Baptism: Meaning, Mode and Subjects by Michael Kimmitt

1. Baptism

"*For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel….*" (1 Corinthians 1:17)

Systematic Theology is that subject, which, taking the information provided by biblical, exegetical and historical theology, seeks to weave it into a comprehensive whole to be applied in "practical theology." We may liken it to a massive tree, growing out of the bedrock of Scripture. The trunk is "theology proper" — what we learn about *God*, and then the main branches are typically as follows: "anthropology" (the doctrine of *man*), "Christology" (the doctrine of *Christ*), "soteriology" (the doctrine of *salvation*), "ecclesiology" (the doctrine of the *church*), and "eschatology" (the doctrine of the *last things*).

The branch we are currently interested in is that dealing with the *church* (ecclesiology), and this splits into various sub-branches: "idea," "attributes," "government," etc. The one we want is "the means of grace" — and again, we find that this, itself, divides into "prayer," "preaching" and the "sacraments." Taking the last, we find it again divides into "baptism" and "the Lord's Supper" — and we take up the former.

Now the purpose of this slightly complicated introduction is to try and instil a sense of proportion into the subject! In terms of the whole, we are actually dealing with a fairly *minor* matter. Paul's quote, at the beginning of this chapter, is a sad perplexity to "sacramentalists."[1] Indeed, it is of interest to note that, of the cluster of words used relating to baptism, there are only *twenty* references in the apostolic epistles and the book of Revelation — five of which occur in the passage in 1 Corinthians, from which we have already quoted, and at least another five which are not dealing with Christian baptism at all!

In short, the subject does not occupy the place in Scripture which it all too often does in our ecclesiastical debates — one large denomination seeing it as so important that it warrants division and the proliferation of "Baptist" churches. So we had, recently, the absurd spectacle of a President of the Baptist Union, on the one hand, denying the fundamental doctrine of the divinity of Christ, while, presumably, on the other hand, holding the position that only *immersion* constitutes valid baptism.

However, it will often be found that the issue of what *constitutes* baptism does expose a whole mass of related theology — and, of course, there are important practical issues relating to this. A young person, for instance, brought up in a Reformed church goes off to university, finds that only the local *evangelical Baptist* church preaches a definite gospel, but is then exposed to remarks about "infant sprinkling," and is persuaded, on some pretty tendentious exegesis, to submit to re-baptism by immersion.

So, at the risk of simply falling into the same trap of exaggerating its place in theology above that which it occupies in Scripture, let us seek to set out the Reformed — and biblical — position. It seems, to the present writer, that this might most conveniently be done in terms of the *meaning*, the *mode* and the *subjects* of baptism.

[1]"Sacramentalism" is the belief that observance of the sacraments is necessary for salvation and that such participation can confer grace.

2. The Meaning of Baptism

"*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations…. baptizing them….*" (Matthew 28:19)

"*I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost*" (Mark 1:8)

A variety of meanings is associated with baptism in Scripture and in the Reformed confessions. However, for our purposes, I wish simply to concentrate on *three*.

First, and self-evidently, it is associated, both in Scripture and in practice, with the *profession* of Christianity. This is asserted in the first of the texts placed above. A "Christian" is someone who has been baptized in the name of the Triune God — and, incidentally, those who have *never* been baptized have no right to the name. Of course, a lot of professing Christianity has little basis, or is doctrinally very questionable. Nonetheless, what divides the *Christian* world from the *Muslim* or the *Hindu* is this: that the persons concerned have been *baptized*. I suggest, too, that this carries the important practical point that, when we approach baptized people, we do so on the basis of their *profession*, while we seek to explain to men "the way of God more perfectly" (cf. Acts 18:26).

When we turn to the second text, we note that, although there is only "one" baptism (Ephesians 4:5), yet two aspects are brought before us in John's teaching. We may perhaps call these the "*ritual*" and the "*real*." The first refers to the actual physical activity the disciple undergoes — the ritual. The second refers to the *reality* to which the ritual points. It is important to keep both these ideas in mind, as a failure to distinguish them may lead us to attribute to one aspect a text of Scripture which is actually referring to the other.

Secondly, Scripture associates baptism with *cleansing*. Just as we put a dirty garment to the wash, so the use of water here points to a cleansing, and quite clearly *the washing away of our sins* — not of course in an *ex opera operato* mode (i.e. by the baptizing action performed), but in a recognition that this is what happens in conversion. So we find people coming to John the Baptist: and were "baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins." (Matthew 3:6); likewise, we find Ananias telling Paul, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." (Acts 22:16).

Third, and most importantly, baptism points to our *union with Christ*. This is the point underlying the second part of our text — that which speaks of the "baptism of the Holy Spirit." This is well set forth in I Corinthians 12:13: "For by one Spirit are we all *baptized into one body*, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit"

Objections

At this point we must seek to deal with two objections. Charismatics and Pentecostals, generally, will argue that the text from John the Baptist points to a *two-stage process* — firstly, conversion (symbolized by water baptism), and then a second and subsequent

"baptism of the Spirit"! It is clear, however, that there is no support for this in the epistles — and indeed, the reverse is stated in I Corinthians 12:13. In the case of Cornelius and his relatives and friends, we see that the word is preached, the Holy Spirit converts and they are *then* baptized with water. Here we have both the external ritual and the internal reality.

A more cogent objection appears to be brought by Baptists who state, in the words of Augustus Strong, "The central truth set forth by baptism is the death and resurrection of Christ, — and our own death and resurrection only as connected with that."[2] It is clear that he is linking the death and resurrection of Christ with the idea that only *immersion* adequately represents this.

In the first place, however, it may be replied to this that the truth of Christ's *death* is surely set forth by the *Lord's Supper*; and in the second, that His *resurrection* is celebrated in every Christian church by the fact that we meet on *Sunday* — the day of His resurrection having replaced the Saturday Sabbath.

Inevitably, reference is made to Romans 6:4 ("buried with Him by baptism into death"). But Paul was not here discussing baptism as such. He is seeking to refute the antinomian argument against a free justification, and, in order to do so, he emphasizes that we are buried, raised, planted, and crucified with Him — in short, that we are *united* to Christ. What is in view, here, is not *water* baptism but that action of the Holy Spirit that has brought us into union with our blessed Redeemer. In a parallel passage in Colossians 2 (vv. 11-12), we are said to be "circumcised" with Him. It is clear, therefore, that it is not the physical, but rather the *spiritual* aspects which are in view in Romans 6. To emphasize one aspect is poor exegesis, however common.

Besides, we are easily misled by our experience of burials with the coffin lowered into the grave and the promise of resurrection; but our Lord was laid in a tomb in a garden — presumably on a shelf. There was nothing that corresponds to the Baptist's *immersion*.

In concluding this discussion of the *meaning* of baptism, I want to call attention to the way in which the work of the Spirit is pictured. He is spoken of as having "sat upon each" (Acts 2:3), "fallen upon" (Acts 8:16) and His being "shed forth" (Acts 2:33), etc. The significance of these representations will appear subsequently.

[2]Augustus Hopkins Strong, Systematic Theology (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1889), p. 528

3. The Mode of Baptism

"*In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea.… Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins*" (Matthew 3:1, 5-6).

In the previous chapter, it was proposed that the Reformed and biblical position might be most conveniently considered in terms of the *meaning*, the *mode*, and the *subjects* of baptism. Having introduced the subject generally, and having dealt with the first point, we now take up the controverted issue of the second.

Now it is a curious fact that the New Testament does not tell us *how* baptism was administered! — after all, everyone then knew by experience. But that very fact should

alert us to its relative unimportance and, second, to the consideration that the very fact that these matters may concern us deeply suggests that here we do not have the mind of Christ. He has set us free (Hallelujah!) — and we should be very cautious about any tendency to go back under a yoke of bondage.

After all, a rite which is to be administered to young and old, to those in health, sickness or *extremis*; in deserts, tropics, tundra and the Arctic, as well as temperate climes, can hardly be tied to only one mode of administration!

