

Baptism 01: Survey, Sacrament, Sign, and Seal

INTRODUCTION

1. The practice of baptism is shared by all legitimate, Christian (and some heretical, non-Christian) traditions.
 - But the doctrine and practice of baptism is very different across denominational and historical lines.
 - Churches disagree on the mode, subjects, circumstances, and significance of baptism into Christ.
2. Our congregation has gone through a significant and unforeseen change on this issue.
 - Last year I became convinced of the basic premises of covenant theology and shortly after of paedobaptism.
 - I never expected or intended to change my view of this issue, and I offered to the elders to resign because of it.
3. But in the last four months we have baptized children, including one infant, from four families in our church.
 - I have been so humbled by and thankful for the general peace and loving spirit accompanying this change.
 - But this issue must be carefully studied; we do not have to agree, but we must, at least, understand each other.
4. This lesson is foundational; before we talk about infant baptism, we must understand baptism in general.

I. BAPTISM: A SURVEY OF THE NT DATA

A. *Baptism in the Ministry of John*

1. John the Baptist preached repentance to the people and baptized believers in the Jordan. **Matt. 3:1-6**
 - His ministry looked forward to the coming of the Christ. **Matt. 3:11-12** (cf. Acts 19:1-7)
 - Jesus personally endorsed the baptism of John by submitting to it. **Matt. 3:13-17** (cf. 21:23-27)
2. *Baptism of repentance unto remission of sins* (βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν) **Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3**
 - Those who acknowledged their sins confessed them and were baptized by John. (cf. Matt. 3:6)
 - Because John's baptism was commissioned by God, to reject it was to reject God's will. **Luke 7:27-30**
3. Ultimately, John's baptism was superseded by the ministry of Christ. **John 3:26-30** (cf. Acts 18:24-19:7)
 - His work was preparatory to Messiah's coming, a radical call of repentance to the covenant nation.
 - The people of God needed to turn away from their sins, look to the Lord in faith, and be cleansed.

B. *Baptism in the Ministry of Jesus*

1. Baptism continued in Jesus' ministry, His disciples administering the rite to believers. **John 3:22-24; 4:1-2**
 - Jesus may be alluding to baptism at His meeting with Nicodemus, though some dispute it. **John 3:1-5**
 - This interpretation has a long history and strong parallels in the NT. (cf. Acts 2:38; Tit. 3:4-5)
2. Jesus ordered baptism in the Great Commission given to the disciples at His ascension. **Matt. 28:18-20**
 - The Lord commanded them to make disciples by *baptizing* (βαπτίζοντες) and *teaching* (διδάσκοντες).
 - These are imperative participles set in parallel, defining *how* the nations are to be discipled.

C. *Baptism in the Ministry of the Apostles*

1. The Book of Acts is full of examples of people responding to the apostles' preaching by being baptized.
 - On the Day of Pentecost 3,000 received the message of Christ and were baptized. **Acts 2:36-41**
 - When the Samaritans believed the good news of Jesus, men and women were baptized. **Acts 8:12**
 - The Ethiopian eunuch requested baptism after hearing and believing in Christ. **Acts 8:35-38**
 - Saul prayed 3 days as a believer and was told to wash away his sins in baptism. **Acts 9:18; 22:12-16**
 - Cornelius and his household heard the gospel, received the Spirit, and were baptized. **Acts 10:44-48**
 - The Lord opened Lydia's heart to the gospel, and she and her house were baptized. **Acts 16:14-15**
 - The Philippian jailer believed on the Lord and then he and his family were baptized. **Acts 16:30-34**
 - When the Corinthians believed the gospel, they were baptized. **Acts 18:8** (cf. 1Cor. 1:14-16)
2. The Epistles give us additional insight into the nature and purpose of baptism in the Church.
 - Baptism identifies a person with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. **Rom. 6:1-7**
 - Baptism is *not* the gospel, so Paul carefully distinguishes the two in his teaching ministry. **1Cor. 1:17**
 - Baptism is a visible symbol of our partaking of the Holy Spirit and entering Christ's Body. **1Cor. 12:13**
 - Baptism is associated with becoming a child of God and putting on Christ as a garment. **Gal. 3:26-29**
 - There is one baptism, and it stands in significant relation to key doctrines of the faith. **Eph. 4:4-5**
 - Baptism portrays spiritual circumcision cutting away our sins as we are united to Christ. **Col. 2:11-12**
 - Baptism saves us, not as a literal, physical act, but in fulfilling biblical typology. **1Pet. 3:18-20, 21-22**
 - In addition to these explicit references, many other allusions could be cited and studied.
 - The crossing of the Red Sea is a type of baptism to be examined in a later study. **1Cor. 10:1-4**
 - Baptism signifies the invisible washing of the Church by Christ. **Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:4-5; Heb. 10:22**

