

Baptism

What Is the Mode?

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The religious world confuses every aspect of the clear teachings of the Scriptures on baptism. One of those aspects is the mode. The word “mode” refers to the method by which baptism is performed. A person who surveys the religious landscape will find that Christendom practices three modes of baptism: (1) sprinkling, (2) pouring, (3) and/or immersion. While there are many who claim the proper mode may be sprinkling or pouring, it is not the majority vote that decides, but only the Bible is to be our guide of religious authority (Acts 17:11, John 12:48, Exodus 23:2; Colossians 3:17). The question is then, “***Is there any word from the Lord***” on the subject of the baptismal mode (Jeremiah 37:17)? Yes!

There are four pieces of evidence that demonstrate that baptism is the mode of immersion only: (1) the lexical definition, (2) the requirements of baptism are associated only with immersion, (3) the usages of the word - baptism - in various NT contexts, and (4) church history.

1. Lexical Definition

*If the word “baptize/baptism” means “to immerse” then to baptize in practice scripturally today would be to immerse someone. Though the modern-day English dictionary word “baptism” gives the meaning, “pouring, sprinkling, or immersion,” such is **not** the case when a person honestly examines the New Testament. A person can discover what the word meant during the period when the Greek New Testament was written.*

One additional note to make before investigating the lexical evidence is that the word “baptism” is a transliteration of a Greek word. Transliteration is taking the Greek letters and translating them into its English letter equivalent. You can see this clearly when the Greek words are placed beside the English transliteration.

Greek word; Transliteration; Meaning; Times Found In The New Testament:

βαπτίζω (baptizo): “to dip, immerse”; 77 times (Mounce, *Mounce Analytical Lexicon*, paragraph 2760).

βάπτισμα (baptisma): “immersion, baptism, ordinance of baptism”; 19 times (Mounce, *Mounce Analytical Lexicon*, paragraph 2762).

βαπτισμός (baptismos): “an act of

dipping or immersion; a baptism; 4 times (Mounce, *Mounce Analytical Lexicon*, paragraph 2766).

βαπτιστής (baptistes): “one who baptizes, a baptist”; 12 times (Mounce, *Mounce Analytical Lexicon*, paragraph 2769).

βάπτω (bapto): “to dip, John 13:26; Luke 16:24; to dye, Revelation 19:13*”; 4 times (Mounce, *Mounce Analytical Lexicon*, paragraph 2771).

Here is a list of various scholarly works showing what the word means:

(1) **Bullinger** (*A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, 90). **βαπτίζω:** “To make a thing dipped or dyed. To immerse for a religious purpose.”

(2) **Danker, et al.** (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 164). **βαπτίζω:** “Dip, immerse, mid. Dip oneself, wash (in non-Christian lit. also ‘plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm. . . .’).”

(3) **Thayer** (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 94). **βαπτίζω:** “immersion, submersion.”

(4) **Abbott-Smith** (*A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 74). βαπτίζω: “to dip, immerse, sink.”

(5) **Perschbacher** (*The New Analytical Greek Lexicon*, 66). βαπτίζω: “to dip, immerse; to cleanse or purify by washing.”

(6) **Richards** (*Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, 100-101). βαπτίζω: “Bapto is the basic verb. It means ‘to dip in’ or ‘to dip under.’ It is often used of dipping fabric in a dye. Baptizo is an intensive form of bapto. From early times it was used in the sense of immersing.”

(7) **McReynolds** (*Word Study Greek-English New Testament*, 907). βαπτίζω: “Baptizo, immerse.”

(8) **Vine** (*An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 1:96-97): “**ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ**, baptism, consisting of the processes of immersion, submersion and emergence (from bapto, to dip). **ΒΑΠΤΙΖΩ**, to baptize, primarily a frequentative form of bapto, to dip, was used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment, or the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another, etc.”

All of the lexical evidence shows that the original meaning of baptism was to immerse, dip, engulf, and/or submerge. Nowhere will a person find any evidence from the original language to prove that βαπτίζω means to sprinkle and/or pour.

