

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MODE OF BAPTISM

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One issue that has concerned and divided Christians is the manner in which we should be baptized. Protestants have divided into different denominations over this issue. Lutheran and most Reformed churches practice baptism by sprinkling or pouring water on the person baptized. Baptist and many similar churches believe the only valid way to baptize is by immersing the person in water. While most churches that practice sprinkling or pouring believe that is the proper mode to use, being based on Scripture, they do recognize immersion as a valid mode, although not the proper one to use. Most immersionist churches, however, believe that the mode is essential, and that someone who has undergone sprinkling or pouring has not been baptized at all.

Arguments favoring these different modes of baptism can be divided into several categories: the meaning of the word *baptize* itself, the descriptions of individual baptisms in the New Testament, similar Old Testament and intertestament practices among the Jews, the practice of the early Christian churches as shown in literature and archaeology, and the significance of baptism as it relates to mode. This article will briefly summarize the first four of these arguments, but will concentrate on the final argument—the significance of baptism as it relates to mode. As the sign of the new covenant, baptism by sprinkling or pouring seems indicated by the Scriptures that describe that new covenant.

Position of the Westminster Standards

Perhaps the best creedal statement of Reformed theology is the Westminster Confession of Faith. It briefly states the classic Presbyterian position regarding the mode of baptism:

“3. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.”¹

The Confession says that baptism is “rightly administered” by pouring or sprinkling, and that immersion (“dipping”) is “not necessary.” “Rightly administered” meant that pouring or sprinkling had Scriptural support. The term “not necessary” meant to the Westminster divines that immersion should not be practiced in Reformed churches. They prohibited immersion because, by the exclusive principle, all worship forms that are not explicitly required by Scripture or necessarily derived from Scripture were to be avoided. It was only recently that the

¹ WCF 28:3. The Westminster divines cited the following Scriptures in support: Mark 7:4; Acts 1:5; cf. 2:3-4, 17, 41; 10:45-47; 11:15-16; 16:33; 1 Cor 10:2; Heb 9:10, 19-22.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has allowed immersion to be used at the discretion of local sessions.²

Reformed churches believed immersion was “not necessary” for valid baptism to take place. However, they did recognize baptisms by immersion as valid, although not “rightly” administered. It was not necessary for those who had been baptized by immersion to be rebaptized when joining a Reformed church. A sacrament may be valid although improperly administered; for example, baptizing by immersing the head only is an improper mode, but it does not negate the sacrament.

Summary of Other Arguments

The argument regarding the mode of baptism is lengthy and complex. This article will concentrate on the argument regarding the significance of baptism. Here is a brief summary of other arguments supporting the traditional Reformed position.³

Meaning of the word *baptize*

Immersionists claim that the Greek word *to baptize* (βαπτίζω *baptizo*) means *to immerse*.⁴ Hence, Jesus’ command in Matt 28:19 is a command to “immerse all nations.” Using any other mode would be disobedience to this command.

Careful examination of this word group, however, reveals that *immerse* would be a poor translation; the traditional transliteration *baptize* is much better, as the meaning is not modal at all. Rather, the word means that the object has been changed in some way by the outward element applied. Often it means to be made wet by water or some other liquid; this can be done by dipping, by pouring, or by sprinkling.⁵ The idea of bringing a change in the object baptized is well illustrated by the use of the term for dying—to “baptize” with blood can mean to “dye” with blood, again, using a variety of modes. Thus, when Jesus will defeat his enemies, his garments

² The PCUSA’s current policy: “The water used for Baptism should be common to the location, and shall be applied to the person by pouring, sprinkling, or immersion. By whatever mode, the water should be applied visibly and generously” (Book of Order W-3.3605). Traditionally, only two modes were permitted; for example, in 1950 this was the stated policy for infants: “He is to baptize the child with water, by pouring or sprinkling it on the head of the child, without adding any other ceremony,” and for adults: “The minister shall baptize the candidate by pouring or sprinkling water upon his head” (Directory for Worship 8:2-3).

³ For a more thorough discussion of these arguments, see John A. Battle, syllabus for Theology 4: The Church and Eschatology, chapter 5, “History of Baptism Through New Testament Times,” and chapter 8, “Mode of Baptism” (http://www.wrs.edu/courses/theology_4.htm).