II. BAPTISM: A SACRAMENT OF THE NT CHURCH

A. What We NOT Mean by "Sacrament"

1. Many evangelicals have an aversion to the term *sacrament* because of Roman Catholic connotations.
"Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify." (Catechism, 1127)
"This is the meaning of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: 'by the very fact of the action's being performed'), i.e., by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that 'the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God.' From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it..." (Catechism, 1128)
2. Many evangelicals refuse to use the term *sacrament*, but this is ahistorical and unfortunate.
 - The problem is not the term but what Rome makes of the term; we should not surrender it lightly.
 - *Sacrament* is from the Latin *sacramentum* and has been used since the early history of the Church.
3. The Bible is clear that a person is *justified by faith apart from the works of the law* (Rom. 3:28)
 - Works of obedience are set in antithesis to the simple act of trusting in Christ alone. (cf. Rom. 4:4-5)
 - While works are important and necessary in the Christian life, they are fruit and evidence of faith, not the instrument by which one is justified before God. (cf. Eph. 2:8-10; 2Tim. 1:9; Jas. 2:14-26)
4. Some will say, "Yes, but the sacraments are not works of man but the work of God in our lives."
 - But baptism and the Lord's Supper are something we are commanded to *do*, not simple trust alone.
 - Moreover, our understanding of the sacraments must align with the Bible's own description of their function in redemptive history. (e.g. Rom. 4:9-12; Luke 23:39-43; 1Cor. 10:1-5; cf. Gen. 15:6)

B. What We DO Mean by "Sacrament"

1. One of the most helpful explanations is Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book IV, Chapter 14.
A sacrament is "is an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men. We may also define more briefly by calling it a testimony of the divine favour toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith towards Him." (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.14.1)
2. Unfortunately, many evangelicals so strenuously object to "sacrament" they reject Scriptural language.
 - Would you say the following to a penitent believer? **Acts 2:38-39; 22:16; 1Cor. 12:13; 1Pet. 3:21**
 - Is it truly because we fear misunderstanding, or do we not believe what the Bible actually says?
3. The Bible uses *sacramental language* to describe the relationship between baptism and salvation.
 - The Westminster Confession of faith describes this relationship *very well*:
 - I. Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word.
 - II. There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.
 - III. The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither does the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that does administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers. (WCF 27 *Of the Sacraments*)
 - This carefully and effectively describes the balance between Rome's view and mere symbolism.
4. Rome has a false view of baptism and the gospel, but many evangelicals have made an opposite error.
 - They see the error in Rome's sacramental theology and they overcorrect into the other ditch!
 - They so reduce the significance of baptism as to deny the very language the Bible uses to describe it.
 - Some churches even minimize baptism, indefinitely postpone it, and offer the Supper without it.
5. Baptism is not "just" a symbol; it is not meaningless; it was given to us by Christ for a powerful reason.
 - It visibly portrays the gospel, a physical demonstration of invisible grace washing and uniting us.
 - Baptism identifies us with Christ and His Church; it is not optional. **Gen. 17:14; Matt. 22:11-14**
6. But baptism is not itself saving. Its effect is not efficacious but representative, just like the Lord's Supper.
 - Baptism *does* signify and seal the grace promised by God in the gospel to those who are in Christ.
 - But it is not *instrumental* in bestowing grace; it is *not* causally connected. (cf. Acts 9:10-19; 10:44-48)

