

Baptism: Its Theological Meaning and Practical Outworking of Its Application

By Andrew Hope

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One of the things I love most about pioneer missionary work is that we “keep the main thing the main thing.” While we all have unique and sometimes differing convictions about secondary issues—whether baptism, spiritual gifts, or church polity—we are united by a common conviction in the inerrant word, the work of Christ on the cross, and unity through the Holy Spirit. It is a testimony to the Lord that we can disagree on the secondary matters because the primary matters are so important, life-changing, and unifying!

For most workers, the meaning and practice of baptism falls in this category of secondary convictions. However, secondary issues are still worth thinking through. The mode of baptism in particular (immersion, sprinkling, etc.) has a practical effect on our church planting strategies.

It is common church planting practice to foster reproducible discipleship. In other words, we want the way we disciple and model the kingdom to be done in a way that a new believer can emulate in their life and help others to do the same. The rubber meets the road on the issue of baptism. If one approaches the merits of baptism from merely a pragmatic perspective and viewed immersion and sprinkling to hold equal value, then it would stand to reason to conclude that sprinkling is

a simpler, more reproducible mode of baptism than immersion. Since many parts of the Muslim world are short on bodies of water, baptisms, and water in general, using a handful of water rather than a large amount, along with not having to travel to find a pool of water, is much easier.

This was the case for a family who came to the Lord while my family and I were living on the edge of the Sahara. This Muslim-background family were living in a nearby refugee camp where water was at a premium. There were no pools of water or anything that could act like a baptismal. The husband was a large man, standing close to two meters, and weighing nearly 100 kg. The “barrel dunking” technique was a logistical impossibility for him.¹ The nearest baptismal was at least a five-hour drive away. Sometime later, the husband’s best friend also began to profess belief in Christ. When he was in the town with the aforementioned baptismal, he politely declined when asked if he wanted to be baptized. He was afraid of water, scared to be immersed. In both cases, the mode of immersion was a significant hurdle to new believers being baptized, as opposed to the mode of sprinkling or pouring² which would not have been a problem in either case.

My assumption in this article, though, is that most of us are coming from the conviction that immersion and sprinkling do not hold equal value, nor are we simply approaching it from a purely pragmatic perspective. At the same time, I also assume that the “main thing” we all agree on is water baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and it is worth agreeing to disagree about mode so as not to allow it to become a divisive issue. Let’s keep the main thing the main thing and not divide ourselves over the secondary matters!

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- 1 Barrel dunking involves taking an old oil drum (that is clean), filling it with water, and then have the person being baptized squat into it.
 - 2 In this paper, I use sprinkling and pouring as similar terms. Some churches sprinkle in baptism. The person baptizing the other dips his or her hand into water, then sprinkles the water or places his or her hand on the person’s head who is being baptized. Pouring is when the person baptizing uses a cup or bowl of water and pours it onto the head of the person being baptized.

What is at stake in my opinion is the reproducibility of discipleship among MBBs. For example, if a person comes to the Lord in the Sahara, does that necessitate them traveling to the nearest baptismal, possibly hundreds of miles away? Or should we be making plans to build baptismals in our ministry locations (and teach MBBs to do the same)? How might a MBB woman feel about being touched by someone (possibly a man) as she is lowered underwater, then coming up wet, clothes clinging to herself, for others to see? In other circumstances, this would be shameful. Is the solution to segregate genders when baptizing?

Or what about a person who wants to be baptized but is afraid of being submerged underwater? Must they overcome this fear to be identified as a follower of Christ? If the Bible teaches us to immerse only, then we must come to terms with the challenges of this command in the driest parts of the world and among cultures whose values of modesty find it shamefully inappropriate. If it teaches something else, however, then the mode of immersion unnecessarily complicates a willing person wanting to be identified as a member of Christ's body. In short, there is much at stake in the mode of baptism.

This article is a summary of my personal understanding of the meaning and mode of baptism, particularly baptism's place in the Old Testament and its outworking in the New Testament

The Meaning of the Term "Baptism" in the Old Testament

The English word "baptism" comes directly from the Greek (*bapto*, *baptisma*, *baptismos*, *baptizo*). Different lexicons give varying definitions of these words. Biblical scholar Ernest Clark argues that *bapto*, which translates Hebrew *taval* in the Septuagint, means "to dip" in the context of the Old Testament.³ Whether referring to hyssop, a finger, or a foot being put into blood or oil, a garment into water, or a morsel into wine,

3 Clark has helped me understand relevant Greek terms and meanings in both the Septuagint and the New Testament, as well as their corresponding OT Hebrew terms.

the meaning is always the same: to dip (Ex. 12:22, Lev. 4:6, Deut. 33:24, Josh. 3:15, Ruth 2:14, 1 Sam. 14:27, 2 Kings 8:15, Job 9:31, Ps. 68:23).