⁴ This would be true for all the related verbs and nouns from the same Greek root.

⁵ As *bapto* (βάπτω) in Luke 16:24 (dipping tip of finger in water) and in Dan 4:33 and 5:21 LXX (condensation of dew); and *baptizo* in Mark 7:4 (ceremonial sprinkling of household items, in Luke 11:38 (ceremonial pouring of water over hands before eating), and in Heb 9:10 (sprinkling of blood in the OT law; cf. v. 13).

will be “baptized with blood,” dyed red, by having blood spattered upon them.⁶ There are many other examples where these terms are used with modes other than dipping or immersing.⁷

Descriptions of actual baptisms in the New Testament

Immersionists often claim that the language used to describe John’s baptism of Jesus and Philip’s baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch indicates immersion was used. John baptized “in (*en*) the Jordan.”⁸ After he was baptized Jesus “immediately went up (*anabaino*) out of (*ek*) the water,”⁹ or “from (*apo*) the water.”¹⁰ Philip and the eunuch “went down (*katabaino*) into (*eis*) the water” and “came up (*anabaino*) out of (*ek*) the water.”¹¹

Actually, these narratives employ Greek prepositions that have a wide variety of usage. *En* can mean “in, with, by means of”; *ek* can mean “out of, away from, apart from”; and *eis* can mean “into, unto, to, toward.”¹² Thus these phrases can well be translated “down to the water” and “up from the water.”

The earliest pictures and fonts available after Christ show baptisms taking place, usually with the person standing in shallow water with water being poured over his head. This would fit these NT examples, with John baptizing “in the Jordan,” that is, standing in the water while people came down to him to be baptized. The actual mode of baptism is not mentioned in the text. It says merely that people “went down” to the water to be baptized, and then “went up” the bank to dry ground again. This interpretation is confirmed in Acts 8—few would suggest that Philip immersed himself along with the eunuch, yet it says that *both* Philip and the eunuch “went down” to the water and then “came up” from the water. It is talking about their going to the place where the baptism took place, not to the baptism itself.

Many examples of baptisms in the NT support the idea that water baptism was a simple rite, performed easily and quickly in a variety of settings, sometimes when little water was available. Sometimes sprinkling or pouring are mentioned in the immediate context. These examples would include John’s baptizing at the Jordan and at Aenon near Salim, the baptism of

⁶ Rev 19:13, *bapto* used for “dye,” in this case not by immersion, but by spattering (cf. Isa 63:3, Heb. נָזַח *nazah* in the Qal stem). The translation “dipped in blood” in Rev 19:13 in many English translations is incorrect; it should be “dyed with blood.”

⁷ As Jdt 12:7 and Sir 34:25 in the LXX; also several examples in classical Greek in which shed blood “baptized” clouds, a lake, and the ground, cited by Kenneth Wuest, *Studies in the Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1945), 71; these examples contradict Wuest’s own conclusion that “*baptizo* means, ‘to dip, to immerse.’ It never means ‘to sprinkle’” (p. 75).

⁸ Matt 3:6 = Mark 1:5.

⁹ Mark 1:10.

¹⁰ Matt 3:16.

¹¹ Acts 8:38-39.

¹² These definitions are given in any standard lexicon or concordance. Young’s Concordance supplies all the English terms used to translate these prepositions in the KJV, along with the number of times each English term is used.

3,000 at Pentecost, Philip's baptizing the eunuch in the desert, the baptism of Saul, the baptism of Cornelius and his family, and the baptism of the Philippian jailer and his family.¹³ In these cases immersion would be difficult at least, and does not seem to be in view in the text. On the other hand, baptism by sprinkling or pouring fits in naturally with the text and with the historical setting.

Jewish ceremonial washings

While Jewish customs concerning various ceremonial washings are not the rule for Christian baptism, they do provide interesting background.¹⁴ The washings commanded in the OT were very frequently by sprinkling; that is why the author of Hebrews uses the term "baptisms" when describing the sprinkling of blood.¹⁵ Sometimes the OT regulations use the general term to "wash," in which case the mode is not specified.¹⁶

During the intertestament period the Jews developed many rules to safeguard the 613 commandments they found in the Torah.¹⁷ This adding to and explaining the law was developed orally and initially recorded about A.D. 200 in the Mishnah and then more fully in the Talmud about A.D. 500.