III. BAPTISM: A SIGN AND SEAL OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

A. *Baptism is a Sign of What?*

1. Every covenant between God and man in the Bible is accompanied by some type of covenant sign(s).
 - The covenant at creation (Covenant of Works) had the tree of life signifying eternal life with God.
 - The covenant with Noah has a rainbow signifying God's promise not to destroy the earth with water.
 - The covenant with Abraham had circumcision, a sign to be studied more in a later lesson.
 - The covenant with Moses had circumcision and the Passover (and perhaps Sabbath and sacrifices).
 - The covenant with David may be an exception to this pattern but is set in the Abrahamic/Mosaic.
2. Many different signs, presented in different forms, but they all have certain features in common.
 - None of these covenant signs are:
 - An empty symbol
 - An optional ritual
 - A rite which conferred grace by its own merit or made one righteous
 - A condition for entering the covenant
 - A deed of human or intrinsic merit
 - But every one of them is:
 - A confirmation of the covenant previously made by God
 - A sign of the covenant relationship between God and His people
 - A demonstration of covenant loyalty when remembered or observed by people
 - A requirement of the covenant (Adam lost the tree by sin; the rainbow simply "is" set in place)
 - A seal authenticating the promises made by God (cf. Rom. 4:11)
 - This is why sin in the Adamic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic covenants forfeits right to the signs.
 - The promises are received by faith, not by the action of the sacrament or of the Church.
3. Baptism is a sign of the New Covenant, and it functions in the same way as the former covenant signs.
 - This is seen in their redemptive historical relationship and in the NT. (cf. 1Cor. 10:1-4; Col. 2:11-12)
 - Baptism marks those under the covenant with Christ just as earlier signs marked the community.
4. Baptism points to Christ and to the promises of God made to those in Him, promises received by faith.
 - Baptism does not primarily point to me or my faith; it shows it, but its main significance is objective.
 - Unfortunately, individualistic western culture conditions us to think of salvation as more about me.

B. *Baptism is a Seal to Whom?*

1. A seal in the ancient world served to authenticate and, to some extent, preserve an official document.
 - In the same way, circumcision sealed the righteousness of God promised to Abraham. **Rom. 4:11**
 - But notice, this same covenant seal, authenticating the promise, was given to Abraham's infant son.
2. Does this mean everyone circumcised in the OT was sealed as righteous before God? Clearly not!
 - But it does mean the promise of righteousness was authentic; whoever believed would be saved.
 - Similarly, baptism affirms God's promise in Christ, whoever believes will be saved. (cf. Mark 16:16)
3. Because the covenant sign is primarily objective, it was placed on infants *before* they believed.
 - Whether and how this relates to our understanding of baptism will be explored in future lessons.
 - But in this lesson we are emphasizing the nature of that sign and seal, not who should be given it.
4. Many were circumcised, but only those who believed received the promise of it. **Deut. 10:16; 30:15-20**
 - Why would Israel be punished if they rejected the Lord? *Because they were under the covenant!*
"For, seeing that nothing is to be expected beyond the promise, and the promise no less denounces wrath to the unbeliever than offers grace to the believer, it is an error to suppose that anything more is conferred by the sacraments than is offered by the word of God, and obtained by true faith."
(John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.14.14)
 - Baptism is a sign of the covenant and seals the promise, but faith is required to actually possess it.

PRAYER OF REFLECTION

Heavenly Father, as we begin this study of baptism, we come wanting only to know and to believe and to do whatever Your word teaches. We thank You for Your graciousness in making covenants with humankind, for establishing a covenant of grace whereby people can be saved through the atoning work of Your blessed Son. We pray, O God, that Your Spirit would help us as we study in the coming days. Enlighten us, guide us, help us, and strengthen us, that Your will might be made known, Your word might be believed, and Your work might be done in this church and in each of our lives. To You be the glory forever, O God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in the name of our Savior we pray. Amen.

