

Baptism

The Case for Pouring



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The question sometimes arises, “Which method of baptism is more fitting in view of Biblical teaching and precedent?” Some groups advocate pouring (sometimes referred to as *affusion*). Others advocate immersion, with the officiant submerging the applicant completely under water one or more times.

The arguments advanced for immersion include these:

- 1. The etymology (origin) of the word *baptism* indicates immersion.**

Some scholars claim that in the Greek language, from which we get the word *baptism*, the construction of the word suggests repeated dippings, immersing, or submerging. Others disagree.

2. The wording of some New Testament baptism accounts seems to indicate immersion.

When Jesus was baptized, He came out of the water at the Jordan River. After the Ethiopian became a believer along the Gaza Road, he went down into the water with Philip to be baptized.

3. Some historians are under the impression that early baptism was by immersion.

A number of writers of church history and other religious books seem confident that immersion was the common mode of baptism in the first few centuries of Christianity.

4. The imagery of certain doctrinal passages appears to point to immersion.

Immersion proponents suggest the imagery in Romans 6:1-6 and Colossians 2:12, of being "buried with him by [or *in*] baptism" and "risen with him," indicates the process of being immersed.

However, there are also Biblical,

reasonable, and compelling arguments for pouring. Here are a number of them:

1. The symbolism of pouring is more apt.

Pouring corresponds to what water baptism symbolizes: the baptism of the Holy Spirit that saves a person and makes him a child of God. Referring to the Spirit coming at Pentecost, God promised, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (Joel 2:28; compare Acts 2:17). At the house of Cornelius, "on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 10:45). It is fitting that the water symbolizing the pouring out of the Holy Spirit also be poured upon the person.

2. Bible examples point to pouring as the method used.

On the day of Pentecost, the apostles baptized three thousand people. They didn't go to the Jordan; it was miles away. The authorities would hardly have permitted a large pool of water such as the Pool of Siloam to be used for the immersion of three thousand people; it was used for drinking. The various small ceremonial

pools used by the Jews for cleansing could possibly have been used, but three thousand immersions would likely have strained their capacity, and again, there would have been Jewish authorities to deal with. It seems most reasonable that the apostles baptized by pouring.

At Paul's baptism in Ananias's house in Damascus, it is unlikely that he would have been immersed if Ananias baptized him on the spot when he stood up (Acts 9:17, 18; 22:12-16).

In the case of Cornelius, "Can any man forbid water?" suggests bringing a small quantity of water (Acts 10:47).

At the baptism of the Philippian jailer, it appears unlikely that Paul and Silas took him and his household to a river or the city's public bathhouse in the wee hours of the morning to be immersed.

In the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, both Philip and the eunuch "went down into" the water and came out again. To use the language of this passage to insist on immersion because they went down "into the water" would seem to argue that Philip immersed himself also! Early sketches of

baptism show both the pastor and applicant standing in shallow water with the pastor pouring the water on the head of the new believer.

3. The etymology of words is not definitive.

The etymology of the word *baptism* is not really significant. Pages of discussion have been written about the root words of the word *baptism* and how these root words have been used by Plato, the Septuagint, Josephus, and others. There appears to be much evidence for *baptism* to mean “immersion” and much for it to mean “pouring.”

Ultimately, however, a word’s etymology does not determine its meaning, for many words have meanings that bear little resemblance to their origin or original meaning. For example, *nice* originally meant *silly* or *foolish*. But *silly* went the other way; it originally meant *worthy* or *blessed*; and then it came to mean *weak*. A *clue* was originally a ball of yarn. *Naughty* originally referred to a person who had *naught* (*nothing*).

4. Old Testament incidents point to pouring.

The New Testament mentions several Old Testament incidents directly in relation to baptism. In 1 Corinthians 10:1, 2, Paul wrote, "I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea." On this occasion the Israelites passed between walls of deep water, but the water that made them wet came from above; for according to Psalm 77:17, "The clouds poured out water."

Peter, in teaching that water baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God, mentioned Noah's ark as a type or figure of baptism (1 Peter 3:20, 21). When Noah's family was safely in the ark, "the windows of heaven were opened" (Genesis 7:11). The ark was rained on but not immersed.

5. Romans 6 does not teach a particular mode of baptism.

Paul here is teaching about our identification with Christ, which baptism symbolizes.

“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Romans 6:3-6).

Being baptized into Jesus means identifying with Him and becoming a part of His body. Being buried with him by baptism speaks of identifying with Him in His death by dying to sin. Being raised up with Him is identifying with His resurrection, rising up and walking in victory over sin because we have been made alive by the baptism of His Spirit. The passage speaks of spiritual realities occurring in the heart of the new believer and how they work out in his life. Water baptism is the outward rite symbolizing all of these.

As Bible expositor Lloyd Hartzler said, "There's no water in Romans 6."

Likewise, in Colossians 2:12, where the phrase "buried with him in baptism" appears, the preceding verse speaks of circumcision. The circumcision in verse 11 is spiritual, "made without hands." The baptism in verse 12 is also spiritual and does not address mode.

6. Early sketches show baptism as pouring.

The earliest sketches of Christian baptism are of pouring, with immersion showing up later, perhaps around A.D. 150. Historian Philip Schaff wrote, "It is remarkable that in almost all the earliest representations of baptism that have been preserved for us, this [the pouring of water from a vessel over the body] is the special act represented" (*History of the Christian Church, Volume 2*, page 249).

Evangelist and Bible student A. D. Wenger visited the catacombs near Rome around the turn of the twentieth century. These underground passageways and tombs were used for burial, and early

Christians hid in them in times of persecution, holding services in them when it was unsafe to do so aboveground. He describes his visit in the book, *Six Months in Bible Lands*, on pages 102-104.

Wenger tells about asking to see frescoes and sketches of baptisms on the walls of the underground passageways. After seeing two illustrations of baptism by pouring, he asked his guide to show him one showing baptism by immersion. The guide replied, "There are none."

7. Pouring is universally practical.

Pouring can be used in any climate and in exceptional circumstances, such as the baptism of a person in a hospital bed or in a prison. Pastor David Showalter wrote about the "privilege of sharing in a baptism for a babe in Christ who was on her deathbed in the hospital. Her pastor, an immersionist, was not able to grant her request for baptism, but had grace enough to ask us to administer the rite for him. Three days later the woman passed to her reward with peace of mind and with faith in Jesus."

Another practical point in pouring is that the one who does the baptizing handles the water, not the person being baptized. No handling of another's body is necessary. In addition, considering that baptism generally takes place in the presence of the brotherhood, pouring does not compromise the modesty of the applicant, whereas immersion is more likely to do so.

The Scriptures, history, and practical issues make a strong case for pouring as a thoroughly Scriptural and preferable mode of baptism. Many churches that baptize by pouring do not require someone baptized by immersion to be rebaptized, but accept baptism by immersion as valid. They do, however, resist the teaching that immersion is the only valid mode of baptism.

Whether one receives water baptism in the "correct" way is not the most important issue related to baptism. Rather, the most important matters are these: Is the applicant truly converted, and does his life clearly reveal he is walking with God? If not, he is not ready for baptism.

To insist that only one mode of baptism can be correct is dangerous because

doing so adds a condition for salvation beyond what the Scripture gives. Perhaps a paraphrase of Romans 14:17 would be appropriate here: "For the kingdom of God is not [pouring or immersion]; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."
-Howard Bean

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