An example of this development is found in Mark 7:4, "When they [Pharisees] 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."¹⁸ This passage refers to the Pharisaical interpretations of Lev 15, which mentions ceremonial defilement of people, utensils, beds, and clothes. People, utensils, and clothes are to be washed.¹⁹ The Pharisees required frequent washings just in case such defilement might have taken place. Their requirements are not found in the OT; it is for this reason that Jesus did not always abide by them.²⁰ He accused the Jewish leaders of adding to the commands of God the commands of men, which sometimes even supplanted the commands of God.²¹

¹³ For details about these accounts that support an easily administered rite involving pouring or sprinkling, see Battle, "Chapter 8, Mode of Baptism," 8.13-14.

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Jewish ceremonial washings, see Battle, "Chapter 5, 'History of Baptism Through New Testament Times,'" 5.2-5.

¹⁵ Heb 9:10, 13.

¹⁶ Such as the cleansed leper, who must "wash" (רָחַץ *rachas*) himself in addition to being sprinkled by the priest (Lev 14:8).

¹⁷ According to Jewish tradition the Torah contains 613 commandments that God gave to Moses for the people to keep. Rabbis have counted 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments.

¹⁸ In Mark 7:4 the Greek words for "wash" and "washing" are *baptizo* and *baptismos*. The Pharisees did not immerse themselves, but rather had water poured over their hands.

¹⁹ E.g., Lev 15:4, 6, 9, 12, etc.; cf. Mishnah *Kelim* ("Vessels"), pp. 604-49 in the Danby translation.

²⁰ As in Luke 11:38, when Jesus "was not baptized" (Greek *ebaptisqh ebaptisthe*) before eating (that is, did not ceremonially have water poured over his hands).

²¹ As in Mark 7:9-13.

Since an unclean item falling into a vessel made the vessel and its contents unclean,²² the rabbis reasoned that water had to be poured or sprinkled over an item to purify the item; in that way the vessel and its contents would not be made unclean themselves. They noted that a large body of water was not contaminated by an unclean person going in it; therefore, they concluded, if a vessel of water would be of sufficient size, an unclean person or other unclean items could be cleansed in it without making the water unclean. They determined exact measurements to meet this requirement, generally being stated as water sufficient to immerse a man. The name given to a water bath of this size was a *mikveh*. Archeological examples of such *mikvehs* have been found near the Dead Sea in the village of Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, and on the fortress of Masada, the last place where the Jews held out against the Romans in A.D. 73.

Jewish ceremonial washings in *mikvehs* included proselyte baptisms as well as other periodic cleansings. The community of Essenes at Qumran insisted on many such washings for its members. Its *Rule of the Community* states that if the person is unfaithful to their covenant, then “he will not sanctify himself with seas and rivers or be made clean with any water for washing.” On the other hand, when it describes the actual cleansing procedure, it mentions the mode of sprinkling:

“But in a spirit of true counsel . . . and in the submission of his soul to all the statutes of God his flesh will be cleansed, that he may be sprinkled with water for impurity and sanctify himself with water of cleanness.”²³

While most scholars assume that immersion was the mode used in these Jewish washings, and while that is the practice now used, the literature itself does not require that this mode was used originally. In any case, these non-Scriptural practices are not normative for Christian baptism.

Early Christian baptism

The practice of the church after the apostolic age reveals the way that the early Christians understood the practice of baptism, handed down from the apostles and those who followed them. The writings of the church fathers are one source of information, and archeological research into early pictures, churches, and baptisteries is another source that helps us interpret the words of the fathers.²⁴ While the early church fathers’ language often is ambiguous, it seems that they concur in the early practice as normally being done while standing in water. Statements about actual mode are not at all definite until the third century, where they appear mixed (“water-bath, plunged, washed, sprinkled”).

One of the clearest statements is found in the *Didache*, a Christian document dated ca. A.D. 150:

²² Lev 11:33-34; Num 19:15.