Selected Quotations from

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV Chapter 14 *Of the Sacraments*

A sacrament is “is an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men. We may also define more briefly by calling it a testimony of the divine favour toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith towards Him. You may make your choice of these definitions, which in meaning differ not from that of Augustine, which defines a sacrament to be a visible sign of a sacred thing, or a visible form of an invisible grace....” (14.1)

“From the definition which we have given, we perceive that there never is a sacrament without an antecedent promise, the sacrament being added as a kind of appendix, with the view of confirming and sealing the promise, and giving a better attestation, or rather, in a manner, confirming it. In this way God provides first for our ignorance and sluggishness, and, secondly, for our infirmity; and yet, properly speaking, it does not so much confirm his word as establish us in the faith of it. For the truth of God is in itself sufficiently stable and certain, and cannot receive a better confirmation from any other quarter than from itself. But as our faith is slender and weak, so if it be not propped up on every side, and supported by all kinds of means, it is forthwith shaken and tossed to and fro, wavers, and even falls.” (14.3)

“The seals which are affixed to diplomas, and other public deeds, are nothing considered in themselves, and would be affixed to no purpose if nothing was written on the parchment, and yet this does not prevent them from sealing and confirming when they are appended to writings. It cannot be alleged that this comparison is a recent fiction of our own, since Paul himself used it, terming circumcision a seal (Rom. 4:11), where he expressly maintains that the circumcision of Abraham was not for justification, but was an attestation to the covenant, by the faith of which he had been previously justified.” (14.5)

“Sacraments... are exercises which confirm our faith in the word of God.” (14.6)

“For just as a building stands and leans on its foundation, and yet is rendered more stable when supported by pillars, so faith leans on the word of God as its proper foundation, and yet when sacraments are added leans more firmly, as if resting on pillars. Or we may call them mirrors, in which we may contemplate the riches of the grace which God bestows upon us. For then, as has been said, he manifests himself to us in as far as our dulness can enable us to recognise him, and testifies his love and kindness to us more expressly than by word.” (14.6)

“We conclude, therefore, that the sacraments are truly termed evidences of divine grace, and, as it were, seals of the good-will which he entertains toward us. They, by sealing it to us, sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith.” (14.7)

“For, seeing that nothing is to be expected beyond the promise, and the promise no less denounces wrath to the unbeliever than offers grace to the believer, it is an error to suppose that anything more is conferred by the sacraments than is offered by the word of God, and obtained by true faith.” (14.14)

“I say that Christ is the matter, or, if you rather choose it, the substance of all the sacraments, since in him they have their whole solidity, and out of him promise nothing.” (14.16)

“They do not of themselves bestow any grace, but they announce and manifest it, and, like earnest and badges, give a ratification of the gifts which the divine liberality has bestowed upon us.” (14.17)

Additional Quotations from

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV Chapter 14 *Of the Sacraments*

“And hence it may be justly said, that such sacraments are ceremonies, by which God is pleased to train his people, first, to excite, cherish, and strengthen faith within; and, secondly, to testify our religion to men.” (14.19)

“Wherefore, with regard to the increase and confirmation of faith, I would remind the reader (though I think I have already expressed it in unambiguous terms), that in assigning this office to the sacraments, it is not as if I thought that there is a kind of secret efficacy perpetually inherent in them, by which they can of themselves promote or strengthen faith, but because our Lord has instituted them for the express purpose of helping to establish and increase our faith. The sacraments duly perform their office only when accompanied by the Spirit, the internal Master, whose energy alone penetrates the heart, stirs up the affections, and procures access for the sacraments into our souls. If he is wanting, the sacraments can avail us no more than the sun shining on the eyeballs of the blind, or sounds uttered in the ears of the deaf. Wherefore, in distributing between the Spirit and the sacraments, I ascribe the whole energy to him, and leave only a ministry to them; this ministry, without the agency of the Spirit, is empty and frivolous, but when he acts within, and exerts his power, it is replete with energy. It is now clear in what way, according to this view, a pious mind is confirmed in faith by means of the sacraments—viz. in the same way in which the light of the sun is seen by the eye, and the sound of the voice heard by the ear; the former of which would not be at all affected by the light unless it had a pupil on which the light might fall; nor the latter reached by any sound, however loud, were it not naturally adapted for hearing. But if it is true, as has been explained, that in the eye it is the power of vision which enables it to see the light, and in the ear the power of hearing which enables it to perceive the voice, and that in our hearts it is the work of the Holy Spirit to commence, maintain, cherish, and establish faith, then it follows, both that the sacraments do not avail one iota without the energy of the Holy Spirit; and that yet in hearts previously taught by that preceptor, there is nothing to prevent the sacraments from strengthening and increasing faith. There is only this difference, that the faculty of seeing and hearing is naturally implanted in the eye and ear; whereas, Christ acts in our minds above the measure of nature by special grace.” (14.9)