The only times the Greek verb baptizo is used in the Septuagint is in 2 Kings 5:14 when Naaman dips himself seven times in the Jordan and in Isaiah 21:4 to describe being overcome by fear. The nouns “baptisma” and “baptismos,” meaning baptism or dipping, are not used in the Septuagint.

It might be tempting at this point to then assume that the word “bapto” is used in the same way in the New Testament, restricted to the same and only meaning (to dip) as it does in the Old Testament. Upon examining how the New Testament authors use the term, however, it is not that simple.

“Baptisms” and Sprinklings in Hebrews 9

The writer of Hebrews uses the term “baptismos” but does so in the plural, *baptismois* (Heb 9:10a). The intent is not to describe more than one baptism of the same kind, but rather various kinds of baptisms, related to “regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation” (9:10b).⁴ The context of this verse is the whole of chapter 9, which compares the Old Testament Levitical system—namely sacrifice, purification, and sanctification—with Christ’s sacrifice, purification, and sanctification of his people through his blood.

There are at least two possibilities to consider in understanding what the author means by baptismois in chapter 9. The first is that it is in reference to immersing things or people under liquid for purification in Levitical law. This would take the meaning to follow the meaning of baptizo in the two instances mentioned above (Naaman washing in the Jordan river, and the second reference in Isaiah to being overwhelmed by fear). In neither case is baptizo used to describe Levitical law,

4 Note: most English versions translate baptismois in Heb. 9:10 as “washings.” These washings in Ch. 9 are in reference to the temple ministry.

however, and thus this option does not seem to be supported by how the term is used in the Old Testament.

Another possible interpretation is that baptismos is a term the author of Hebrews is using as a synonym for other terms used in Levitical ritual such as sprinkling or throwing, usually in reference to blood, oil, or water. Let's consider the subsequent verses in chapter 9 with this lense of understanding for baptismos.

In verses 12–13, the author compares the earthly Old Testament tent and its covenant signs and regulations with Christ's covenant and sign. In the first covenant, blood sacrifices cannot cleanse God's people. But with Christ's new covenant, Christ enters the perfect tent of God's presence by the authority of his own blood.

The author expounds on this idea in verse 13. The term used is "sprinkling," namely blood and ashes from an animal sacrifice on defiled people for the purpose of sanctification. Specifically, it is for the purification of the flesh. Verse 14 goes on: "how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God." The author connects the Levitical law and practice of animal's blood from sacrifice to Christ's blood, and then purification of the flesh to purification of the conscience, both in the context of sprinkling. Interestingly, the author also connects Christ's offering being done through the Holy Spirit.

Then in 9:19, the author draws yet another comparison between the two covenants. Moses sprinkled blood with water on the book, the people of Israel, the tent, and "all the vessels used in worship" (9:21). Verse 22 goes on to say that "under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Reading 9:10 again in this context, baptismos is understood in reference to Levitical law, and the application of liquid in this chapter is by sprinkling blood. As the author refers to the old covenant, he compares it with Christ's new covenant: Christ entered the

tent by means of his own blood (9:12) and put away sin once for all by his sacrifice and shed blood (9:24–28).

In chapter 9, the author's examples of various baptisms (baptismois) all refer to sprinkling blood and water on people or objects. The Greek word for sprinkling used in Heb. 9:13, 19, and 21 is *rantismos*. In other words, the author of Hebrews seems to use the term sprinkling (*rantismos*) to describe what he means by baptismois (baptisms).

It seems that the writer of Hebrews' primary intent in using baptism in the plural is to describe Old Testament Jewish law and religious practice to cleanse people, places, and objects in order to make them holy. It is then compared to Christ's use of his own blood to perfect this holiness in the heavenlies. The implications for the author's uses of baptizo, which would mean "sprinkling" at least in part, is therefore very significant.