In fact, we might simply end our consideration there — and I suspect if we did so, we would be close to the mind of the New Testament — were it not for the fact that not only Baptist churches but a growing number of Evangelical ones persist in asserting that only *total immersion* (dressed and usually backwards!) constitutes baptism. To give an example, taken simply from the latest literature to hand:

"The administration of baptism…. will be by total immersion in water. (Matthew 3:5, 6, 13, 16; John 3:23; Acts 8:38, 39; Romans 6:3, 4)"

Needless to say, the proof texts do not prove the point; but of that, more anon.

How, then, is the matter to be resolved? Clearly the answer is by reference to those same inspired Scriptures, which are "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The approach taken has been the scientific one: obtain all the information available and then construct a theology which does justice to all the data. To that end, every text referring to baptism in the New Testament has been examined and classified. This seems to point to quite clear conclusions — and I can only urge anyone bothered about this issue to pursue the same course. What follows is simply a summary.

Baptism and its Cognates

There are five words used in the New Testament and it may be helpful at this point simply to list them:

βαπτίζω	*baptizo*	Baptize	80
βάπτισμα	*baptisma*	Baptism	22
βαπτισμός	*baptismos*	Washing	4
βαπτιστής	*baptistes*	Baptizer	14
βάπτω	*bapto*	Dip or Dye.	3

In the first column is the Greek word which is transliterated in the second; the third column gives the translation and the final column the approximate number of uses of each word in the New Testament.

It is not necessary to know Greek to be able to see that in most cases the words are simply taken over into our language. In the providence of God, the translators of the Latin version simply used the original words, which have in turn been *anglicized* in our versions.

The Baptisms of John

As we think about the work of John the Baptizer, perhaps, almost unbidden, an idea comes into our mind compounded from our imagination (as well as photographs of missionary activity) of this dour figure standing in the Jordan with perhaps a line of four or six figures in front of him waiting to be immersed. I suggest, however, that we need to ask ourselves two questions: (1) *How many people did John baptize?* and (2) *How long did his ministry last?*

We may feel we do not know, but in fact we can at least make feasible estimates.

As we read the gospel narratives, what we find is that a great religious revival is going on under John's ministry: Pharisees, Sadducees, tax collectors and soldiers, as well as the common people, are all moved by the preaching, and come to be baptized. At the time, the population of cultural societies (perhaps only some 10% of the population) is not engaged in husbandry — so when we read of "Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan" (Matthew 3:5) that may suggest a population around 2 million. Allowing that the word "all" does not necessarily mean "every single person," we may yet estimate the answer to our first question to be that around *one million people* were baptized.

Now we know that John was six months older than our Lord and, from Luke 3:23, that Jesus was "about thirty years of age" when His ministry began — John was then about the same age, which was, apparently, the normal age for the start of a priest's ministry. John's work then decreases, he is imprisoned, and is finally executed. At the outset, his work probably did not last beyond a year.

Now back to Jordan and that line of figures.

Let us suppose that, instead of four or six, a *continual stream* is presented. How long will it take to "immerse" each one? Perhaps a minute? After fifty minutes, John wades to the bank, rests for a few minutes and then resumes his labours. After four hours, he has immersed two hundred individuals (and is utterly exhausted!). He resumes the next day, and, after five days, he has done a *thousand*. There are still 999,000 to go! How long does one suppose flesh and blood could sustain such an activity?

May we not, at this point, hear some other Scriptures? "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7). "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean…." (Ezekiel 36:25). What need for this ado about "immersion"? How appropriate that one coming from a *priestly* line should use those "sprinklings" and "washings" of Old Testament usage, which all point forward to the "[taking] away [of] the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Mathematics is a marvellous science; the one exact science we have. We apply it to the data across two millennia, and it demonstrates, incontrovertibly, that whatever the gospel writers meant, when they spoke of *John's* baptism, it *cannot mean immersion*. Nor is there any reason why it should. If a small piece of bread and a sip of wine may represent the Lord's Supper, why may not a *sprinkling* of water represent our cleansing from sin in baptism?

Objections

Although this seems quite clear, it may be that certain objections are felt to this interpretation. The writer can think of four, and it may be helpful simply to consider them.

1. John is said to baptize "*in* [the] Jordan" (Mark 1:9). Does this not then imply *immersion*? Not necessarily. It *could* be by immersion, but an old picture of baptism shows a person standing in the water and the administrator *pouring* water on his head from a container. This would be equally consistent with the phrase, "in the river."

2. In the phrase, "I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost" (Mark 1:8), the Greek word "ἐν" (ek) should be translated "in" instead of "with." This is, in fact, offered as an alternative in the margin of the Revised Version and in the text of the Authorized Standard Version, where "with" appears in the margin. This is interesting because it comes to the heart of the discussion. What really is at issue, in the argument, is not the *amount* of water, but *how it is applied*. Is the water poured or sprinkled on the person (which is consistent with the translation "with"), or is the person *immersed* in the water (which is consistent with the translation "in")?

Greek prepositions are tricky, even for the expert. A glance at the *Englishman's Greek Concordance* shows that the normal translation is "in," but "with" also occurs, as also "among, at, by, on, unto" etc. A good example of the use of "with" is in 1 Corinthians 4:21, where Paul uses the phrase "ἐν ῥάβδῳ" (*en rhabdō*) which is translated "with a rod" and where "in" would be quite inappropriate. To translate then "ἐν ὕδατι" (*en hydati*) as "with water" seems quite in keeping. The correctness of this translation is strengthened by the fact that in the parallel phrase in Luke's gospel, the Greek "ἐν" (*en*) is omitted. This, then, requires the dative, "with." A further consideration is that the translation, "*in* the Holy Spirit," seems quite out of keeping with what actually happens. We are not *immersed* in Him! He is *poured out* on us. For these three reasons, it seems appropriate to reject the translation, "in," and use "with" as in our common translation.

3. But surely, says someone, all this is beside the point: whatever your arguments, we have an actual example in the case of our Lord. His baptism was by immersion. Well, taken on its own, it may have been. There is nothing in the narrative to rule it out — but neither is there is there anything there to imply it *must* have been. Although our Lord's baptism is mentioned in all four gospels narratives, only two have a direct account. In Matthew we read: "And Jesus, when He was baptised, went up immediately from the water" (3:16); and in Mark: "coming up out of the water" (1:10). Once again we are faced with the difficulties of Greek prepositions. In Matthew, the word used is "ἀπὸ (*apo*)." This means "from" or "away from"—not "out of" as the AV translated it. In Mark, the word is "ἐκ" (*ek*) which means "out of" or "from." Putting both accounts together, all we apparently are being told is that our Lord "came from" the water. If He and John the Baptist had stepped into the Jordan, and John had scooped up water and poured it on our Lord's head, and then they had both come away from the water, all the facts in the biblical narrative would be covered. In the light of our previous discussion, immersion seems unlikely.

4. One further objection needs to be considered. Does not the fact that John baptized in *Jordan* — and later "in Aenon near to Salim, *because there was much water there*" (John 3:23) — point to *immersion* as the mode? Well, no, it does not! Judea was a relatively *barren* area compared with Galilee. Doubtless, the towns and villages had adequate but limited water supplies — enough for themselves and passing travellers, except in times of

drought (1 Kings 17); but quite inadequate for the massive number of travellers who came as a result of John's preaching. Food could be carried, but apart from the baptismal needs, water in bulk was required for travellers and animals. In fact, the reference to "much water" in the Greek is "ὕδατα πολλὰ" (*hydata polla*) — which Thayer translates as "many springs or fountains." Again, the derivation of the name "Aenon" is given, by Strong, as "place of springs." Now it is perfectly feasible to water both man and beast in a place of springs; and to baptize a multitude by pouring or sprinkling. It would be singularly difficult to immerse even one person in those springs with which the writer is acquainted!

Interestingly, the account in John 3 adds an additional datum of information, for we read in verse 25, "Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying." Clearly this is linked with the references to baptism — four in five verses. But how were *Jewish* purifications carried out? By "sprinkling" (Leviticus 14:6-7; Numbers 8:7 and 19:1113).[3] So far, then, from supporting the immersionist's position, a careful examination of John 3 points in precisely the opposite direction.

