus, then we must follow His example of immersion.

Mark 1:5

Mark records, *“Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.”* The clarity of this passage requires no comment. The practice of the first century was clearly immersion. In this particular case it was immersion *“...in the Jordan River.”*

John 3:23

John 3:23 records, *“Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized.”* The baptism of the first century required *“much water.”* This

was not a little sprinkling process. It was immersion.

Supporters of sprinkling deny that the abundant water had anything to do with the baptism that John practiced. They claim that John chose this place of abundant water because it would have been a gathering place for people, thus he would have found an audience for his message. This point is open to some debate. An audience is certainly necessary for John to preach his message, but the consistent pattern of the New Testament remains immersion. If a gathering of people was the attraction of Aenon, then why didn't John simply write that John the Baptist was baptizing in Aenon because there were many people there? The natural point to be taken from the mention of much water in connection with John the Baptist is that the abundant water allowed John the Baptist to immerse those who accepted his message.

Acts 8:36-38

In Acts 8:38 Luke wrote, *“So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.”* Notice that the eunuch and Philip both went down into the water. They did not just approach the waters edge and sprinkle a little water on the eunuch, but rather, they both went down into the water.

The eunuch understood that baptism required a body of water large enough for immersion. The eunuch did not hold up his canteen and say, “Look, here is water what prevents me from being sprinkled.” The Bible clearly indicates immersion as the proper action of baptism.

Acts 22:16

Acts 22:16 records, *“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”*

The practice of baptism in the first century was one that brought to mind the idea of a washing. A washing naturally involves more than just sprinkling a little water upon someone. A little sprinkling would not provide enough water to suggest a washing, but the New Testament practice of immersion easily fits the idea of washing.

Romans 6:3-5

Paul wrote, *“Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death”* (Romans 6:4). Paul directly states that we are buried in baptism. The word buried gives us an undeniable description of the proper action to follow in baptism.

Ephesians 5:26

In this verse Paul wrote, *“That He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word.”* This reference to baptism as the *“washing of water”* suggests an action more significant than a little sprinkling of water.

Colossians 2:12

Again, Paul wrote, *“Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”* The word buried clearly indicates immersion as the practice in the first century. If we truly follow the teaching of the New Testament, then our practice in baptism must be immersion.

Titus 3:5

In this verse Paul wrote, *“...but according to His mercy He*

saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” The reference to baptism as a “*washing*” suggests an action more than merely sprinkling. Baptism in the first century was something that could be described as a washing.

Heb. 10:22

This verse reads, “*Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*” Again, the reference to baptism as having “*our bodies washed*” makes it clear that the practice in the first century was more than a mere sprinkling.

I Peter 3:21

Peter writes, “*There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*” Once again we see that the practice of the New Testament was one that used so much water that it washed the flesh. A mere sprinkling would not require this clarification by Peter.

Every statement, example, and inference of the New Testament points directly to immersion as the practice during the first century. Those of us who want to have confidence that our baptism is pleasing to God will settle for nothing less than immersion.

General Arguments in Favor of Immersion

In addition to the Bible verses considered so far in this study,

there are several other arguments to be made against pouring and sprinkling and in favor of immersion. We will look at those arguments at this time.

The Meaning of the Greek Word *Baptizo*

The word *baptize* is from the Greek word *baptizo*. The following excerpts from various lexicons give us the meaning of this word.

1. Bagster's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip, immerse.
2. Bass' Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip, immerse, or plunge in water.
3. Bloomfield's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to immerse, or sink anything in water, or other liquid.
4. Bretschneider's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to immerse into water, to submerge.
5. Bullinger's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to immerse for a religious purpose.
6. Constantine's Lexicon, *baptizo*: immerse, plunge, dip.
7. Cremer's Lexicon, *baptizo*: immerse, submerge.
8. Dawson's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip or immerse in water.
9. Dunbar's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip, immerse, submerge, plunge, sink, overwhelm.
10. Green's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip, immerse, to cleanse or purify by washing.
11. Greenfield's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to immerse, immerge, submerge, sink.
12. Grimm's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to cleanse by dipping or submerging,

to wash, to make clean with water.

13. Groves' Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip, immerse, immerge, plunge, to wash.

14. Hedericus' Lexicon, *baptizo*: plunge, immerse, cover with water.

15. Jones' Lexicon, *baptizo*: I plunge-plunge in water, dip.

16. Leigh's Lexicon, *baptizo*: the native and proper signification of it is to dip into water, or to plunge under water.

