

Immersion : The True Meaning of Baptism

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It is with great diffidence that we enter into controversy, but a recent article, "The Mode of Baptism: How Baptism should be Administered" (*Free Presbyterian Magazine*, January and February 1997), compels us to do so. We do so in the way J.C. Philpot took up his pen in an identical situation in 1857: lest 1. our silence should be construed as inability to answer, and 2. the beliefs of any who are not well established should be shaken. We seek to write under the influence of grace.

The subject of the article is that the correct mode of baptism is sprinkling or pouring, though immersion can be allowed. The writer, Mr. K.M. Watkins, divides it into four sections:

- 1 The Meaning of the Greek Word
- 2 The Recorded Instances of Baptism in the New Testament
- 3 The Symbolic Import of Baptism
- 4 The Spirit of the Gospel

He writes very strongly against immersion.

I. The Meaning of the Greek Word

Our New Testament word "baptize" is the Greek word *baptizo* left untranslated. What does the word mean? We do not know how fluent Mr. Watkins is in Greek; we ourselves have never learned the language, and so have to rely entirely on the opinions of others. We readily confess this at the outset.

However, it seems clear that the normal everyday meaning of *baptizo* is "to dip," "to immerse." J.C. Philpot writes: "We have examined, we believe, nearly every passage in which the word *baptizo* is used in the Greek authors, besides consulting the best Lexicons in Latin, English and German, and as we shall presently show, we cannot find in any one of them that the Greek word *baptizo* ever means pouring, or sprinkling, or putting on." He further writes: "The chief pity is that our translators did not render it, as they ought to have done, *dip*."

Mr. Watkins, though, confuses the whole matter from the beginning by saying, "it is not unusual for Scripture's answer to lie not on the surface of her pages, but much deeper" - thus the plain, obvious answer is not the answer. He further makes, as a foundation, the claim that if in one instance only the word *baptizo* does not mean dip or immerse, then the Baptist case is overthrown. Not so! The learned writers agree that the word is sometimes used in a metaphorical and different sense but this is never its primary meaning. As we see it, simply, to give an English comparison: the meaning of the word "dip" is obvious - to "immerse"; yet we do have expressions like "dipping into a book" where the word does not mean "being immersed" in it. But this does not affect the normal meaning of the word. But even if *baptizo* is occasionally used in a different sense, it certainly does not mean "sprinkle" or "pour."

Mr. Watkins refers to an early Father using the word *baptizo* for being baptized in blood, or in tears - which he says cannot be immersion. Of course, we agree; but this is a secondary, metaphorical use, whose meaning is plain to all.

After bringing in irrelevant references to the Septuagint, Mr. Watkins refers to 1 Corinthians 10. 2 and 1 Peter 3. 21 where the word *baptizo* is used. He contends that Israel was not immersed in the cloud and the sea, nor was Noah, in the ark, immersed. But we see no difficulty here. The word is used metaphorically. Israel's passing under the cloud and between the walls of sea on each side was like an immersion, as was the time when the ark was enveloped by the sea beneath and the falling water from above.

A final point is the use of *baptizo* in Mark 7. 4, where *baptizo* is used for the washing of cups and pots, brazen vessels and tables, and also in Luke 11. 38 where the Pharisee used it for washing. It is claimed that it is "an act of desperation" to claim that all these were immersed. But Dr. Gill, than whom there was no more outstanding scholar in Hebrew customs and lore, claims that they were. But even if this could be definitely disproved, *baptizo* is used occasionally, in a secondary and metaphorical sense, to mean "washing."

Mr. Watkins concludes that what he has said overturns our "mistaken dogma" and establishes themselves "upon the unassailable rock of truth." We beg to disagree. *Baptizo* means to dip.

II. The Recorded Instances of Baptism in the New Testament.

It is here that Mr. Watkins is at his weakest. Again and again he has to have recourse to explaining away passages (which point conclusively to immersion) by saying the translation is wrong. Surely this is dangerous ground.

The vast majority of the Lord's people cannot understand Greek. How can they then come to any judgment on any point of our most holy faith? If we accept that most of the baptism passages are wrongly translated, what do we say when the Jehovah's Witnesses at our doors contend that the passages concerning the Godhead of Christ are wrongly translated? But why did the learned 1611 translators put these passages (wrongly, we are told) in the Baptist sense? They were all, as far as is known, paedobaptists.

Matthew 3. 6 tells us they "were baptized of him in Jordan." This seems clearly to point to immersion. But, no, Mr. Watkins says it could be translated "at," not "in." J.C. Philpot, replying to the identical point in 1857, comments: "That it could not, nor anything like it. And as a proof, we challenge Mr. Baxter (who had written the book on sprinkling) to bring forward a single received translation where it is so rendered; in fact it could not be so translated without violating all the laws of translation."

Again, we think of the end of Matthew 3, the beautiful account of the baptism of Jesus - we believe immersed in the waters of Jordan to prefigure His awful baptism of suffering when immersed in the Father's wrath against the sins of His people.

"The waves of swelling grief
Did o'er His bosom roll,
And mountains of almighty wrath,
Lay heavy on His soul."