²³ Translated by Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), 373; sometimes this document is called the *Manual of Discipline*.

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of early Christian baptism, see Battle, “Chapter 8, Mode of Baptism,” 8.14-19.

“But concerning baptism, thus you shall baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (running) water. But if you have not living water, then baptize in other water; and if you are not able in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵

This statement of the *Didache* can be taken in two ways: (1) immerse if possible, otherwise pour; or (2) baptize, if possible, with the person standing in running water or in a receptacle; otherwise, the person baptized may stand on the floor; in either case, pouring would be used.

Without the benefit of archeology to help interpret the early Christian literature, many in the past have assumed definition (1) to be the case. For example, John Calvin assumed immersion to be the ancient practice:

But whether the person being baptized should be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, whether he should only be sprinkled with poured water—these details are of no importance, but ought to be optional to churches according to the diversity of countries. Yet the word “baptize” means to immerse, and it is clear that the rite of immersion was observed in the ancient church.²⁶

However, archeological research since Calvin’s time has revealed that the early churches practiced baptism normally by having the person stand in water, with water being poured over the head.²⁷ This would agree with interpretation (2) of the *Didache*. In confirmation of this practice, the two earliest extant Christian church structures, dating from the third century, have baptisteries that are much too shallow to allow immersion.²⁸

Mode and the Significance of Baptism

While the various linguistic and historical arguments regarding the mode of baptism are important, the argument would not be complete without an examination of the meaning of baptism and the way that meaning relates to its mode.

²⁵ Ch. 7 (ANF 7:379b).

²⁶ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4:15:19; this statement frequently is cited by baptistic writers.

²⁷ There is much published research both into ancient pictures and frescos of baptisms and into early baptismal fonts and baptisteries. See B. B. Warfield, *Works*, Vol. 9, Ch. 12, “The Archaeology of the Mode of Baptism”; Clement F. Rogers, *Baptism and Christian Archaeology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903).

²⁸ The church of St. Babylas at Kaoussie and the house church in Dura-Europos; see Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past: The Archeological Background of Judaism and Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 499, 539-541; Finegan’s suggestion that the baptistery in Dura might be a memorial because he believes immersion was the usual mode of baptism is directly contradicted by the archeologist on the scene, Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 91.

Immersionist argument

There are two NT passages that relate baptism to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and thereby to the death of our old life and the birth of our new life.

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Rom 6:3-4)

. . . having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col 2:12)

Many proponents of each position believe that these passages are speaking of spiritual baptism, not water baptism. However, good arguments can be made that Paul is speaking of water baptism in the two passages. Yet, even if only spiritual baptism is in view, it seems reasonable that water baptism should reflect in its mode this same concept. Immersionists claim that immersion in water most closely represents the death-burial-resurrection figure.

Total symbolism of baptism

While baptism does signify our death and resurrection in Christ, its meaning is much broader.²⁹ The Westminster Larger Catechism lists seven different truths symbolized in baptism: “ingrafting into Christ, forgiveness of sins by his blood, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, adoption as God’s children, resurrection to everlasting life, admission to the visible church, and engagement to be the Lord’s.”³⁰ The Westminster standards link baptism to the covenant of grace. All these significances are positive or beneficial. It is possible to summarize these significances in the following way:

Union with Christ.—Paul mentions this aspect of baptism often, especially in connection with Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.³¹ God now sees us as in Christ, sharing his righteousness and standing. Some have made this particular significance the primary meaning of baptism.³²

Forgiveness of sins.—Very often baptism is linked to purification, cleansing, forgiveness, and acceptance with God.³³ In a similar manner the gospels associate John’s baptizing with forgiveness and cleansing.³⁴

²⁹ For a more thorough discussion of this topic, see John Battle, “Chapter 6, Significance of Baptism,” http://www.wrs.edu/courses/theology_4.htm.

³⁰ WLC 165.

³¹ Rom 6:3-6; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Gal 3:27-28; Col 2:11-12.

³² As John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 6.

³³ Acts 2:38; 22:16; Col 2:12-13; Heb 10:22; 1 Pet 3:21.