“The sacraments are confirmations of our faith in such a sense, that the Lord, sometimes, when he sees meet to withdraw our assurance of the things which he had promised in the sacraments, takes away the sacraments themselves. When he deprives Adam of the gift of immortality, and expels him from the garden, “lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and live for ever” (Gen. 3:22). What is this we hear? Could that fruit have restored Adam to the immortality from which he had already fallen? By no means. It is just as if he had said, Lest he indulge in vain confidence, if allowed to retain the symbol of my promise, let that be withdrawn which might give him some hope of immortality.” (14.12)

“That which God instituted continues firm, and retains its nature, however men may vary; but since it is one thing to offer, and another to receive, there is nothing to prevent a symbol, consecrated by the word of the Lord, from being truly what it is said to be, and preserving its power, though it may at the same time confer no benefit on the wicked and ungodly. This question is well solved by Augustine in a few words: ‘If you receive carnally, it ceases not to be spiritual, but it is not spiritual to you’ (August. Hom. in Joann. 26). But as Augustine shows in the above passages that a sacrament is a thing of no value if separated from its truth; so also, when the two are conjoined, he reminds us that it is necessary to distinguish, in order that we may not cleave too much to the external sign. ‘As it is servile weakness to follow the latter, and take the signs for the thing signified, so to interpret the signs as of no use is an extravagant error’ (August. de Doct. Christ. Lib. 3 c. 9). He mentions two faults which are here to be avoided; the one when we receive the signs as if they had been given in vain, and by malignantly destroying or impairing their secret meanings, prevent them from yielding any fruit—the other, when by not raising our minds beyond the visible sign, we attribute to it blessings which are conferred upon us by Christ alone, and that by means of the Holy Spirit, who makes us to be partakers of Christ, external signs assisting if they invite us to Christ; whereas, when wrested to any other purpose, their whole utility is overthrown.” (14.16)

The Proper Mode of Baptism

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Introduction

What is the proper mode by which baptism is to be administered? Three different modes are attested in the history and contemporary practice of the Christian Church: sprinkling, pouring (affusion), and immersion. Yet Christians are sharply divided over the proper administration of baptism. Those who practice sprinkling or pouring will also accept, and sometimes also practice, baptism by immersion. But those who only practice baptism by immersion typically reject sprinkling or pouring as no baptism at all. So which is it? Can baptism be rightly administered by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion, or is immersion the only proper mode of biblical baptism? This paper will attempt to answer this question, briefly and in layman's terms so as to benefit the average church member. We will demonstrate that baptism in the Bible is associated with a variety of modes of administration and that sprinkling, pouring, or immersion will suffice for biblical baptism so long as the other elements of valid baptism are present.¹

Definition of Terms

Those who contend that baptism can only rightly be administered by immersion usually begin their argument by pointing to the lexical definition of the relevant Greek terms. It is true *baptizo* means “to dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge”² and *baptisma* means “immersion, submersion.”³ But this is not the end of the debate. Indeed, it is only the beginning. While these terms can certainly mean *immersion* and frequently do in classical Greek texts, the ways these terms are used in the New Testament must ultimately determine their meaning there. Context is important to the debate. If it can be demonstrated from the New Testament these terms apply to baptism by some means other than immersion, then we cannot rightly argue that immersion is the only proper mode of baptism.