We read (verse 16), "And Jesus, when He was baptized, went up straightway out of the water." But, no. Again Mr. Watkins says this is a wrong translation: it should be "went up straightway *away from the water*."

To us one of the clearest passages of Scripture is the baptism of the eunuch (Acts 8): "They went down both into the water ... And when they were come up out of the water . . ." What could be clearer? The translators have blundered again, we are told. (Why should they blunder over the baptism passages every time and give a rendering- in favour of immersion when they themselves were paedobaptists? It seems rather strange.) Mr. Watkins says it should read: "They went down both to the water ... And when they were come up away from the water . . ."

But then an unbelievable argument is used. If we are right in saying the eunuch was immersed, then Philip must have been immersed too! Surely two people can go down into the water for different purposes - one to baptize, and the other to be baptized?

For instance, a doctor and his patient go into the surgery together but not for the same purpose: one to treat, and other to be treated.

It almost seems too much when we come to the well-known text (John 3. 23): "John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, *because there was much water there*," to be told that yet once more the translators have made a mistake; it should be "many waters." But, even so, we are told, the water was needed for the people to drink.

We pause here. Surely there is something wrong when the case against immersion has to be built on the paedobaptist translators making mistake after mistake - and that, whenever the Word of God gives an instance of baptism. But are they not usually regarded as some of the most able linguists this country has ever known? And there were over fifty of them who had to agree. What authority has a present-day writer to say again and again that they were mistaken? We believe the case is clear.

Again, we confess that we do not understand Greek; but following Mr. Philpot's hint above mentioned, we looked at the translation of the above passages in various versions - Wycliffe (1380), Tyndale (1534), Cranmer (1539), Geneva (1557), and even the Roman Catholic Rhemish version (1582), and find that not one of them agrees with the translation Mr. Watkins has contended is the right one.

Following this, Mr. Watkins contends for the impossibility of the baptism in the Acts of the Apostles being by immersion, because of 1, the vast numbers; 2, the lack of water.

Dr. Gill refers to 10,000 being baptized in one day in the River Swale by a monk named Austin - mentioned in Foxe's Book of Martyrs. He also mentions 20,000 Russians being baptized in a day in the tenth century, mentioning that the ancient Russian church only baptized by immersion. But apart from the apostles, were there not the seventy to assist - whilst it is a well-known fact of Baptist history that the actual act of baptizing has not been totally limited to ministers?

Gill also refers to ample amounts of water in Jerusalem private baths for ceremonial uncleanness; many pools in the city; various places in the temple, the dipping room for the high priest, the molten sea for the common priests, the ten brazen lavers, etc.

Dr. Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine* (1841), lists the Pool of Bethesda, Solomon's Pool, the Pool of Siloam, the Upper Pool, the Pool of Hezekiah and the Lower Pool of Gihon, giving the ample dimensions of each. Concerning the last named, he states: "In this spot alone, three thousand or any number might have been baptized the same day."

Mr. Watkins' most unsatisfactory conclusion to a most unsatisfactory section is Acts 9. 18: he "arose, and was baptized." Another wrong translation! It should read, "Standing up, he was baptized." But if this conclusion is unsatisfactory, the last sentence is astonishing: "many of the recorded instances of baptism in Scripture rule it (immersion) out completely."

We pause here to state that most of the old paedobaptist divines confessed that baptism in Scripture was by immersion. We give a few examples out of many.

Luther: "I could wish that such as are to be baptized should be completely immersed into the water, according to the meaning of the word and the significance of the ordinance, as also without doubt it was instituted by Christ."

Calvin: "The word baptize signifies to immerse, and the rite of immersion was practised in the ancient church."

Wesley: Romans 6. 4: "The allusion is to the ancient manner of baptizing by immersion."

Chalmers: Romans 6. 4-7: "The original meaning of the word baptism is immersion ... We doubt not that the prevalent style of the administration in the apostles' days was by the actual submerging of the whole body under water."

All these were "infant sprinklers" and even in the context of some of the above passages contend for this - which makes all the more telling their confession that "from the beginning it was not so."

But perhaps the most interesting of all is the little-known fact that the rubric for infant baptism in the Church of England (according to the prayer book in use for 300 years) was: "And then naming it after them, if they shall certify him that the child may well endure it, he shall dip the child in the water discreetly and warily. But, *if they certify that the child is weak*, it shall suffice to pour water upon it."

Others who could be quoted are:

Cyril of Jerusalem; Dr. Owen; Mosheim's Church History; Prof. Moses Stuart; Jeremy Taylor; Beza; Bishop Bloomfield; Neander; Dr. Doddridge; Dr. Whitby; Archbishop Tillotson; Cardinal Wiseman; Bossuet; Grotius.

Some of these were Roman Catholics - but they have no difficulty in maintaining that baptism in the New Testament means immersion. They contend that the infallible church has the authority to change it to sprinkling!

III The Symbolic Import of Baptism.

Believers' baptism by immersion is a beautiful ordinance. It is an ordinance for sinners. The baptismal pool represents the grave of the Lord Jesus.