[3]"As for the living bird, he shall take it, and the cedar wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water: And he shall *sprinkle* upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird loose into the open field" (Leviticus 14:6-7). "And thus shalt thou do unto them, to cleanse them: *Sprinkle* water of purifying upon them, and let them shave all their flesh, and let them wash their clothes, and so make themselves clean" (Numbers 8:7). "He that toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with it on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be clean: but if he purify not himself the third day, then the seventh day he shall not be clean. Whosoever toucheth the dead body of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off from Israel: because the water of separation was not *sprinkled* upon him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is yet upon him" (Numbers 19:11-13).

Conclusion

We have examined the circumstances surrounding John's baptizing and have ascertained that it is precisely what might have been expected from a priest carrying out purifications under the old dispensation. This fits in with the very large numbers who came — and nothing in the possible objections is inconsistent with the interpretation that these baptisms were carried out by pouring or sprinkling. Everything cries out that they could not have been carried out by immersion.

Baptism in the rest of the Gospels

When we turn to the remainder of the gospel narratives to see what we may learn about the mode of baptism, we are immediately faced with the two great texts at the end of Matthew and Mark.

"*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*" (Matthew 28:19).

"*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.…*" (Mark 16:16).

From these, we learn that a Christian may be defined as one who believes, is a disciple, and *has been baptized*. However, nothing is said about the mode — and indeed, we would have to turn to other Scriptures to discover that water is involved, because it is not even mentioned in either text.

Figurative

There are a number of other minor references to *baptism* and *John the Baptizer*, which do not add anything of significance to our quest, but in Mark 10:38 (cf. parallels) our Lord asks: "Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Clearly the reference is figurative — and has in view His forthcoming sufferings. Now we could say that our Lord was *immersed* in trouble but it would be equally possible to substitute the words *overwhelmed with.* It would be a bold person who attempted to derive a mode from this passage. Indeed the fact that the word here is being used figuratively is surely a warning that its meaning is much wider than some brethren suppose.

Mark 7

However, there are two further passages in the gospel accounts which do shed light on the matter, but which may readily be overlooked by the English reader, as the Greek words are not translated "baptize." Both arise out of Pharisaic ritualism, and the first relevant section is in Mark 7:4:

"*And when they come from the market, except they* ***wash****, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the* ***washing*** *of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables*."

There is some textual variation, but I have emphasized "wash" and "washings," as the underlying word in the Greek is "baptize" — both βαπτίζω (*baptizo*) and βαπτισμός (*baptismos*) are used.

Now what is going on here? Is it likely that, on returning from the market place, the purchasers immediately *immersed* themselves in water? They did not have our facilities of baths and running water — and normally, water would have been laboriously carried into the home in water pots. And though there would be no great difficulty about cups, pitchers and copper vessels being immersed, would it have been practicable to immerse the *couches* or *tables*? Now twice, in the passage, reference is made to "the tradition of the elders" (vv. 3, 5). In the book of Leviticus, there are arrangements for ceremonial cleansing in connection with various matters. Pharisaism had built on that — a common fallacy, to which we are all even now prone — and extended it. Presumably what Mark is explaining to his readers is that certain ceremonial washings are being performed — probably by sprinkling — and this is called *baptizing*!

Luke 11

The second passage occurs in Luke 11:37-38, where a Pharisee had invited our Lord to dine:

"….*and he went in, and sat down to meat. And when the Pharisee saw it, he marvelled that he had not first* ***washed*** *before dinner.*"

In the Greek, the word "washed" is actually "baptized." Now is it likely that our Lord and the other guests had all *immersed* themselves — which would had to have been in *separate* containers, for the water would immediately, on the use, be considered contaminated — before partaking of their meal? Well certainly the translators do not think so! Young's *Literal Translation* gives correctly "baptize," but the dozen or so other translations consulted all have variations on "wash." So here we have the consent of many Greek scholars that the word *baptize* simply means wash!

It is interesting to note how Alexander Carson, in his work on baptism,[4] deals with this objection. If we read him aright, his argument amounts to this: "Baptism means immersion; therefore our Lord must have been immersed." It is salutary to see how such an intelligent and well-informed mind can get hold of the wrong end of the stick. Because he believed baptism meant "immersion, and nothing but immersion," then that is what it must mean here — whatever the improbability. But this is to miss the whole point.

What we are seeking to do in this series is not to take our definition from a *dictionary*, but to go through the whole New Testament and work out from the actual circumstances *what the writers meant* when they used the word. Dictionaries, whatever their undoubted value when seeking for the meaning of a word, are purely secondary authorities, and may need to be altered in the light of further investigation into the actual usage of a particular word.

[4]Alexander Carson, Baptism: Its Mode and Subjects (Grand Rapids: Kregel, repr. 1981).

John 2

Further light on the previous incident is probably shed by the account we have of the marriage at Cana of Galilee in John 2. Here we read of "six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece" (v. 6) — probably 17-25 gallons. The normal procedure would be for water to be drawn in a container from the pot, so that the contents were not contaminated, and then *poured* over the hands, and possibly the feet, of the guest. There were elaborate rituals in connection with purification, which are hinted at in all three accounts. So, doubtless, all that the Pharisee had expected of our Lord in the account in Luke 11 is that He would have washed, or allowed His hands to be washed, before eating.

Perhaps, however, we should ask whether it would be possible to immerse in such a container? Well, certainly not in one of this size. Here mathematics can again be invoked. If we take the outside amount, and recognizing the pots are not quite full, we have a maximum amount of perhaps thirty gallons. Since there are 6.25 gallons to the cubic foot, we have a capacity of some 5 cubic feet, which may be contained in a cylindrical pot fifteen inches in diameter and four feet high. Presumably the actual pots would have been wider in the middle and narrowed towards the top, but clearly such would be inadequate for immersion — a much larger vessel being needed.

Conclusion

We may therefore summarize this part of our study by saying that in the two or three cases where baptism is mentioned, it can be deduced that it is being used in terms of *pouring*, *sprinkling* or *washing*, and cannot reasonably be applied to *immersion*. This, of course, is entirely in line with the results of our earlier studies.

Baptism in the Acts of the Apostles

At the outset of this book, we are immediately faced with a repetition of the promise found in various forms in all four gospels accounts:

"*For John indeed baptized in water, but you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 1:5).

This continued repetition surely serves to remind us that what is important about baptism is not the external sign, but the *inward reality* to which the sign points. We may be baptized by aspersion, affusion, or even single or "trine" immersion (or varying combinations), but unless it is true of us that "by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body…." (1 Corinthians 12:13), it were well for us that we had never been born. What matters is not the *ritual*, but the *reality* to which the ritual points. Unhappily, one aspect of the fall is that we readily tend towards ritual!

We see this amongst some Christian Jews in their emphasis on circumcision; we see it amongst Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics in their emphasis on including various rituals in worship; we see it amongst those who place religion in keeping Christmas and Easter and Good Friday, etc., and who insist on certain clothes and cloths — indeed, we call them "ritualists" — and it is to be feared that we see it amongst those who insist on a particular mode of baptism — for the Galatian heresy is ever with us!

Of course, I realise the last group will simply reply: "Baptism means immersion and nothing but immersion — we are simply carrying out our Lord's command." But it is the purpose of this investigation to see whether this is so. Certainly our examination so far points in precisely the opposite direction.

The Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38, 41)

The Holy Spirit had come upon the apostles, and, as a result of Peter's preaching, around three thousand people had received his word and were baptized the same day. Two aspects are of interest here. Firstly, if this was done by *immersion*, then each of the twelve apostles needed to handle some 250 persons. Assuming one was baptized every minute, that amounts to five hours (allowing for breaks) — see earlier calculations relative to John the Baptist). Not a bad day's work!

The improbability of this is minor, compared with the second aspect: i.e. the near impossibility of obtaining the requisite amount of water.

Jerusalem, unlike most major cities, is not situated on a river. My copy of *The New Bible Dictionary* (1962) states that, to this day, water supply is a problem. Even in this country, where water is abundant and sanitary facilities excellent, anyone with any knowledge of

Baptist churches will be aware of the extensive planning which is often needed to carry out even a single immersion. The candidate may need to travel many miles. Anecdote and the literature list heroic efforts to move (and fill) tanks, etc., and yet we find that, on the day of Pentecost, in the dry season of the year, when most households would rely on cisterns filled in the rainy season, and where there was no extensive body of water available, the apostles had, apparently, no difficulty in baptizing about three thousand persons. Well, there would be no problem in doing it by *sprinkling* — or even by *pouring*.