Baptism as Washing or Purification without Immersion

In the New Testament the Greek words for *baptize* or *baptism* are used several times to describe ceremonial washing or purification that did not include immersion (Mark 7:4; Heb. 6:2). When a Pharisee invited Jesus to a meal “he was astonished to see that He did not first wash before dinner” (Luke 11:38). The word for *wash* in this verse is *baptizo*, the same verb used to describe Christian baptism repeatedly in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 22:16; Rom. 6:3; etc.). Did the Pharisee expect Jesus to take a bath before eating, or is *baptizo* being used to describe ceremonial washing that did not involve immersion? Similarly in Hebrews baptism (*baptismos*) is used to describe Old Testament rituals of purification that were administered by sprinkling, not immersion (Heb. 9:6-22). The writer uses *baptismos* to describe “the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer” (9:13; cf. Num. 19) as well as the time when Moses “took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people” (9:19; cf. Exod. 24:5-8) and when “in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship” (9:21; cf. Exod. 40:1-16). All of these washings were a type or shadow of the purification Christians receive under the priesthood of Christ in the New Covenant (Heb. 9:22-26). So clearly *baptism* is used in the New Testament to describe forms of ritual purification that did not involve immersion.

¹ The elements of valid baptism would include water (Acts 8:36-38), a Trinitarian faith (Eph. 4:4-6; cf. Acts 19:1-7), and the intention of the parties to actually administer true baptism (Acts 2:36-41). These elements are not discussed or defended in this paper, but the author would welcome the opportunity for further explanation of these elements.

² Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 94.

³ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

Baptism as Symbolic of Identification or Union without Immersion

Baptism is also used to describe Israel's identification with Moses and their salvation from Egypt when they crossed the Red Sea. Paul parallels Israel's exodus and the New Testament Church by noting, "Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1Cor. 10:1-4). Once again, the text has *baptizo*, the same word used throughout the New Testament to describe Christian baptism. Paul says Israel was baptized in the cloud and in the sea, but clearly they were not immersed (Exod. 14:22, 29). It was the Egyptian army that was immersed, and they drowned when God closed the waters on them (Exod. 14:28, 30).

If Israel was not immersed in the sea, in what sense were they baptized? The point of the passage is that crossing the Red Sea was a type or shadow of Christian baptism. The Israelites passed through the water on dry ground and were identified with their Savior-figure, Moses, who was a forerunner and type of Christ. When the Israelites passed through the sea they left slavery in Egypt and the power of Pharaoh behind. They were identified with a new leader, they were united to their Savior, and Paul says that Savior who led them, watered them, and accompanied them through the wilderness was Christ. Baptism does the same for believers today. In baptism we leave behind our slavery to sin and the dominion of Satan. We are identified with a new Leader and united to our Savior, Jesus Christ. He is the one who leads us through death and will bring us safely to the Promised Land. Israel's crossing of the Red Sea was a form of baptism, but it was not administered by immersion.

Baptism as Metaphorically Overwhelmed without Immersion

There are at least two passages where baptism is used to describe a great ordeal or being metaphorically overwhelmed without literally being immersed in any way. Jesus said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50) The Lord was not referring to His baptism by John or the practice of baptism administered by His disciples. He was referring to the trial of suffering He would soon undergo to redeem the people of God. This is the same experience he seems to have in mind when He asked James and John, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38) James and John would, indeed, be baptized with a baptism of suffering like Jesus' own (Mark 10:39; cf. Acts 12:1-2; Rev. 1:9), though clearly not with its atoning effect. In both passages Jesus uses baptism to describe an overwhelming experience, but one that did not involve actual immersion. While it may be observed these verses have nothing to do with the ritual of baptism prescribed by the Lord, they help us understand how the term is used in the New Testament.

Additional Observations

There are a number of practical considerations that must be taken into account as we determine whether baptism requires a particular form of administration. These considerations are not determinative in themselves, but they appropriately caution us from too quickly deciding that immersion alone is biblical baptism. None of these will be developed in detail, but the reader is encouraged to weigh them carefully in studying this question.