The Purpose of Sprinkling in Old Testament Law

Here are three Old Testament passages that seem to align with Hebrews 9:

1. Num. 19:17–18 (cf. Heb. 9:13). In this case, ashes from a burnt sin offering are mixed with water. Then the clean person sprinkles the water onto the tent and furnishings of the unclean person.
2. Ex. 24:6, 8 (cf. Heb. 9:19). Here, Moses takes blood and throws it on Israel to seal the covenant that God made with his people.
3. Lev. 8:19; 16:14 (cf. Heb. 9:2). Moses throws blood from a sin offering onto the altar, and takes the blood from the sin offering to the mercy seat of God's tabernacle.

There are many other cases of sprinkling in the Old Testament, and usually the Greek *perirraino* (to sprinkle) is used in the Septuagint. There is an element of repentance since the blood of the sin offering is used. Another of *perirrainos*' primary meanings is for consecration, or setting apart by making someone or something holy. This can be for the taber-

nacle and its furnishings, for priests as they enter service (Num. 8:6–7), enter a covenant, or cleanse someone who has violated God’s law.

To the writer of Hebrews, then, dipping (baptismos) is tied to sprinkling (rantismos) and has a loaded meaning. It refers to a variety of Old Testament Jewish law rituals that were used to show repentance of sin, cleansing, purification, consecration, and of God’s people entering into a covenant with their Lord. While the author of Hebrews’ understanding and definition of baptism in the Old Testament may feel foreign to many modern-day theologies of baptism, it does help the Christian better understand the biblical foundation of baptism in the New Testament.

Key Examples of Baptism in the New Testament

The first example of baptism in the New Testament is by John the Baptist. It is safe to assume that John the Baptist did not come up with baptism on his own. Doing so would have meant that he was creating a means of cleansing that was not found in Levitical law. Jesus taught that he came not to abolish the law of God, but rather to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17–20). Since Jesus did not have authority from the Father to change the law, it stands to reason that John the Baptist was also confined to ministry practices that fit within Old Testament law.

Clark explains,

Several ancient Jewish rituals converge in the practice of baptism in the New Testament. Each antecedent ritual brings with it its own particular actions, effects, and significance. Thus, while the Greek terms *baptizo* and *baptisma* refer only to dipping, the practice of baptism is multivalent. It perpetuates and alludes to several earlier themes.⁵ (2022, handout on baptism)

5 Definition of multivalent: *having or susceptible of many applications, interpretations, meanings, or values*. Thus, Clark understands baptism in the New Testament to have breadth of meaning that includes immersion, pouring, and sprinkling.

What Old Testament practice was John practicing then when he was baptizing others?

In John 1:25, people representing the Pharisees asked John the question, “Why are you baptizing people if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” From this question it seems the Jews expected one of these three people to do what John was doing. Where did the Pharisees’ expectation of baptism come from then? Looking in the Old Testament, there’s no mention either of someone immersing other people, nor of a prophecy of someone who would immerse others. The only baptizo (dipping) of a person in water in the Old Testament was done by Naaman and this was on himself seven times in the Jordan River. If we are open to a broader New Testament definition that is more comprehensive than simply immersion, then we can find prophecies in the OT that fit, namely the following.

- Isaiah 52:15. “So shall he sprinkle many nations.” This verse is found in what is commonly understood to be a Messianic prophecy, as the passage also refers to the same person being he who is, “high and lifted up,” and “pierced for our transgressions.”
- Ezekiel 36:25–26. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.”

From John’s response, he seems to indicate that he is not the fulfillment of these prophecies, as he only baptizes with water. John knows that Christ is much greater than he, and that Jesus is the one who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11).

Then, what mode was John using to baptize the multitudes in the Jordan River? That becomes less certain given the understanding of baptism from Hebrews. Perhaps it was only immersion or perhaps he sprinkled also.

Christ's Water Baptism

The baptism of Christ is the next major baptism event in the New Testament. It's worth reflecting on the question: why is Jesus being baptized? It doesn't make good sense that Jesus would undergo a baptism for the purpose of repentance of his sins. He does not need a baptism of repentance or purification—he's Holy God! Even John protested, as the baptism he was performing on others was for the repentance of sins and not for the one of whose sandals he was not worthy to untie (Luke 3:16).

What is going on here? A key to understanding the meaning of Christ's baptism is to understand that Christ did not want to be baptized to show repentance, but rather to fulfill Old Testament law. Jesus responds to John's protest by saying that he needs to be baptized, "in order to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). What righteousness then is being fulfilled by Jesus' baptism?