17. Liddell and Scott's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip in or under water.

18. Maltby's Lexicon, *baptizo*: immergo, to plunge, to immerse.

19. Parkhurst's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip, immerge, or plunge in water.

20. Pickering's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip, to dip under, to plunge, to steep, dye, or color.

21. Robinson's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to immerse, to sink.

22. Robson's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip in, immerse, to tinge, dye.

23. Scapula's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip, to immerse.

24. Schleusner's Lexicon, *baptizo*: properly, to immerse, to dip in, to dip into water.

25. Schrevelius' Lexicon, *baptizo*: to baptize, dip, immerse, wash, cleanse.

26. Sophocles' Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip, to immerse, to sink.

27. Stephanus' Lexicon, *baptizo*: plunge, immerse, likewise dip which is done by plunging.

28. Stockius' Lexicon, *baptizo*: generally and by force of the word it

has the notion of dipping in and of immersing.

29. Thayer's Lexicon, *baptizo*: to dip repeatedly, to immerge, submerge. To cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water.

30. Wright's Lexicon, *baptizo*: dip, immerse, plunge, saturate, baptize, humble, overwhelm.

As you can easily see, the word *baptizo* means to dip, immerse, or plunge. It does not mean to pour (The Greek word for pour is *ekcheo*) or sprinkle (The Greek word for sprinkle is *rhantizo*). If we follow the teaching of the Bible, and use Bible words in Bible ways, then our practice in baptism must be immersion. (The above excerpts were taken from the *Handbook on Baptism* by J.W. Shepherd, published by Gospel Advocate Co. Nashville, Tennessee, 1972.)

Referring to Greek Lexicons is common in a study of baptism, but the fact remains that few of us are Greek scholars. Most of us scarcely know Greek from Hebrew, and never will. Furthermore, if a person desires, he can shop around and find a scholar who supports his own point of view. This is possible because scholars don't always agree. So, if the scholars don't always agree, then what are the rest of us to do? How can we ever hope to settle this matter? The answer to this dilemma is surprisingly simple. We don't need to know a single thing about the Greek language to resolve this problem. We can simply do what has been universally accepted as good and proper in the eyes of God. We can practice immersion. When we do this, we can leave the scholars in their own little world to debate whatever technical points they desire to debate. We can take comfort in knowing that we have done that which is absolutely in harmony with the word baptism and in harmony with the practice of the first century Christians.

Baptizo Translates the Hebrew *Tabal*

When the Greek Jews wanted to translate the Hebrew word for immersion, *tabal*, they chose the word *baptizo*. For example, in II Kings 5:14 where Naaman dipped seven times in the Jordan, the Greek-speaking Jews chose the word *baptizo* to translate the Hebrew. This fact serves to further confirm for us that the action of baptism is immersion and not sprinkling.

Bible Words in Bible Ways

We cannot impose our own definition from some other time upon the word *baptizo*. Our authority must reside upon a solid Bible book, chapter, and verse foundation, not upon uninspired manuscripts from some other time. Unfortunately, some people think they have found divine authority for sprinkling in uninspired ancient manuscripts. In reality, all they have found is the recorded opinion of man. The age of the document does not change this fact.

People sometimes forget that words vary in meaning over time. Words even vary in meaning within the same time period depending on the particular usage the author intended. This is nothing new. The Random House College Dictionary lists 135 entries (yes, 135 entries) under the word *run*, but this does not mean we are at liberty to choose which usage we desire to apply to a particular context or subject. We must respect the usage the author has chosen.

The New Testament clearly shows us that it uses the word *baptizo* to indicate immersion. Therefore, we must respect the usage God has chosen. It does not make any difference if some fragment of a

letter, document, or other uninspired ancient manuscript can be found that uses the word in some other manner. We use Bible words in Bible ways. We respect God's usage regardless of what other men, in other times, might have done with the word. We follow the word of God, not uninspired manuscripts.

We Baptize the Person, Not the Water

We baptize the person, not the water. We dip, plunge, or immerse a person into the water. Mark 1:9 reads, "*Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*" Jesus was dipped, plunged, or immersed by John into the Jordan. Jesus was not poured into the Jordan. Jesus was not sprinkled into the Jordan. Jesus was dipped, immersed, or plunged into the Jordan. The only idea that stands the test of reason is that we dip, immerse, or plunge a person in water.