First, there are the examples in the New Testament. Are we certain every example of baptism in the New Testament is an example of immersion? Can we even be certain that any of the baptisms described in the New Testament actually involved immersion? Immersion-only advocates typically appeal to passages like John 3:23 which says, "John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there." Also Acts 8:38 which relates, "They both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him." But do these passages prove that John fully immersed those who came to him for baptism? Was Philip immersed along with the eunuch since "they both went down into the water"? The truth is neither passage is conclusive. God could certainly have provided enough water for Philip to immerse the eunuch, but since they were in the desert, it is also possible they used a small pool where immersion was not possible. It is possible the 3,000 baptized on Pentecost in Jerusalem were all immersed (Acts 2:41), but it is questionable whether enough baths and pools would have been available for them to do so. If baptism signifies ritual purification in the Bible, then it is just as possible the 3,000 were baptized

by sprinkling or pouring, rather than immersion. The same could be said of the Philippian jailer and his household who were baptized in the city in the middle of the night (Acts 16:33, cf. v.25). The fact is all of these cases appear to indicate immersion if we assume that is how baptism is performed. But none of them actually describe immersion. It is entirely possible some or all of these baptisms were performed by some other means.

Second, there is the symbolism of baptism in the New Testament. Immersion-only advocates will frequently point to Romans 6:3-4 and suggest that only immersion can truly symbolize death and burial with Christ. But this argument overlooks two important facts. The Jews in Jesus' day did not bury in the ground, as we most often do in western culture. Jesus' body was placed inside a tomb, not buried underneath the earth. Baptism identifies us with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, whether or not the rite visually portrays it. Additionally we should note that baptism symbolizes many other things besides burial with Christ, none of which are effectively portrayed by immersion. Baptism is symbolic of being washed (Acts 22:16), clothed (Gal. 3:27), circumcised (Col. 2:12), and sprinkled (Heb. 10:22). It is also associated with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:16-21, 38-39). I personally prefer the mode of immersion, and would recommend its use in most cases. It does visually depict a union with Christ that overwhelms and buries and the rising from water to a new life. But the question is does the Bible require immersion? Is it the only proper mode by which baptism can be administered? Despite my personal preference for the imagery of immersion, the weight of New Testament evidence seems to clearly say no.

Third, there is the testimony of Church history. Scholars debate when sprinkling and pouring first came to be used for baptism, but there is no doubt they were the preferred forms for much of the Church's history. Tradition is by no means determinative for those who believe in *sola Scriptura*. But we should not quickly discount the weight of that tradition. If immersion is the only acceptable mode of Christian baptism, then most of the fathers, theologians, and teachers throughout the centuries misunderstood it. Moreover, we would be compelled to say most of them were never properly baptized, if immersion is the only proper mode. All of us should be willing to stand on the word of God regardless of history and tradition, but we must be very certain of our arguments before we decide so many believers through so many centuries were wrong on this issue and were actually disobedient.

Fourth, there is the question of Christian fellowship. Every congregation of God's people must take seriously the question of who should be admitted and who should be excluded. No one wishes to erroneously exclude a true believer (Acts 9:26-28), but we should be careful not to welcome those clearly rejected by the Lord (2Jn. 9-11; 3Jn. 9-10). The immersion-only view of baptism has significant implications for the question of Christian fellowship. Should we refuse conscientious, God-fearing disciples who believe their baptism by sprinkling or pouring was sufficient? We are not suggesting there should be no standards for proper baptism.⁴ We are suggesting that because of the biblical evidence against a single mode of baptism, Christians should not be divided over this question.

Conclusion

The debate over the proper mode of baptism will continue. Nothing new has been said in this brief essay, nor is it likely these arguments will convince those strongly committed to an opposing point of view. But I pray these observations will be helpful for those open-minded enough to reconsider their position and re-examine the Bible's teaching on the proper mode of baptism. Baptism is very important (Matt. 28:19), but it is not the gospel (1Cor. 1:17). Each of us must be obedient to the word of God insofar as we understand it, but we must never lose sight of the fact that Christ's work alone is the basis for our salvation (Gal. 6:14). We are not saved by a perfect theology or even a proper practice of baptism. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, or we are not saved at all (Eph. 2:8-9). Therefore, let us approach this issue with humility, with charity, with patience, and with deep gratitude for the fellowship we have as believers and members of the Body of Christ.

⁴ For example, Mormons baptize "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." But because their view of God is non-Trinitarian and their doctrine of Christ is clearly heretical, virtually all Christian churches refuse to accept their baptism. This is not only appropriate but necessary, in my judgment (Acts 19:1-7).