Now inevitably we cannot know all the possibilities, but even if an extensive reservoir were available, is it likely that a probably hostile population would suffer the extensive pollution to their water supplies in immersing three thousand; or, indeed, that the later candidates would suffer themselves to be immersed in such a polluted pool? We would simply ask: *Which is the most probable method?* I have never seen the day of Pentecost cited in the proof texts for immersion — nor am I surprised that it is not!

The Samaritans (Acts 8:12-13,16)

We learn nothing directly about mode from this passage, but it is worth noting, first, that "they were baptized, both men and women" (v. 12). Second, the nature of receiving the Holy Spirit is indicated by the statement, "For as yet he was *fallen upon* none of them" (v. 16).

The Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:36, 38-39)

This passage is almost invariably quoted by Baptists as a proof-text of their position:

"….*and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water.…* (vv. 38-39).

Now this is precisely the account we might give of a baptism by immersion — though it does not prove that it was! Let us examine the circumstances a little more closely.

First, we note that the Scriptures specifically call our attention, in verse 26, to the fact that "[this] is *desert*." Second, we read that they had encountered "[some] water" (v. 36). We are not told how much. It might have been water trickling down a rock face; or a spring in the desert; or a small or large pool. That it was a body sufficient to *immerse* someone in, is pure presumption. It may be said that the eunuch "*went down.…*into the water" (v. 38), but this does not prove *immersion*, because precisely the same is said of Philip — if it proves it of one, it proves it of both! And as if to make matters quite clear, the passage goes on: "And when *they* were *come up out* of the water…." emphasizing that what was true of the eunuch was true of Philip. If, in fact, the water was a small pool or even a spring, and they had both stepped into it, and Philip had cupped his hand and poured or sprinkled water on the eunuch, all that is said in the account would equally be covered. Indeed, the same would be true if it was simply a trickle on a rock face that Philip used — for although the most usual translation of the Greek word "εἰς" (*eis*) is "into," it may simply mean "to" or, indeed, quite a number of other things, depending on the context. Similarly, the word "ἐκ/ἐξ" (*ek/ex)*, translated "out of," might be "from." Is it perhaps significant that although there is a perfectly good way in Greek of unambiguously conveying the sense "into" and "out of," the Holy Spirit did not in fact do so?

The truth of the matter is that Baptists begin by assuming "immersion" and then simply read it into the passage and use it for a proof-text — which is, of course, to fall into the logical trap of arguing in a circle.

Saul (Acts 9:18, cf. 22:16)

Here we have an account of the baptism of Paul of Tarsus. We read:

"….*and* [he] *arose, and was baptized* (9:18).

Let us simply remind ourselves of the circumstances. On his way to Damascus, Saul had been confronted and converted by the risen Lord Jesus. Entering the city blinded, he had been three days without food or drink when Ananias came to him and he received his sight. Then the account simply says: (1) he *arose*, (2) he *was baptized*, and (3) when he had received food, he was strengthened.

A simple reading of the narrative, without preconceptions, suggests that, having risen, Paul was baptized by Ananias, *standing up* — presumably either by sprinkling or pouring *in situ* — and then took food. Is it at all likely that, in his weakened condition, Ananias conveyed him either to some public bath (if such existed), or outside the city to the Abana or Pharpar, and, having searched out some suitable quiet spot, immersed him, *before he had had opportunity even to break his fast?* What simply are the probabilities of the situation?

The Baptism of Cornelius, his relatives and close friends (Acts 10:44, 47-48)

Peter, having been sent for by this Gentile centurion, is engaged in preaching to the party when….

"….*the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word*" (v. 44).

Those who had come with Peter were astonished….

"….*because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost*" (v. 45).

Then Peter asks the obvious question:

"*Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord*" (vv. 47-48).

The natural reading of the passage is that water was then brought into the house and the party was baptized, either by pouring or sprinkling. This interpretation is strengthened by Peter's defence of his actions in chapter 11:

"*And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost* ***fell on*** *them,* ***as on us at the beginning****. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost*" (vv. 15-16).

They had experienced that the Holy Spirit "fell" or was "poured out" on them. So analogy would obviously lead them to expect that baptism with water would follow a similar mode.

Lydia and her Household (Acts 16:14-15)

As a result of the missionary activity of Paul and his party, they had come to Philippi. Here, two incidents of baptism are recorded. In the first, on the Sabbath day, Paul had preached at a riverside place of prayer. The sequence of events recorded is as follows:

1. Among the worshippers was a certain Lydia, a seller of purple from Thyatira.
2. The Lord opened her heart so that she heeded God's word.
3. Then "she was baptized, and her household" (v. 15).
4. She then constrained Paul and his party to stay at her house.

The implications are so well-stated by another writer that we shall avail ourselves of some of his words. Is it likely:

"….that this respectable Eastern lady of good position was immersed, without previous preparation, at a public place, by a man she had never seen before? Such a thing would be a flagrant violation of the customs and usages of the East, where women have always been retiring in their habit. And Paul…. was not the man to do unnecessary violence to these feelings of delicacy…. Beyond all shadow of doubt, Lydia was not immersed."

One has only to try and visualize Paul, Lydia and her household, all dripping wet, making their way back into the city, to see the folly of the contention that baptism is "immersion and nothing but immersion"!

The Philippian Jailer and his Family (Acts 16)

The second incident in Philippi concerned Paul and Silas' imprisonment. The facts are very familiar.

Around midnight there was an earthquake, and the jailer, waking out of his sleep, fears the prisoners have escaped and is about to kill himself when Paul intervenes and the man is saved. Then:

"….*he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them*" (vv. 33-34).

Now the story tells us that the jailer took water to wash their wounds. Then immediately he and all the family were baptized. Logically, the water for this was drawn from the same cistern or well which served the prison. Is it likely that the prison possessed also a full tank in which he and his family could be *immersed*? Even less likely is it that, having locked up the other prisoners, the whole party proceeded in the early hours to the local river, where they were then immersed — particularly in the light of Paul's comment in verse 37 ("They have beaten us openly uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us

into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? nay verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out"). Once again, every probability points to these baptisms being carried out by affusion or aspersion — particularly as they were fitted in between the washing of their wounds and the provision of a meal.

Crispus, his Household, and the Ephesian Disciples (Acts 18:8; 19:1-7)

Nothing immediately relevant to our enquiry into the meaning of the word *baptism* is furnished by these two references. We may note that, just as this book began with a reference to the connection between being baptized with water and with the Holy Spirit, so the last reference to the subject, apart from a reference back in Paul's account of his conversion, again links the two items together, for it concludes:

"*When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them….*" (19:56).

Conclusions

We have now gone over virtually every reference in the book of Acts to the subject of baptism. In seeking to elucidate its mode, we have considered one passage where immersion may have been possible, namely, that of the Ethiopian Eunuch. But certainly that passage does not prove that it was immersion, and, quite apart from the implications of other passages, some of the incidental circumstances suggest it was not. In each and every other case where there is enough information to draw conclusions, on any fair consideration of the evidence, the implications point to *pouring* or *sprinkling* being the only probable, or, in some cases, possible mode.

This is, of course, entirely in line with the conclusions we came to from a study of the gospels narratives — and, indeed, the meaning of baptism itself. It remains to round off what may be deduced about the mode of baptism from the epistles and the book of Revelation.

Baptism in the Epistles and Revelation

When we turn to the epistles of the New Testament, we find, more or less, extended treatments of such subjects as *assurance, church officers, the gospel, immorality, Israel, the Judgment, justification, the Law, legalism, marriage and divorce, the resurrection, the second coming, sectarianism, sin, spiritual gifts, the state, things indifferent*, et al. Even the subject of *widows* occupies fourteen verses of I Timothy — some 12% of the epistle.