The Greek language had a word for sprinkling, which was ῥαντίζω (rhantidzo). This word is used several times in the NT. Baptism is associated with “washing” (Hebrews 10:22; Ephesians 5:25-26; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:5) since it is through water immersion that we contact the blood of Jesus that washes away our sins (Acts 22:16). Sprinkling is connected with the blood of Jesus because it represents the ultimate fulfillment of what the Old Testament animal sacrifices were pointing towards when the blood was sprinkled on the altar (Hebrews 10:1–4, 22; 12:22–24; 1 Peter 1:2). In Hebrews 10:22, the heart of a sinner is sprinkled with the blood of Christ, which washes away sins when the physical body has been lowered underneath the water and raised up out of it.

The Greek language also had a word for pouring, which was χέω (cheo). In the NT, there are prepositions that are attached in front of this word such as: (1) καταχέω (katacheo) [Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3]; (2) ἐκχέω (ekcheo) [Revelation 16:1,2,3; Matthew 9:17; 26:28; Mark 14:24;

John 2:15; Acts 1:18; 2:17,18,33; 10:45; Jude 11; (3) ἐπιχέω (epicheo) [Luke 10:34]; (4) συγγέω (suncheo) [Acts 2:6; 9:22; 19:32; 21:27,31], but it is also not associated with water baptism. If the Greeks had a word for sprinkling and pouring, and yet the NT writers chose to use the **distinctive** word for immersion, how can anyone say there is biblical authority for sprinkling and/or pouring as the proper mode of baptism? The fact is, a person must go beyond the authority of the New Testament to hold to sprinkling/pouring as baptism (1 Corinthians 4:6).

2. The Requirements of Baptism Are Associated Only With Immersion

a. Requirement no. 1: Baptism requires “much water” (John 3:23). In this passage the Bible records that “...*John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there...*” (John 3:23). This is a powerful incidental detail that John the apostle just so happens to write down by the inspiration of the Spirit. It is a fact that “much water” is not needed for sprinkling or pouring. When reading this passage one must honestly ask himself, “Why did John need to be baptizing where there was much water?” The best evidence points to the fact that he was baptizing

where there was “much water” because he **needed enough water to administer immersion.**

Requirement no. 2: Baptism requires a “coming up from the water” (Mark 1:10). This is in regards to Jesus being baptized by John. Mark records, *“And immediately coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove”* (Mark 1:10). Mark records that Jesus came up from the water. Question: “What do you first have to do in order to come up out of the water?” You must **first go down into the water!** It is clear from this passage that Jesus was immersed, which plainly teaches us that one must be engulfed in water and then come up out of it to be baptized. There is no way anyone can say this is anything else but the act of immersion.

Requirement no. 3: Baptism requires a “going down to the water” (Acts 8:38). This passage is in regards to the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion. Luke records, *“And he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him”* (Acts 8:38). The mode of baptism required both Philip (the administrator) and the eunuch to go down into the water. Why was this necessary? If sprinkling or pouring were the mode, then they could stand along the bank and Philip could grab some water to

sprinkle or pour upon the eunuch's head. However, if baptism is immersion, it was necessary for both Philip and the eunuch to go down into the water.

Requirement no. 4: Baptism requires a burial in water (Romans 6:3,4; Colossians 2:11,12). In the context of Romans 6, baptism is likened to a burial. Everyone understands that in a burial the body is completely covered. Remember, Jesus was laid in a new tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, and the tomb was sealed by a large stone (Matthew 27:57-61). The body of Jesus was covered on all sides. Likewise the linking of baptism with the idea of a burial clearly shows that Paul, the inspired voice of God, recognized that baptism was by immersion.

Requirement no. 5: Baptism requires a uniting (Romans 6:5-7). Romans 6:5 states: *"For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection."* How does sprinkling and/or pouring show us uniting with the death of Christ?

Requirement no. 6: Baptism requires a resurrection from the water (Romans 6:3,4). Sprinkling and/or pouring are not immersion because they do not fit the picture of being identified with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Unless a sinner has been buried with Christ in the waters of bap-

tism, he cannot claim to have been buried with Jesus or to be raised in newness of life (Romans 6:2-4).