Regeneration and baptism by the Holy Spirit.—Water baptism symbolizes our spiritual baptism, our regeneration by the Holy Spirit, just as physical circumcision symbolized spiritual regeneration.³⁵

Initiation into the visible church.—Christ commanded all his disciples to be baptized, and it was the standard way for believers to publicly confess Christ and join the visible church, the body of believers.³⁶ Since baptism and circumcision signify the same thing, baptism has replaced circumcision as the means to enter the visible church.³⁷

Baptism should symbolize all of these elements, not just that of death and resurrection with Christ. The sprinkling of water and blood and the pouring out of the Spirit are scriptural terms and figures for these spiritual blessings. In the Scriptures the modes of sprinkling and pouring are most often associated with these concepts. Baptism by sprinkling or pouring best symbolizes the totality of these blessings.

Baptism and the new covenant

In addition to the implied covenant God made with Adam when he was created (the “covenant of works”) there are several covenants explicitly mentioned in the Bible that God made with humans on the earth. These include the covenants with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, and the new covenant. These covenants provide the backbone of biblical theology. Covenant theology, developed since the Reformation, has demonstrated that these biblical covenants are outgrowths or further enactments of a divine plan, which can be framed as a covenant among the persons of the Trinity. Theologians have called this divine covenant the covenant of redemption, or, when applied to us, the covenant of grace. In particular, the Father determined that the Son would take a human nature, perfectly obey the Father’s law, and suffer and die for the sins of the elect. In return for this obedience, the Father would reward him with an eternal kingdom and a people to be his own. These elect people would be gathered by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

From Adam until Abraham there were individual believers and believing families or clans, but no outward organized body of the church. In Gen 17 God appeared to Abraham and

³⁴ Matt 3:6 = Mark 1:4 = Luke 3:3. John 3:25 shows that his baptism was considered a purification. Cf. the “washing” in 1 Cor 6:11.

³⁵ Regeneration in Titus 3:5; water and Spirit baptism linked in John 1:33 = Acts 1:5 = Acts 11:16; either could be referred to in 1 Cor 12:13 and Gal 3:27. Rom 2:28-29 and Col 2:11-13 identify the parallel significance of baptism and circumcision. The OT itself provides these positive significances of circumcision: Gen 17:10; 34:14-17; Exod 12:44, 48; Deut 10:12-13, 16; 30:6; Josh 5:7-9; Jer 4:4, 14; 9:24-26.

³⁶ Matt 28:19; Acts 2:41 and many other examples in the NT.

³⁷ 1 Cor 7:18-20; Gal 2:3-5.

³⁸ Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17 contains these elements. For a concise biblical defense of this theological covenant and its relation to the biblical covenants, see John Battle, “Premillennialism and Covenant Theology,” *WRS Journal* 2:1 (Winter 1995): 2-6.

again declared his covenant with him, that God would be his God and the God of his descendants. At that time God instituted the sacrament of circumcision as the rite of initiation into that covenant. Covenant theologians date the beginning of the visible church as an institution from that date.³⁹

Throughout the remainder of the OT history circumcision was required for entry into the covenant community of God, the visible church. The covenant with Moses added the tabernacle system with its Levitical priesthood and multitude of sacrifices. The covenant with David promised a perpetual kingship for that family, specifically, the great messianic king. However, the types and prophecies of the OT pointed to the coming of the Messiah and a better day ahead, when God would not only bring the Messiah, but would give a new heart to his people, to obey God's law and receive all the blessings promised in these covenants.⁴⁰

When Christ came he fulfilled all the demands of the old covenants, and instituted the new covenant.⁴¹ Before Christ came it was not yet revealed that the messianic coming would take place in two phases, first he would come to suffer, then he would come again in glory to judge and to rule; this truth was made known in the NT.⁴² Therefore, the present dispensation exists in a tension, often called "already, and not yet." Some aspects of the new covenant are now in place, but the fullness of its fulfillment will take place in the future, at the second coming of Christ.