By contrast, the words βαπτίζω (*baptizo*), βάπτισμα (*baptisma*), and βαπτισμός (*baptismos*) occur only nineteen times in the epistles: three in Romans, ten in 1 Corinthians, once in Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians and 1 Peter, and twice in Hebrews. βάπτω (*bapto*) occurs once in Revelation. We look in vain for any extended treatment of the subject — the references being mainly incidental to the actual discussions.

Now compare this with virtually any "confession of faith." It would be almost unthinkable that the matter is not discussed. On the contrary, it is treated often at length. One has seen an introductory leaflet put out by a Baptist church, in which, in order to explain their name, substantial space is devoted to stating that only adults are baptized on profession of faith, and that baptism is by immersion! All this is quite foreign to the New Testament. Even in the "pastoral epistles," where surely we might have expected it, there is only an incidental reference in Titus 3:5.[5]

We have already remarked that the matter simply does not occupy the place in the New Testament that it does in our discussions — and it might well be felt that this extended series on the *mode* of baptism already transgresses that balance, were it not that a defence of the *biblical and Reformed* position is forced on us by those who so pertinaciously urge what we are convinced is an unbiblical one.

With these considerations in mind, let us examine what we may deduce from the texts themselves.

[5]"*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the* ***washing*** *of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost*" (Titus 3:5).

Romans 6:3-4

It is perhaps understandable that those who already hold the immersionist position will read into these verses a confirmation of it, and then cite them, as they regularly do, as proof-texts for immersion. And certainly, when we find a *non*-Baptist scholar of the stature of Bishop Lightfoot citing verse 4 as an "image of baptism," we should pause. However, not too long — for if we have followed out the logic of the position so far, we hold no such presuppositions. Let us then take a longer look at the passage. The following points should be borne in mind.

1. The apostle is not here dealing with baptism as such, but with the antinomian objection which invariably arises whenever the doctrine of justification by faith alone is properly expounded.

2. It would be rather odd that we need to base an argument for a particular *mode* on an incidental reference dealing with another subject altogether — for the essential refutation of the antinomian position is that we are *united with Christ*.

3. It is this *union* of the believer with Christ that is the essential point that Paul is concerned to convey — not only *baptized and buried*, but also *crucified and planted* (the latter two having no reference to water baptism). The word translated "planted" in the AV and "united" in the RV has the idea of grafted — a very beautiful union. A full exposition of the passage would extend well-beyond the confines of this chapter, and the interested reader is referred to the appropriate commentaries.[6]

There is, however, one purely practical consideration which should be borne in mind: We are simply being misled by our experience of burials in seeing a connection between that and the immersionists' practice. For our Lord's burial was not *a going down into a dug grave*. Rather, it was an "entombment." Once this is grasped, all apparent force in the passage simply disappears.

[6]John Murray and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones will both be found helpful. See Murray's commentary on Romans and also his volume on baptism. I found Lloyd-Jones quite convincing in seeing the reference to baptism pointing to I Corinthians 12:13 — that is, real baptism — though I doubt that his distinction between "with the Spirit" and "by the Spirit" is valid.

1 Corinthians 1:13-17

This passage, though it contains six of our twenty texts, adds nothing to our understanding of the *mode* of baptism.

1 Corinthians 10:2

Speaking of the Israelites coming out of Egypt, Paul writes: "all [were] baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea." This passage has evoked some rather odd exegesis. Gill, in defence of his belief that "baptism" always means "immersion," visualizes the Israelites passing through the Red Sea, with the water standing on both sides and the cloud overhead as a picture of immersion. Others have wondered whether Psalm 68:9 ("Thou, O God, didst send a plentiful rain…."), referring to the wilderness, might not apply — presumably baptism by sprinkling! But the truth surely is that just as Romans 6 applies to our union with Christ, so, all this text is telling us is that these are *united* with Moses — they are Moses' men. Incidentally, the *whole multitude* were baptized: men, women and children.

1 Corinthians 12:13

This text refers to the baptism of the Holy Spirit — the reality which is symbolized by water baptism.

1 Corinthians 15:29

If I understood what these two references meant, it might add something to our understanding of the *meaning* and possibly the *subjects* of baptism. It adds nothing to our understanding of the *mode*.

Galatians 3:27

This text probably refers to what we have called *real* baptism, not *water* baptism. In other words, to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, to which reference has just been made. It adds nothing to our understanding of the *mode*.

Ephesians 4:5

This occurs in a passage devoted to the subject and importance of Christian *unity*. We are reminded that there is "One Lord, one faith, one baptism." Yet it is notorious that baptism

is a divisive issue! It would seem, therefore, that it must point to *real* baptism — and not to any particular mode associated with the *ritual*.

Colossians 2:11-12

Verse 12 parallels Romans 6:4. However, the previous verse introduces an additional item of information, for it tells us that "In whom also ye are *circumcised*" (v. 11). Now clearly physical circumcision is not meant; indeed, the passage goes on to add, "with the circumcision made without hands…." This would confirm the opinion, previously expressed, that what is in view is our *union with Christ*, effected by the Holy Spirit — not *water* baptism at all. This, then, is an additional reason for rejecting any adventitious connection with "immersion."

Hebrews 6:2; 9:10

The first passage speaks of "the doctrine of baptisms…." and the second of "divers washings…." The Greek has βαπτισμός (*baptismos*). The only other occurrences are in Mark 7:4, 8 — passages which speak of the "washing of cups, and pots" etc., which we have already considered. These references all seem to point back to the Old Testament modes of symbolic purging of sin — and the attentive reader will have noted how cleansing is made by various sprinklings and washings (Leviticus 14:6-7; Numbers 8:7; 19:11-13 — cf. Psalm 51:7; Ezekiel 36:25-27). That this is what is in mind, seems to be confirmed by the examples given in Hebrews 9: "*sprinkling* the unclean" (v. 13); "and *sprinkled* both the book, and all the people" (v. 19); "Moreover he *sprinkled* with blood …" (v. 21).

Now a distinction can just about be drawn between these two almost synonymous Greek words, βάπτισμα (*baptisma*), and βαπτισμός (*baptismos*) — the one referring to Christian baptism, the other to Old Testament purifications — but the obvious implication is that both were carried out by sprinkling or washing.

1 Peter 3:21

This probably refers to Holy Spirit baptism — not water baptism.

Revelation 19:13

The Greek word is βάπτω (*bapto*). It occurs also in Luke 16:24 and John 13:26, and is translated "dip" in all three places. Here, finally, we seem to have an example of "immersion"! But when we look up the cross reference in Isaiah 63:3-4, from which the image was drawn, we read: "….and their blood shall be *sprinkled* upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment." What John saw, in his vision, is Christ's garments sprinkled by the blood of His enemies — and the word he used to describe this (βάπτω — *bapto*) is the root word from which we have the four others, and whose meaning we have been trying to ascertain.

Discussion

1. I have looked at every text in the New Testament which uses the word *baptism* in one of its five Greek forms. Most of these have been discussed, but the fourteen references to βαπτιστής (*baptistes*) — i.e. John the Baptizer — are generally incidental and mainly omitted.

Now if we take paper and draw on it three columns and label the first *Immersion Certain*, the second *Immersion Possible or Probable*, the third *Immersion Impossible or Improbable*, we may, apart from those references which are *figurative*, assign every text. Not a single one goes into the first column (*Immersion Certain*)! In the second, may go the references to our Lord's baptism, the Ethiopian Eunuch and Revelation 19:13 (i.e. the garment dipped in blood). Virtually all the other references where an assignment can be made, will be found in the column *Immersion Impossible or Improbable*.

I believe these results speak for themselves and I would encourage anyone bothered by this matter to repeat the exercise for themselves. To speak plainly, had Scripture wished us to know that *immersion* and "*only immersion*" constituted Christian baptism, why, in no single case, is immersion *certain*, and why, in so many cases, does a plain reading lead to the probable conclusion that immersion was *not* involved?

2. Why, then, the widespread and unthinking adoption of Baptist views in evangelical churches? Well, probably, "unthinking" actually sums it up! A Greek dictionary is consulted and gives the meaning "dip" or "submerge"; a quick glance at the New Testament suggests both John's baptisms and that by Philip of the Ethiopian Eunuch suggests both John's baptisms and that by Philip of the Ethiopian Eunuch was immersion — and a misunderstanding of Romans 6, completes the delusion.