God's Plan of Salvation

Hear the Gospel: Romans 10:14-17

Believe: John 3:16; Hebrews 11:6

Repent: Luke 13:3, Acts 17:30,31

Confess: Romans 10:9,10; Matthew 10:32,33

Be united with Christ in baptism: Romans 6:3-5

None of the above steps save in and of themselves. It is the grace of God that appointed these as steps leading to the saving blood of Jesus. To get to the saving blood each step must be taken just as it is presented in the Bible. These steps only have value because God's grace has so granted. Without God's grace these steps would be worthless. Have you followed these steps to the saving blood of Jesus?

Do Not Add and Do Not Take Away

John wrote, *“For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book”* (Rev. 22:18,19. See also Gal. 3:15 and II Thes 2:15; 3:6.). Given the clear warning against making changes to God’s word, how could we dare take away the immersion so clearly taught and substitute pouring or sprinkling?

Making changes in God’s Word is spiritual suicide. Nadab and Abihu thought the little change they made would be acceptable to God, but they found out too late that God was not pleased with their new idea (Leviticus 10:1-3). Tragically, many today will learn too late that the many changes, alterations, and substitutions of modern religion are not acceptable to God (see Matthew 7:21-23). Many people think they are merrily on their way to heaven, but in reality they are still on the broad road that leads to destruction. They have been deceived by blind leaders (Matthew 15:14) and will be eternally disappointed when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

Why Take a Gamble?

Everyone agrees that immersion is acceptable to God. Even those who practice pouring and sprinkling believe that immersion is acceptable to God. Now, since there is a way that is infallibly safe, why gamble with a questionable practice? Why gamble with eternity? A person should wonder why modern preachers aren’t looking out for the best interests of members. Why do they engage in a practice that could result in eternal doom? That doesn’t sound like the kind of

preacher people ought to be trusting (Matthew 15:9,14).

The Union Occurs in *Baptizo*

In Romans 6:3-5 Paul wrote, *“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.”* We are united with Christ in *baptizo* (immersion), not *rhantizo* (sprinkling) and not *ekcheo* (pouring). The union takes place in *baptizo*.

II Thes. 2:15.

In this passage Paul wrote, *“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.”* Virtually every scholar agrees that the practice of the New Testament was immersion. All scholars do agree that immersion fulfills the requirements of *baptizo*. Given the agreement of scholars and the fact that Paul told us to *“stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle,”* the course we should pursue is crystal clear. To be faithful to New Testament teaching, we must practice immersion.

Arguments in Favor of Sprinkling

Unfortunately, all the preceding material will not be enough to convince some people. Some people will continue to argue in support of pouring and sprinkling. In this section we will take a look at some of the

arguments advanced to support the modern practice of pouring and sprinkling.

It's Just a Symbol

This argument claims that baptism is just a symbol of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection; therefore, the actual mode of baptism is irrelevant. This is perhaps one of the more illogical arguments in favor of sprinkling. If baptism is a symbol of Jesus' burial, then what

YOU ARE INVITED

Come visit with us, look us over, and ask any questions that you have about the church of Christ.

Sunday 9:00 A.M. Bible Study
Sunday 10:00 A.M. & 5:00 P.M. Worship Service
Wednesday 7:00 P.M. Bible Study

If you prefer, you may write or call, and ask us any question that you have. Mail your questions to:

CHURCH OF CHRIST

7115 West 65th Street

Little Rock Arkansas 72219-0062

E-Mail—donmclain@sbcglobal.net

Call—(501) - 568-1062

Web-Site—http://www.w65stchurchofchrist.org/My_Homepage.html

Elders

George Rumker
Louis Sharp
Bill Wharton

Deacons

Glen Gray
Brady Speer
Bennie Stephens
Karl Vandevender
Kevin Webb

Evangelist

Don McClain

symbolizes Jesus' burial and resurrection best? Immersion, of course. Neither sprinkling nor pouring symbolize the burial and resurrection of Jesus. A bystander would have no idea that death, burial, and resurrection were being symbolized by the action of sprinkling because sprinkling does not resemble a burial.

At times, this argument takes the approach that since Christians are not literally crucified on a cross (Gal. 5:24), why should we insist on a literal burial in water? We teach a literal burial in water because this is what the Bible teaches. It is what God said to do. In addition to teaching us that we are buried with Christ in baptism, He also instructed us not to add to or take away from His word (Gal. 1:6-9; 3:15; Rev. 22:18,19).