Likewise, it was also newly revealed in the NT that the Gentiles would be made equal partakers with the Jews in the promises of the new covenant. They would do this without having to become proselytes to Judaism.⁴³ In keeping with this new state of affairs, the administration of the visible church changed. The sacrificial and temple laws were abrogated, having been fulfilled by Christ's sacrifice. Circumcision, a sign marking primarily the physical descendants of Israel, was no longer required. Rather, baptism, a sign of the universal blessings of the new covenant, became the new ritual for both Jew and Gentile to become a part of the visible church. It is for this reason that we can refer to baptism as a sign of the new covenant, and thereby as a sign of the covenant of grace.

Ancient covenant initiation

During the twentieth century archaeologists unearthed thousands of texts from the ancient Near East (ANE) dated thousands of years before Christ. The transcription and translation of many of these texts provide scholars with a far greater understanding of the

³⁹ The Reformers saw in the Abrahamic covenant the necessary marks of the visible church: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline.

⁴⁰ In particular, Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:24-38.

⁴¹ At the institution of the Lord's supper—"this is my blood of the covenant" in Matt 26:28 and Mark 14:24, and "the new covenant in my blood" in Luke 22:20; cf. 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 12:24.

⁴² 1 Pet 1:10-12.

⁴³ Eph 3:2-9. The development of this new theological concept is one of the main themes of the book of Acts.

historical, cultural, and legal background of the OT. Of special importance is the use of covenant formats in international relations during that era. ANE covenants followed a set pattern, including a historical introduction, the parties of the covenant, the requirements of the covenant, the rewards for obedience and penalties for disobedience, and a provision for periodic reading and renewal of the covenant. This pattern is duplicated in the book of Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the OT. George E. Mendenhall has pioneered in this area for the past fifty years, relating the international covenants of the ANE to those found in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁴ These studies reveal that the Mosaic covenant closely follows the form of international covenants of the second millennium B.C. (the time of Moses).

An important feature of ancient covenants was the initiatory ritual. The king (the “vassal”) being bound to a covenant by a greater king (the “suzerain”) was required to make a sacrifice and call down imprecations on himself if he should break that covenant. Echoes of that custom are seen in God’s passing between the pieces of the animals as he confirmed his covenant with Abraham and in the nobles’ passing between the pieces of animals (figuratively speaking) in the days of Jeremiah.⁴⁵

In a similar manner both circumcision and baptism are initiatory rituals, bringing the person under the terms of the Abrahamic and new covenants. These rites picture what are called the sanctions of the covenant—the sanctions being either the promised rewards for obedience or the threatened punishments for disobedience. They picture life, and they picture death.

In particular, baptism pictures the positive benefits spelled out in traditional Reformed theology, but it also pictures death, the divine penalty for disobedience. That is why Jesus could refer to his own approaching suffering and death as a “baptism.”⁴⁶ For the believer baptism pictures the death of Jesus (and our death in him) because of our sins and the life of Jesus (and our new life in him) because of his obedience. On the other hand, for the unbeliever baptism pictures the threat of death that his sin and unbelief bring upon him. Baptism does not automatically regenerate a person, but it does place him in a position of greater privilege and obligation as a member of God’s covenant community, and places him under the sanctions of the new covenant.

This understanding of the significance of baptism harmonizes all the various Scriptural passages into one concept, which in turn corresponds to ancient practice. If this correspondence is correct, the underlying significance of baptism is that we place ourselves and those under us (children, in the NT) under the obligations of the new covenant. Baptism would therefore symbolize our obligation to accept the blessings available through faith and obedience, and the

⁴⁴ In the 1950s Mendenhall wrote several monographs published by the American Schools of Oriental Research, and several books since then, as *The Tenth Generation: Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (1974) and *Ancient Israel’s Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context* (2001); he summarized his findings in “Covenant,” *IDB* 1:714-723. The special application of these findings to the doctrine of the sacraments has been ably expounded by Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

⁴⁵ Gen 15:8-21; Jer 34:18-20.

⁴⁶ Mark 10:38-39.

curses resulting from disobedience and rebellion. Ultimately it pictures Christ, who took those covenant curses on himself so that we, through faith in him, could receive the blessings of the new covenant.

Mode as it relates to the new covenant

Since baptism primarily represents the new covenant and its sanctions, its mode may be determined by examining scriptural passages related to the establishment and operation of the new covenant. This examination reveals that sprinkling and pouring are the primary modes associated with this covenant; immersion is not referred to in any of these passages.