Our experience tells us that the earth is flat; that the sun rises in the east and goes round the earth to the west; and that if you burn things they decrease in weight. But the facts do not bear us out — and we have to learn that, in fact, the earth is basically a ball, and the apparent motion of the sun is caused by the earth's rotation. Only the coming of accurate balances served to explode the phlogiston theory. There is absolutely nothing wrong with framing a hypothesis as to a situation, provided it is then checked and, if necessary, revised in the light of all the facts. The Baptist hypothesis rests on arguing from the particular to the general — a logical fallacy — and not checking out every aspect. For if it can be shown that, in a single case, baptism does *not* mean immersion, then the whole argument crumbles.

In fact, we have shown that there is not a single certain case of immersion in the New Testament and that the probability, in case after case, is that baptism was administered by sprinkling or pouring. Let our Baptist brethren go through the whole New Testament and show that every instance recorded was, or probably was, immersion — and if this cannot be done (and of course, we are convinced that it cannot) we invite them to abandon their schismatical divisions and return to the Reformed faith.

3. But there are additional points which confirm our position and which need to be set out. There is, in fact, a threefold aspect to baptism.

First, lying behind the matter, are all the purifications of the Old Testament, which, of course, pointed forward to the taking away of sins by our Lord Jesus Christ. We find references to these in the New Testament in the baptizing of pots and vessels etc. in Mark

7; in our Lord's failure to wash or baptize *Himself* in Luke 11; in the dispute between John's disciples and the Jews "about purif[ication]" (John 3:25); and finally in the references to "baptisms" in Hebrews 9. Now all these baptisms or purifications were clearly carried out by pouring, sprinkling or washing.

Second, as we have seen, the strong probability is that most of the baptisms of the New Testament were carried out by pouring or sprinkling; and, as we have shown, there is nothing in the terms to imply that "immersion" was ever practised.

Third, these water baptisms pointed forward to, or signified, *real* baptism — the engrafting of us into the body of Christ by regeneration (the baptism of the Holy Spirit). And how is that represented to us? Here is a selection of phrases: "*sat upon* each one of them" (Acts 2:3); "as yet he was *fallen upon* none of them" (Acts 8:16); "the Holy Ghost *fell on* all them which heard the word" (Acts 10:44) "the Holy Ghost *fell on* them, as on us at the beginning" (Acts 11:15); "the Holy Ghost *came on* them…." (Acts 19:6). The point surely which is being emphasized in each case is that *real* baptism is pictured not as an "immersion" in the Holy Spirit, but that He *falls* on us *from above* — as in baptism by sprinkling or pouring.

Each of these three separate items is congruous with the others. The washings and sprinklings of the Old Testament point forward to the pourings or sprinklings of baptism in the New Testament, and finally to the great *reality* of the falling of the Holy Spirit on believers. And we are reminded in Scripture that a three-fold cord is not easily broken (cf. Ecclesiastes 4:12). Substitute "immersion" in the second and the whole imagery falls apart.

4. We have earlier remarked that the practical requirements of "immersion" pose many problems which are familiar to all — such as the need to build or have available baptisteries in buildings. In addition, there are *medical* ones: At least one minister has remarked on being ill for days after baptizing by immersion a large number of persons, and C. H. Spurgeon, in his later years, delegated the operation, as his health would not justify him in performing it. How odd to have a ministerial ordinance which the minister cannot perform!

One has heard of one Anglican missionary in Kenya who insisted on baptizing converts by immersion and who contracted bilharzia as a result, so that his missionary career was terminated — and, indeed, his life imperilled. In other cases, people have nearly been drowned when baptisms have been performed in the sea. More might be said, but we forbear.

5. This consideration rather naturally leads on to our final one. The worship of the Old Testament with its types and shadows and sacrifices must have been extremely laborious. But our Lord tells the Samaritan woman, "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him" (John 4:23). In Acts and the epistles we can identify the elements of that worship. It was performed "with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12:28) on the Lord's day, and consisted of:

1. Reading the Scriptures.
2. Praise — in the singing of the Psalms.
3. Prayer.
4. Preaching of the Word.

5. Benediction. To that were added the two sacraments:
6. Baptism, and
7. The Lord's Supper.

This extremely simple New Testament worship required no temple — not even a synagogue. Rather, the Scripture regularly speaks of "a church in a house" (cf. Romans 16:5). Even two or three gathered together were promised God's presence. The head of the household or an elder to minister, a supply of the Scriptures, some water, a little bread and wine and all was provided for. Meeting houses could come later — and would obviously be convenient where large numbers were involved. But there are now in areas of persecution (and, doubtless, may be in the future, particularly where no Reformed worship is available), great advantages in such simplicity.

But on the Baptist premise, all this is distorted! Much water is needed, some large container, and — as all who have experienced it know — no small performance. Does this sound like the simplicity of New Testament worship? Or does it sound like some Pharisaic distortion which has crept in later to distort the primitive and biblical mode?

Conclusion

We rest our case, believing it to be unassailable. It only remains for us to consider now the *subjects* of baptism in the concluding section.

4. The Subjects of Baptism

"*Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized*" (Westminster Confession 28:4)

One of the advantages of writing on the Reformed faith is that there is no particular exegetical axe to grind. It is not likely, after some centuries, that any serious alteration may need to be made, though clearly there may need to be minor adjustments or clarifications. The one requirement is simply to set out as clearly and faithfully as possible the biblical position — and there is no need to be concerned about or suppress any fact; even if it may point in another direction.

In the earlier material dealing with the *mode* of baptism, attention was called to three separate lines of evidence: First, the principle modes of ceremonial purification in the Old Testament were pouring, sprinkling or washing; and these cleansings are called "baptisms" in the New Testament. Second, when we examine all the references to actual baptisms in the New Testament, we find that individuals — small numbers or large — are instantly accommodated and with a complete lack of bother. The clear practical implication is that baptism meant pouring or sprinkling — not immersion. Third, *ritual* baptism with water simply points to *real* baptism with the Holy Spirit: "I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost" (Mark 1:8). Now the Spirit is always spoken of as "falling" or being "poured out" etc., so we would expect the *mode* of the ritual to picture the reality. Each of these lines of evidence confirms the others, and a threefold cord is not easily broken. They point to the fact that the apostolic mode was affusion or aspersion (pouring or sprinkling) — not immersion.

The only significant line of argument I have seen against this evidence is that there is some historical material pointing to immersion in the sub-apostolic period so that around AD150 the usual practice was "trine immersion…. in the nude." In fact, over the centuries, a vast number of different ceremonies have arisen, varying from "trine immersion" at one extreme, to the practice in St. Martin's in Birmingham in the last century, where those to be baptized were arranged round the communion rails and sprinkled from the font by the minister with a brush.

Now to these various modes, the Reformed response is that our authority is simply *Scripture* — not what may be gleaned from archaeology or history — and to remind our readers that the *biblical* requirement is that "all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40). There is an interesting aspect to this, as we come to consider the *subjects* of baptism, for there is reasonable historical evidence pointing to the baptism of some children *as early as AD70 or 80* — i.e. still within the apostolic period — and continuing thereafter with hardly any dissent for 1500 years. Nonetheless, we repeat, our authority is Scripture. The matter must be fairly determined from there — however interesting or illuminating the historical record may be.

Stating the Question

The Christian church is, or should be, a missionary organization. As it extends its bounds, men and women will be converted to Christ. Profession of the faith is ratified by baptism. We read, in Acts, of individuals, families and multitudes who are baptized. We have no problem here. Our service books provide for adult baptisms. We believe in them and practise them. There is no dispute between us and Baptists on this matter! The *real* question is this: *Should the children of one or both professing parents be baptized?* To that, we who are Reformed reply:

"Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 28:4).

