

The Reformed View of BAPTISM

(3) Its Mode (continued)

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Introduction

When we turn to the remainder of the Gospels to see what we may learn about Baptism we are immediately faced with the two great texts at the end of Matthew and Mark. Mt. xxviii.19 reads: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* Then in Mk. xvi.16: *"He who believes and is baptized will be saved; ..."* 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 Baptist which do not add anything of any significance to our quest, but at Mark x.38 (cf. parallels) Our Lord asks: *"Can you drink the cup that I drink, 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 vii

However there are two further passages in the Gospels 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 vii.4: "*And when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.*" There is some textual variation but I have emphasized **wash and washings** as the underlying word in Greek is **baptize**.

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, 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.*" 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 xi

The second passage occurs in Luke xi.37,38 where a Pharisee had invited Our Lord to breakfast. "*And he went in and sat down to eat. 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 – in separate containers, for the water would immediately on use be considered contaminated – before partaking of their meal? Well certainly the translators do not think so! Youngs literal translation gives correctly baptize; but the dozen or so other translations consulted all have variations on wash. So here, in the unanimous consent of many Greek scholars the word baptize = wash!

Objection

It is interesting to note how Carson in his work on Baptism deals with this objection. If we read him aright his argument amounts to this: Baptism means Immersion; therefore Our Lord must have 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 see how the word is actually used. Dictionaries, whatever their value, are purely secondary authorities, defining the meaning of words from actual usage and requiring to be altered to reflect that usage.

John ii

Some further light is probably shed by the account we have of the Marriage at Cana of Galilee in John ii. Here we read in verse 6 of *"six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece"* – probably 17 to 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 poured over the hands and possibly 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 xi 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 $6\frac{1}{4}$ gallons to the cubic foot we have a capacity of some 5 cu. ft. 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 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 and from which information can be deduced, that information unambiguously points to the word 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.