Looking back to Numbers, we remember how sprinkling with water, blood, and oil was a means to consecrate, or set apart, the tabernacle and all of its furnishings. As Jesus is on the cusp of kicking off his ministry, his baptism was likely a consecration to set him apart for ministry, which was immediately followed by God the Father opening the heavens, and the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus. The Father blesses his Son, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). With the consecration that is immediately approved of by the Father and Holy Spirit, Jesus begins his full-time ministry on earth.

Christ's Holy Spirit Baptism/Anointing

Jesus said, "John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized by the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4–5). This verse is worth stopping and reflecting on. The baptism that Jesus is even more concerned about is one that is performed not by man but by God himself. This is the truer baptism of the two, as anyone who is baptized by the Holy Spirit is truly a child of God, whereas water baptism can bring about no such effect in man. Water baptism is the physical representation of cleansing and sanctifi-

cation, but water cannot in itself cleanse and sanctify. The truer baptism of the Holy Spirit is the only one of the two that can accomplish the cleansing and indwelling of God's presence in a believer.

The first such baptism of the Holy Spirit takes place on Jesus. As soon as John baptized Jesus, "the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form as a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'" (Matt 3:17). This is where Jesus was anointed to begin the work of the Messiah. Peter also describes this as an anointing (Acts 10:38). Right after this event, Jesus quotes Isaiah 61, stating that he is the Christ.

Other NT writers use the term "anointing" to describe the presence of the Holy Spirit (*chrisos*, 2 Cor. 1:21; *echrisen*, Heb. 1:9; *chrisma*, 1 John 2:20, 27). The term is the same one to describe the spiritual meaning, not the literal one. By contrast, James uses the term *aleipho* to describe the physical anointing of the sick with oil (James 5:14).

Thus, in the NT, the verb *chrío* and derivative nouns have spiritual significance (the one exception being when Jesus anointed the blind man's eyes with mud). The correlation between *chrío* "anointing" and baptism "consecration" seem to be inextricably linked. They are two sides of the same coin. Namely, the anointing of the believer by the Holy Spirit consecrates him as holy and well-pleasing in God's sight.

Since this paper is primarily about the mode of baptism, it is worth noting the different modes of anointing. Whether in the Old Testament with water, oil, blood, or in the New Testament with oil, ointment, or mud, the mode is always applying something onto the person, not the person being dipped into the anointing element.

Holy-Spirit Baptism in Acts

We see Holy-Spirit baptism fulfilled more than once in Acts. At Pentecost the apostles are anointed with the Holy Spirit, in fulfillment of Joel, "I will pour out my Spirit" (Joel 2:28-29). Again, this happens in Acts 10 when Peter visits Cornelius and his household. The Holy Spirit

“fell on all who heard the word” (10:44). Luke describes the event with the phrase “poured out” (10:45). In both cases, the mode of Holy-Spirit baptism was described as falling or pouring. Joel foretells this: “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28).

Of course, the main point in the passages above is not to be used as a proof text for sprinkling or pouring, but rather to focus on the amazing promise given by Jesus, fulfilled in Acts and that continues to be fulfilled all over the world today, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. That said, if one were to choose which mode better symbolizes or reflects Holy Spirit baptism described in the New Testament, then sprinkling/pouring seems to be a more accurate representation than immersion.⁶

Buried and Raised with Christ: Two New Testament Verses in Debate

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col. 2:11–12)

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3–4)

I cite these two passages because they are used often to explain that the mode of immersion is a visualization of being buried with Christ in

6 I am considering sprinkling and pouring to be synonymous, in that both acts are applying liquid to a person or thing. In the case of persons, both involve putting liquid onto a person's head.

baptism. Further, both passages speak of being raised from the dead like Christ. The immersion-only conviction holds that the mode of immersion visually represents the death, burial (going under the water), and resurrection (coming out of the water). It is a symbol of what the Lord has already done in the believer's life and being united with him in his death and resurrection.

The question that we need to ask, though, is which baptism does Paul refer to in both passages: is it water baptism, Holy-Spirit baptism, or both? While the two are linked, the former is an action of man, and the latter is the action of God. What is described in both passages is the action of God in a believer's life. Just as the first part of the passage in Colossians speaks about a spiritual circumcision "made without hands," so too it speaks of a spiritual baptism by the Holy Spirit. At the very least, the passage could refer to Holy-Spirit Baptism only without any reference to water baptism.