That is the sole point at issue. We are not concerned to defend abuses of infant baptism, or misunderstandings of particular services which may be used, nor here to discuss the effects of baptism. The question, in fact, may be put another way round: *Are our infant seed to be treated as members of the church?*

Preliminary Considerations

All of systematic theology is connected, and, therefore, any specific doctrine inevitably depends on others. There are two specific doctrines that concern us here: the *church* and the *covenant*. There has been extensive discussion of both points. Here we simply wish to bring out two points. Although a new *form* is implied by our Lord's words, "I will build my church…." (Matthew 16:18), there is a generic *unity* with the church (Acts 7:38) of the Old Testament, so that Paul, in Romans 11:16-21, can speak of us as being grafted into and partaking "of the root and fatness of the olive tree" (v. 17). And we are reminded that "thou bearest not the root, but the root thee" (v. 18).

Likewise, though we speak of an "old" and a "new" covenant, there is an *essential unity*, so that Galatians 3 tells us that we are partakers of the covenant made with Abraham, and Hebrews refers to an "*everlasting covenant*" (cf. 13:20). Both aspects are summed up in the terms of the promise to Abraham: "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The unity of both is further confirmed by the repeated promise of God all throughout Scripture: "*I will be their God, and they shall be my people*."[7]

Arguments for Infant Baptism

1. We begin by reminding our readers that "Salvation is of the LORD" (Jonah 2:9). Who are *saved*, and, consequently, who are *lost*, lies in the decree of God formed in eternity. But, practically, God uses means, and we perceive from Scripture that it normally pleases Him to save *in the line of generations*. At the outset of the sacred volume in Genesis 4 and 5, we note two lines being traced. First, we have the line of Cain. Here we see the development of husbandry, mechanics and music; also of polygamy and warfare. But nothing is said of *grace*. Then there is the line of Seth. We note, here, that "then began men to call upon the name of the Lord" (Genesis 4:26). Although we cannot know whether all his named descendants were saved, yet in the seventh generation we read: "*And Enoch walked with God*: and he was not; for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). Further, Lamech and Noah were gracious men. Now clearly not all the Sethites were regenerate, for we read in Genesis 6 of mixed marriages between the two lines — and in spite of many sons and daughters being born, by Noah's time in the tenth generation, only he and his family remained godly.

2. From Noah's line, came (in time) Abraham; but we note in passing a significant prophecy: "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem" (Genesis 9:27). Now we have already noted that in Abraham all nations are to be blessed, but as we read the story we see the development of the covenant promise signified by circumcision for the adult Abraham and the men of his house, and all the male infants eight days old: "And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations" (Genesis 17:9). Abraham "received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had" (Romans 4:11). But Isaac is circumcised at eight days old. The infant church contained not only believers (Abraham), but also their *seed* (Isaac).

3. Further, we read of Abraham that the Lord said, "For I know him, that he will *command his children* and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him" (Genesis 18:19). There was to be godly training in the ways of the Lord, or, as the New Testament puts it, "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but *bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*."

4. In the time of Moses, a second sacrament was added — the Passover. Now both involved the shedding of blood and, of course, pointed forward to the one great and final sacrifice of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. "For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Now, as we look back, the shedding of blood is no longer appropriate, so baptism replaces circumcision: "In whom also ye are circumcised…. buried with him in baptism" (Colossians 2:11-12); and the Lord's Supper replaces the Passover.

5. The position, then, is this: for 2000 years, church and covenant included not only believers, but also their infant seed. All male children were circumcised at eight days — or they were treated as cut off from the covenant (cf. Genesis 17:14). Adult proselyte members were circumcised on admission. This continued in the church as late as AD60, for we read of those who continued circumcising their children at the time of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem.

6. Now Christ is the "messenger of the covenant" (Malachi 3:1) — the covenant made with Abraham — and He is "a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: and that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Romans 15:8-9). Now what were the terms of the covenant? Just this: that He would be a God unto Abraham *and to his seed* (cf. Genesis 17:7). Is there, then, any command that this privileged position of children has been abrogated under the terms of the new covenant?

7. Let us, then, seek to review the various references with this question in mind.

[7]Cf. Genesis 17:8; Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 22:33; 25:38; 26:12; 29:45; Numbers 15:41; Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:28; Ezekiel 11:20; 14:11; 37:23, 27; Zechariah 8:8; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Hebrews 8:10; Revelation 21:7, 3; et al.

Matthew 19:13-15

Here we see our Lord's attitude when the disciples would have resisted. "Suffer *little children*, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for *of such is the kingdom of heaven*."

Acts 2:37-39

Peter is preaching on the day of Pentecost, and in response to the question "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" he replies: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ…. For the promise is unto you, *and to your children….*"

Acts 16:14-15

Here we read of a certain Lydia, "whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. And when she was baptized, *and her household….*"

Acts 16:30-34

Then, in the story of the Philippian jailer, he asks him: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, *and thy house*. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house…. and [he] was baptized, *he and all his*, straightway ... and [he] rejoiced, believing in God with all his house."

Note: the jailer asks “What must *I* do….,” but the reply includes *his house*, so we see that *all the family* were baptized, but it was he, singular, who had believed.

1 Corinthians 1:16

“And I baptized also the *household* of Stephanas.” Here we have a third example of a household baptism.

1 Corinthians 7:14

“….else were your children unclean; but now are they *holy*.” The children of the covenant are in a special position before God. There is debate as to what precisely is meant by “holy” in this passage, but I suggest that the texts which follow do throw some light on the matter. In Ezekiel 16:21, God complains: “Thou hast slain *my children*….” and in Malachi 2:13-15, He rebukes divorce, “that he might seek a *godly seed.*”

Ephesians 6:1-3 / Colossians 3:20

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. ‘Honour thy father and mother’; which is the first commandment with promise; ‘That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.’” “Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.”

Now, *who are being addressed* in these two epistles? In the first, it is: “[To] *the saints* which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1); and in the second: “To *the saints* and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse.” We see instruction being given to husbands, wives, masters, servants *and children*. All are *equally* being treated as *members* of the church!

Discussion

Let us now be clear. It is not asserted that these texts prove infant baptism. We do not know whether the households of Stephanas, Lydia or the Philippian jailer contained any children, though there must be a good probability that one or more did. What is being asserted is this: The *children* of church members under the old covenant were also treated as church members and the males received the sacrament of circumcision. *There is no evidence that this privilege has been withdrawn* under the new covenant; and the incidental notices of the New Testament are entirely consistent with their membership and consequent baptism. Put negatively, we may reasonably ask our Baptist brethren with their emphasis on individual repentance and faith, to say what in their system and practice corresponds to the three household baptisms mentioned above?

We may summarize what we have been saying by recognizing that God is sovereign in salvation. But it pleases Him to use means to His ends and it is His gracious and merciful provision to normally call His elect in a covenant line. We see this in the line of Seth over against that of Cain. We do not see, for instance, election operating apparently randomly between the two lines. That, of course, does not mean that *all* the covenant line are saved

— amongst the Sethites it would appear that the majority fell away. Nor does it mean that God may not start a fresh covenant line at any time; for we see precisely that happening in all missionary outreach. I have heard of Dutch Reformed people who can trace back their ancestry 400 or 450 years and say that in every generation there have been those who have called upon the name of the Lord. Under the old dispensation, the sign of the covenant line was circumcision; under the new, baptism. It is entirely in line with this that we should expect to baptize our infant seed — and all the evidence points in this direction. The line of Shem ran down through Abraham to the Patriarchs, and thus to all Israel. Most of us in the west are Japhethites. It is appropriate that in this, as in other regards, we should dwell in the tents of Shem!

Conclusion

We have sought, up to this point, to set forth the truth in a positive manner. It only remains to consider objections to paedobaptism and to draw some practical conclusions from the whole discussion.

5. Objections to Paedobaptism

"*The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.…*" (Westminster Confession 1:4)

In the previous pages we attempted to set forth the positive truth that the infant seed of believing parents are to be baptized.

"The argument in a nutshell is simply this: God established His Church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of His Church and as such entitled to its ordinances. Among these ordinances is baptism, which standing in a similar place in the New Dispensation to circumcision in the Old, is like it to be given to children."

The quotation is taken from the conclusion of a fascinating article by B. B. Warfield entitled "The Polemics of Infant Baptism," in which he takes up six objections to infant baptism listed by A. H. Strong in his *Systematic Theology*, and shows that not one is valid.[8] The whole article is well worth reading. Here, in a much briefer response, I simply want to consider three objections which regularly occur.