Some passages describing the new covenant (such as Jer 31) do not contain any of these modal terms. But several other new covenant passages do. Here is a brief account of them:

Isaiah 52:15.—This verse introduces a classic passage predicting the coming Messiah, his sufferings, and his reward of a kingdom of the elect (Isa 52:13-53:12). When the suffering Messiah comes, he will sprinkle many nations.⁴⁷ This refers to the cleansing of the Gentiles that will result from the new covenant. When the Ethiopian eunuch read this passage, Philip taught him that it was speaking of Jesus; the eunuch believed and, as a result, Philip baptized him, presumably and most appropriately by sprinkling.

Ezekiel 36:24-27.—This passage describes the blessings that are to befall Israel when God fulfills the new covenant. It will produce regeneration, a new heart of flesh given by God's Spirit. In the immediately preceding parallel statement God says, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean."

Joel 2:28-32.—God predicts that in the last days he would "pour out his Spirit on all people" and bestow miraculous spiritual gifts on them, and there will be an influx of new believers; this will be followed by "the great and dreadful day of the Lord." This promise is similar to Zech 12:10, "I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit [or Spirit] of grace and supplication." During his Pentecost sermon Peter said that Joel's prophecy was being fulfilled as the Christians exercised their special spiritual gifts.⁴⁸ This "pouring out" of the Spirit was called a "baptism" of the Holy Spirit by John the Baptist,⁴⁹ and is one of the signs of the introduction of the new covenant. In the book of Acts occurrences of the baptism of the Holy Spirit were accompanied at the same time with water baptism.⁵⁰ The mode of pouring, as well as that of sprinkling, fits well with this prophetic context.

⁴⁷ נִזְרָה *nazah* in the Hiphil stem, meaning ceremonial sprinkling to produce cleansing; this is the consistent meaning of the term in the OT. In the Qal stem the term means to sprinkle or spatter in a non-ceremonial sense. Some conjecture the meaning here to be "startle," because there is no element (water, oil, blood, etc.) mentioned in the verse; this conjecture has no support in the term's usage.

⁴⁸ Acts 2:17.

⁴⁹ Matt 3:11 = Mark 1:8 = Luke 3:16; John 1:33.

⁵⁰ Acts 2:41; 10:46-47.

Hebrews 10:19-22.—The author of Hebrews describes our status under the new covenant; now we can draw near to God, “having our heart sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” The two expressions “bodies washed” and “hearts sprinkled” are parallel. The sprinkling of our hearts by the blood of Christ is metaphoric of spiritual cleansing; the washing of our bodies probably refers to water baptism as picturing the cleansing of our hearts. The mode of sprinkling would be most appropriate in this case. The previous context in Hebrews clearly links this mode to the new covenant. Hebrews 8 quotes at length the prophecy of the new covenant in Jer 31. Hebrews 9:10-15 states that the “sprinkling” of blood to purify people outwardly has been replaced in the “new order” by the “cleansing” produced by the blood of Christ on our consciences. The parallel term for “sprinkling” in Heb 9 is “baptisms.”⁵¹ Since sprinkling often was of blood, this mode therefore symbolizes death and burial, as well as new life under the resurrection.

Conclusion

Baptism by sprinkling or pouring has strong scriptural support from the usage of the terms employed and from the historical situation. In addition, the significance of baptism provides confirmation of these modes. Baptism is the initiatory rite that brings one into the covenant community of God (the visible church) and into the terms of the new covenant. As such it signifies the curses and the blessings of the new covenant; it obligates the person to believe in Christ so that he will bear the covenant curses in his place; it also warns the person of the serious nature of that obligation. The new covenant is described in several Scriptures; in those contexts immersion is never mentioned; rather, whenever a mode is mentioned in the context, it is pouring or sprinkling. The teaching of the Westminster Standards on the mode of baptism is confirmed both by traditional biblical exegesis and by newer research into the background of the biblical covenants.

⁵¹ “Sprinkling” in Heb 9:13, 19, 21; “baptisms” in Heb 9:10 (Greek; the NIV translates “ceremonial washings”).