If it does speak to water baptism, let's consider the analogy. The question at hand is whether immersion is the better symbolic mode, given these passages, than sprinkling. The problem comes perhaps in how typical burials happen opposed to how Christ's burial happened. Christ's body was laid in a small room hewn from a rock face, not the ground. In the case of Christ's burial, he was put horizontally into the tomb, and then came out of the tomb. While immersion does give a symbolic impression of how most people are buried in the ground (and therefore how they might come out of the ground if resurrected), the symbolism does not hold firmly in the specific case of Christ's burial and resurrection. Also, the Romans passage speaks of being baptized into Christ's death. Since Christ died on a cross, this symbology doesn't really seem to apply well with this reference either.

Then what are these passages getting at when referring to being buried and raised with Christ? First Corinthians gives us an Old Testament example and then applies it to Christ, which will help us. In 1 Cor. 10:1-5, Paul talks about the Israelites being "baptized into Moses." In chapter 12 he then talks about the parts and gifts of the body, referencing baptism

to describe what's going on, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews and Greeks, slaves or free— and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:12–13).

In the former case with Moses, the event was walking through the Red Sea on dry ground, passing through walls of water on either side. Is this kind of baptism to be understood as a water immersion? A case could certainly be made to name it as such. Is it therefore the only way to understand how Paul uses baptism in these passages? Since he may be primarily referring to Holy-Spirit baptism, and since the grave analogy isn't consistent, it seems good to understand Paul's usage as multivalent in these passages. In other words, Paul's own definition of baptism might have included immersion, sprinkling, and pouring.

Speculating On Baptisms in Acts

There are other examples of baptism in Acts. They are also more subjective, but worth giving thought to.

At Pentecost, about 3,000 people were baptized. Have we considered the logistical realities of this situation? The apostles were not planning to baptize anyone this day, as they were just meeting together in prayer. If 3,000 people were baptized, where did the baptisms come from to accommodate that many people? Where did the clean water come from to do so many baptisms? The Jordan river was over 20 miles away. The people who were baptized weren't planning to be baptized either, so it's safe to assume that there were some pretty dirty people who got baptized. How was it logistically possible for that amount of water to be changed out for all those baptisms if they were all done by immersion?

The Philippian jailor and his household were baptized in the middle of the night. Is it more likely that Paul and Silas took them to the nearby river in their physical condition and performed immersion baptism in a river in the dark, or rather sprinkled them or poured water over them?

Conclusion

At the end of the day, let us give our Lord praise that there is reason for this article being written, as we are talking about realities among the unreached and not hypotheticals. Muslims are coming to the Lord and wanting to become part of the Body of Christ through water baptism, regardless of the mode used. Praise God! It is my opinion that the function of baptism is just as much for the church as it is for the person being baptized. It is the church's way of knowing who wants to be identified as part of the Body of Christ, and who is accountable to the Body. This is "the main thing," and I pray this article will only reinforce this conviction among us. Whether we are immersing or sprinkling, may we welcome many more into the Body of Christ!

At the same time, the logistical challenges and difficulties in reproducibility for immersion in some geographical and cultural contexts are acute. It is my opinion that immersion is not the only mode described or used in the Old or the New Testaments. Immersion baptism, therefore, could be an unnecessary weight to put on believers from a Muslim background.

The implications with these two modes, immersing and sprinkling, are great enough for us to consider as church planters how we go about baptizing new believers. Might we need to change our practices if it is better for these new believers? I realize this is a big ask, especially if one comes from an immersion-only church background. I do not ask us to consider doing so half-heartedly. We all want what is best for God's church, and so it is with this in mind that I would encourage us to consider sprinkling as a possibility for the sake of Christ's body.

I thank the Lord for the privilege of serving alongside you in the name of Jesus!

Your fellow laborer in the harvest fields,

Andrew Hope

Questions for Conversation

1. What are the practical challenges to baptism in your context? Are there any theological issues raised by these practical challenges?
2. What is your perspective on the Scripture passages discussed in the article? Share any points of agreement or push-back with the biblical interpretation of the author.
3. What is your view of the meaning and mode of baptism, and what ought it look like in practice in your context?

Bibliography

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