Also, this argument plays a tricky little game with the word "literal." Christians are not literally crucified as Christ was crucified, and they are not literally buried in a tomb, left for dead, as Christ was literally buried. The burial in water is a symbolic death, burial, and resurrection. It is not the literal physical death, literal burial in a cemetery, and literal resurrection that Jesus experienced. Yes, this symbol requires a literal burial in water but it is still a symbolic burial. It is not the literal process Jesus went through in His death burial and resurrection.

Historical Evidence Supports the Practice of Sprinkling

Historical evidence does exist that suggests sprinkling was practiced shortly after the first century. Historical evidence also tells us that sprinkling was limited to rare cases of severe illness where an immersion was not deemed feasible. History further tells us that such "baptisms" were considered second rate and opposed by many. In fact, for a time, anyone who had not been immersed was not allowed to hold any office within the church. History tells us many interesting things and it can be made to appear to support either side of the issue. But there is one thing history cannot do. It cannot give us the Bible book, chapter,

and verse where God authorized pouring or sprinkling as a substitution for baptism. We must remember that we do not base our faith upon a clever presentation of selected historical evidences. We base our faith upon the solid foundation of the Scriptures.

The Greek Word *Immergo* Means Immersion

This argument claims that if God had meant for baptism to be immersion, then He would have used the Greek word *immergo*. This argument overlooks the fact that the word *baptizo* is also a Greek word that means to immerse. God did choose a word that means immersion, but since God did not choose the specific Greek word that supporters of sprinkling wanted Him to choose, they refuse to respect the word He chose.

There are Sprinklings in the Old Testament

This argument is correct. There are various sprinklings in the Old Testament (see Exodus 29:20,21; Leviticus 14:7, 51; Numbers 8:7). There are also washings in the Old Testament (Exodus 40:12; Leviticus 14:8,9; Numbers 19:19). Neither set of verses proves what is to be done under the New Testament. All these verses do is tell us about some things that were practiced under the Law of Moses. These Old Testament practices may be interesting, but as Christians we follow Christ. He has all authority (Matt. 28:18-20). He tells us what we are to do today. His teaching, and the teaching of His disciples, repeatedly reveals that baptism is immersion.

The Word *With* and John 1:26-34

This argument focuses on John the Baptist's use of the word

“with” when he said, *“I baptize you with water.”* Based on this use of the word *“with”* it is claimed that what John meant was, *“I sprinkle you with water.”*

First, this is a weak argument at best due to the flexibility of the original Greek word that is translated *“with”* in the King James Version, but translated *“in”* in the New American Standard, the Williams, the New English, and others.

Second, this argument overlooks the fact that the immersion of baptism was also thought of as a washing (see Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:22; I Peter 3:21). John did wash people with the water of the Jordan when he immersed them into the Jordan. The word *“with”* does not exclude the idea of immersion. For example, a person washing dishes will first wash the dishes with soapy water, and then rinse the dishes with clean water. Anyone who has ever washed dishes understands that the use of the word *“with”* does not exclude the idea of immersion.

But What About the Sick?

This argument seeks to justify the common practice of sprinkling by appealing to rare cases. Supporters of sprinkling forget that proposed exceptions don't establish a common rule of practice. Our foundation must be a solid Bible book, chapter, and verse foundation, not unusual or hypothetical cases. This argument tugs at our heart and stirs up questions about such cases, but it does not give us one single Bible verse that authorizes us to substitute sprinkling for baptism.

But What About Grandmother?

This argument appeals to emotions to gain support for

sprinkling, but if a loved one is lost, then a loved one is lost. There is nothing we can do to change it. The support of all mankind cannot change this fact. If we decide to follow the same path that a lost loved one took, then we can only hope to be lost, too. If there was truly mutual love between a person and their dearly departed, then certainly, the dearly departed would not want them to be lost, also. If the departed could speak from beyond the grave, they would tell us to follow the way of God (Luke 16:27,28).

God requires that our loyalty be to Christ (Matt. 10:37). We

Request your free copy of this series today!

You can receive each chapter in this series starting with chapter one.

Send your name and address to:

CHURCH OF CHRIST; 7115 West 65th Street,
Little Rock Arkansas 72219-0062

Or E-Mail—donmclain@sbcglobal.net

And we will do the rest.

COMING NEXT CHAPTER

That They all
May
Be
One

John 17:21



Chapter eleven

The Old Testament in New Testament Times

Church of Christ,
7115 West 65th St.,
Little Rock, AR 72219-0062