"View the rite with understanding;
Jesus' grave before you lies;
Be interred at His commanding;
After His example rise."

In being baptized by immersion, the believer declares that, as a sinner, his only hope is in the death, burial and resurrection of the Son of God. Secondly, he declares his desire that, being buried in baptism, he has died to his past life and to any hope of salvation through the law, and desires to rise again to newness of life. Thirdly, he sees the sacred privilege of following his Lord and Master when "He Himself, in Jordan's river, was immersed beneath the stream." Fourthly, his hope is that as he is now buried beneath the water, and rises again, so in the great day he will rise with Christ at the resurrection of the just.

Now all this is very sacred to us and, to us, appears to be firmly based on the biblical teaching of Romans 6, verses 3 and 4, and Colossians 2, verse 12. Yet Mr. Watkins to our amazement emphatically denies this, claiming that effusion more fully represents the truth. He says we set "all the other rich truths aside" - but the Holy Ghost does use the symbol of burial. It is not one we have chosen. And to say that burial in Scripture is not burial beneath the ground, as in Britain today, misses the point. When a person was buried, albeit in a cave, his whole body was hidden from sight; otherwise, why use the term "burial"? But how sprinkling can set forth this we do not know. Some of us have seen such a beauty in "being buried with Christ" and such a sacredness in obeying His commandments and following Him.

But then, to our astonishment, we are told that there is no significance in the burial of Jesus. We feel this is a solemn assertion. We have seen such a beauty in the Saviour's burial in the garden tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea. But:

1. The apostle, in 1 Corinthians 15, in giving a summary of the faith lists three things: Christ died; He was buried; He rose again. Why particularly mention the burial of Jesus, along with the other vital truths of His death and resurrection, if there is no significance?

2. The burial of Christ was the plain and clear evidence that He truly died. He lay three days and nights in the cold grave to set forth clearly the fact of His death. So it is those who have died with Christ who are commanded to be buried with Christ in baptism as an emblem of their death to sin, the law and the world.

3. The burial of Jesus is part of His great work of identification with His people. "When He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him." Must His people go to the cold, dark grave? Jesus has gone before, and in His glorious resurrection, He has taken the sting from death and the victory from the grave. Over the open grave of a believer, we can say, "Come, see the place where the Lord lay." Dr. Watts was an infant sprinkler, but he clearly saw the beautiful significance of the burial of Jesus.

"Why should we tremble to convey
Their bodies to the tomb?
There the dear flesh of Jesus lay,
And left a long perfume."

The graves of all His saints He blessed,
And softened every bed;
Where should the dying members rest,
But with their dying Head?"

Finally, Mr. Watkins contends that baptism symbolises "Purification from sin." We agree. But we cannot agree that this is better symbolised by sprinkling. We read of a fountain opened for sin and uncleanness (Zech. 13. 1), and like Peter we have to say, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." Painfully feeling our defilement, we want to be "plunged in that crimson ocean, Christ's atonement made for sin."

IV The Spirit of the Gospel.

This part of Mr. Watkins' article saddened us most of all. We believe his language is most unworthy of a minister of the gospel. He first contends that sprinkling is more suitable for tiny children and the aged, in cold climates as well as hot, saying that "we cannot think that God would command a sacrament of universal obligation to professors of the true religion and their children that would preclude many from its benefit and endanger the health of others." We have never heard of anyone's health being injured by being baptized by immersion. We have heard of the opposite those who have been most unwell *until* their baptism, and have been better afterwards. (One of our present-day ministers, we believe, crawled or hobbled to the baptismal pool, but walked away.) But it is dangerous to sit in judgment on the wisdom of God.

Mr. Watkins then says infant sprinkling is more simple - and gives a most exaggerated, almost ludicrous, account (which we will not repeat in our pages) of all kinds of peculiarities which he says attend the administration of the ordinance. "It has to be seen to be believed!" he remarks.

But the conclusion which suggests *indecent* in women being baptized by immersion is an insult to Baptists right down the ages, ever since the Lord was immersed in Jordan. We are most surprised that this was ever allowed to appear in print. He ends: "What? Shall the one God command that in day to day living, 'Women adorn themselves in modest apparel,' and then in the special day of baptism command them to appear so immodestly? God forbid."

It is sad that any minister or magazine should stoop to this, and it shows the paucity of arguments in favour of infant sprinkling when such arguments have to be sought out. This was an argument used when our churches first appeared in the 1600s, but we thought the sober, godly lives of ministers and people had silenced this long ago.

In conclusion, we think of the many sacred, solemn occasions when the beautiful ordinance of believers' baptism has been administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and on many occasions the presence of the Lord has been felt, and those baptized have gone home "with the answer of a good conscience." At one time such baptizings were in the river, and often those who came to scoff were silenced by the beauty and the solemnity of the ordinance, some savingly affected. There are many instances of godly women venturing, even though their lives have been threatened by their ungodly husbands, and yet they were brought safely through.

At the beginning, we stated our dislike of controversy, especially with those who believe the doctrines of free grace, but love for the truth compels us, and we trust we have written for the honour and glory of God and the good of His people.