3. The Usages Of “Baptism” In Various New Testament Contexts

The usage of the word “baptism” in a figurative sense is Matthew 20:20–28. The sons of Zebedee clearly had a mistaken view about the nature of the kingdom of Jesus. Jesus reveals to them that if they are to be partakers of the blessings of the kingdom, then they will have to undergo suffering, just as He suffered. This is why He stated in Matthew 20:22-23: *“You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”* They said to Him, *“We are able.”* So He said to them, *“You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.”* We know that Jesus was not referencing His water baptism by John the prophet (Matthew 3:13–17) because the death of John had occurred six chapters earlier in Matthew 14:1–12. You cannot be baptized by a dead administrator!

Secondly, Jesus had already made a reference

to His death using this same type of language in Luke 12:50: ***“But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!”*** Who would dare promote the ridiculous notion that Jesus only suffered a little? Since He used the imagery of baptism in regard to His suffering, it is obvious that He was engulfed (or overwhelmed) in pain when He hung on the cross!

The next usage of “baptism” is the phrase *“baptized into Moses”* in a figurative sense in 1 Corinthians 10:1–4. If you read the historical account of the Israelites passing through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21–31), you will discover that they were covered by walls of water on each side and the cloud of glory overshadowed them (cf. Exodus 14:18). They were covered on all sides! Who would ever suggest the ridiculous idea that when the sea divided, the Israelites passed through water that was no more than a few millimeters high?

The next usage of the word “baptism” is an antitype of the universal flood of Noah’s day in 1 Peter 3:21. Read the historical account of Noah and his family who were saved by the overwhelming water that covered all the pre-Flood mountains (Genesis 8:17–20), lasted a little over a year, and killed all the animals and human beings that were outside the ark that could not survive in water

(Genesis 8:21–23). With that description of the flood, the farthest idea from your mind should be to suggest that the mountains were covered with a few millimeters of water or that animals and human beings drowned in a little bit of water!

4. Church History

Although church history in and of itself is not the authority, it does help us to understand what the church did directly after the death of the apostles (who were guided into all truth by the Holy Spirit and preserved the message in the writings of the New Testament – John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 14:37; Jude 3), and it helps us understand how some departed from the original pattern.

During the first three centuries after the establishment of the church, it is clear that Christians recognized that immersion was the proper mode of baptism.

John D. Castelein states:

“Finally, we can trace the emergence in church history of sprinkling as a secondary mode of baptizing that eventually replaced immersion in Roman Catholic practice. The Didache, a second-century Christian document, allows for pouring — but not sprinkling — of water but only when immersion (preferably in cold flowing water) is just not possible. For example, a man

named Novatian (ca. AD 251) received an emergency baptism by having water poured all over him while he lay in bed, since it was feared he would soon die. Such an emergency baptism is called a “clinical” baptism (from the Greek word for “bed”). When Novatian was later elevated to the priesthood, there was much protest due to his unorthodox and incomplete baptism.

By the middle of the third century, the church father Cyprian was still reluctant to declare that sprinkling was as valid a mode as immersion. Even by AD 753, Pope Stephen II, while in France, was being asked by monks from Cressy in Brittany whether it was valid to sprinkle an infant on the head. There are later councils (e.g., Calcuith, AD 816) that insist that even infants must be immersed. For a long time in church history, people who experienced only this provisional “clinical” baptism could not partake of the Lord’s Supper until they were fully immersed. In fact, it is universally acknowledged that sprinkling and pouring did not become officially recognized as alternative modes to immersion until the Council of Ravenna in 1311.” (Nettles et al., **Understanding Four Views on Baptism**, 140-141).

Church history teaches us two clear lessons. First, early Christians considered baptism to be full

body immersion, and departure from this teaching was a direct result of man-made teaching (Jeremiah 10:23).

Secondly, if we desire to become New Testament Christians, we must abandon the doctrines of men and return to the ancient order of the apostles and prophets who were inspired by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Is the mode of baptism really that important? Should we sprinkle today if people request it? When all the evidence has been weighed, it is clear that the Scriptures teach baptism is by immersion. The Greek language overwhelmingly affirms that its original meaning was immersion and early Christians practiced immersion until the doctrines of man intervened and intercepted in the church. In order to be pleasing unto God, we must practice only the true mode of baptism - **immersion**.

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