Objection 1. "There is no command in the New Testament for infant baptism."

The first response must surely be that the argument is on the other foot! That infant *circumcision*, as well as adult, was practiced by the express command of God in the Old Testament church, is admitted by all. *Where, under the new dispensation, has it been revoked?* And why, under the brighter and fuller light of the gospel, are our children to be spiritually disadvantaged as compared with their position in the old?

Second, when, as usually happens, our objector states that he needs a "positive command," there is surely a measure of arrogance here. God instructs us in His Word in

prose: “The heavens declare the glory of God….” (Psalm 19:1); by *parable*: “A sower went forth to sow….” (Matthew 13:3). There is *allegory*: “Which things are an allegory….” (Galatians 4:24), and *apocalyptic*: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ….” (Revelation 1:1). Matters may be: “either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (Westminster Confession of Faith 1:4). It is not for the creature to stand in judgment on *how the Creator should instruct us* — let us reverently accept whatever way He does.

Third, it may be objected that “I care not a fig for your ‘good and necessary consequence.’ Give me a plain command of Scripture and I will obey!” Will you not? Every Christian church I know rightly admits believing women to the Lord’s Supper. But *there is neither command nor example of such in the New Testament.* We do so, and properly do so, as a result of “good and necessary consequence.”

A consideration of these points shows that this argument simply falls to the ground.

[8]B. B. Warfield, Studies in Theology (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, reprint 1988), pp. 389ff.

Objection 2. “The Scriptures require faith and repentance before baptism.”

The argument is, of course, that as infants are incapable of exercising either, they are not proper subjects of baptism. But let us spell the argument out a little further and it will be seen to be a sophism. What is actually being implied is this: “The Scriptures require faith and repentance *of adults*, in order to be baptized; but as *infants* cannot exercise these, they cannot be baptized.” The fallacy lies in the fact that the premise is about *adults*, but the conclusion is about *infants*.

This will perhaps be made clearer by substituting another Scripture: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16). So: the Scriptures require belief and baptism of *adults*, in order to be saved; but as infants cannot exercise these they will be damned.

Again: “…. if any would not work, *neither* should he eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). So: the Scriptures require work of *adults*, in order to eat; but as *infants* cannot work they may not be fed!

The sophism, a specious but fallacious argument, is surely now clear. We do not believe all infants are lost, nor do we believe they should not eat. The mistake arises simply by applying to *infants* what was intended for *adults* — and clearly, then, this argument falls to the ground also.

Objection 3. “The Reformers brought infant baptism over from Rome!”

This series has been primarily concerned with analysing and commenting on the biblical data. But there is a historical objection which is rather regularly brought up: The Reformers, and those of us who take the Reformed position, are accused of having “carried over infant baptism from Rome.” Now, if I were to point out to Baptists that, in practising immersion, they were simply following the Jehovah’s Witnesses, they would indignantly and rightly reply that they were following their practice long before the so-called Jehovah’s Witnesses were ever invented. But precisely the same consideration

applies here: The history of infant baptism goes back as far as we have historical records. To suggest, as one writer did, that it does not occur before AD400 is simply wrong. The earliest development of sacerdotalism occurs around AD250 with Cyprian. Over the centuries, the "See of Rome" steadily increased her pretensions: as the restraining hand of Caesar went down, so the Man of Sin went up (2 Thessalonians 2). But a millennium was to pass before the Roman system was fully developed.

One might just as well argue that to sing Psalms is not biblical "because Rome sings Psalms." We sing them just because we find that our Lord and His apostles sang them. It is those who do not sing them who are being unbiblical. The Reformed practice owes nothing to Rome, and yet the fact that the canard is so readily repeated suggests some desperation in the Baptist case!

6. Implications

What conclusions may we draw from the foregoing?

1. When a person has been baptized in the name of the Triune God, it is not to be repeated. It simply will not do for it to be set aside with some comment about "infant sprinkling." The minister who carries out such a repetition should know better — and the candidate could know better if only he or she had enquired. Undoubtedly, the term *Anabaptist* carries negative overtones, and one would not for a moment seek to defend the terrible incidents which have occurred in earlier centuries, but it still seems the only word to apply to this practice of repetition. But, says someone, my parents were only *nominal* Christians. I was baptized because it was "the done thing." So God, in mercy, has given you the reality to correspond to what, in perhaps ignorance, was given in ritual as a child. Rejoice, but do not repeat. But, says another, the church in which I was baptized is largely apostate and the minister was an *ungodly* man. If true, these things are common and deplorable, but do not invalidate official actions, any more than the character of a Registrar performing marriages affects their validity. The only exception to this rule concerns the cults such as Christadelphians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, etc., where in all cases the Trinity is denied. In these cases, Christian baptism should be sought.

2. Where a person has been brought to true faith in Christ and has not previously been baptized, then they should seek it as a matter of urgency. Baptism is the *defining evidence* to themselves and the world that they are *Christians*. It is perhaps ironical that the one place where one is most likely to meet unbaptized believers is in *Baptist churches* — or amongst those connected by birth with them. It may be that, just as in some Presbyterian churches there is a reluctance to take the Lord's Supper because of its infrequency and, consequently, the emphasis placed on it, the unbiblical emphasis placed on baptism and the demand for a particular (and we are persuaded *unbiblical*) mode, often, along with a great deal of associated display, inhibits precisely the more exercised and sensitive souls, who, in the judgment of charity, are proper candidates.

3. But beyond our quarrels and divisions, we must seek the *reality* of the faith. Have we truly repented and believed the gospel? Has God, in Christ, saved our souls? Whatever conclusions we come to about mode and subjects (i.e. the ritual), are we partakers of the reality to which it points (i.e. the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the new birth)? If not, all out theologizing will be in vain — and it would be better if we had never been born!

Final Conclusions

In, somewhat thankfully, coming to the end, I want to again recognize the danger mentioned at the start of getting the whole subject out of proportion. The defence of the Reformed and biblical position is forced on us by those who see the matter as of such importance as to set up “Baptist” churches, appoint “Baptist” ministers and structure a whole denomination. Historically, this whole movement is schismatic.

We now invite all such to carefully reconsider their position. It is common for Baptists to see baptism as symbolizing the death and resurrection of Christ. If, however, they will consider what has been written on its *meaning*, I suspect there is little with which they will wish to quarrel. As regards the *mode*, let the reader, instead of relying on a few proof-texts, carefully go through the New Testament and note every place where baptism is spoken of — including those texts where the original is hidden by the translation. Let him consider the multitudes at Jordan, the three thousand on the day of Pentecost, the jailer at night, etc. Then compare this with the amount of work involved in the average church in immersing one person. Now recollect that the ritual is to represent the reality of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. I believe the only conclusion can be to give up the insistence on immersion. As regards the *subjects*, we are agreed that converted adults should be baptized. The only real question is the treatment of their *children*. Here we need to consider the whole data of Scripture. The fact that children were included in the covenant from the first, the absence of any indication of a change, and then the incidental notices of family baptisms and the commands addressed to children as members of the church, can only point one way.

Recommended Reading

THE BEST BOOK on baptism is the Bible! The purpose of these articles has simply been to bring out the biblical position, and we simply invite our readers to emulate the Berean Christians and search out for themselves the truth of the matter, and we are confident of the result. But many of us are deficient in Greek, and also we tend to overlook matters unless our attention is specifically called to them. Certainly these articles could not have been written without drawing on others. The interested student may find help in the following, amongst many:

Jay E. Adams, The Meaning and Mode of Baptism (P & R Publishing, 1975)

James M. Chaney, William the Baptist (P & R Publishing, 2011)

Peter Edwards, Candid Reasons for Renouncing the Principles of Anti-Paedobaptism (1795)

Edmund B. Fairfield, Letters on Baptism (1893)

W. J. Lowe, Baptism: Its Mode and Subjects (Trieste Publishing Pty Limited, 2017)

Pierre-Charles Marcel, The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism (James Clarke Company, Limited, 2002)

John Murray, Christian Baptism (P & R Publishing, 1980)

Duane Spencer, Holy Baptism: Word Keys Which Unlock the Covenant (Geneva Ministries, 1984)