

Baptism: Its Mode.(4)

Acts of the Apostles

Michael Kimmitt

Introduction.

At the outset of the Acts of the Apostles we are immediately faced with a repetition of the promise found in varying form in all four Gospels:

“For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.” (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 Aspersions, Affusion, 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 Cor. 12:13).

it were well for us that we had never been born. What matters most is not Ritual - but the Reality to which the Ritual points. Unfortunately one aspect of the Fall is that we readily tend to Ritual!

We see this amongst some Christian Jews in their emphasis on circumcision; we see it amongst Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics in 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 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:vv.38, 41.

The Holy Spirit had come upon the apostles and as a result of Peter’s preaching some three thousand had received his word and were baptized the same day. Now

two aspects are of interest here. First, if this was done by immersion then each of the twelve Apostles needed to handle some 250 persons. Assuming one minute each that amounts to five hours - allowing for breaks (see the calculations relative to John the Baptist in the second article in this series); not a bad day's work!

The improbability of this is minor compared with 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 England, 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 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 more 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 vv. 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, that the nature of receiving the Holy Ghost is indicated by the statement: "For as yet He was fallen upon none of them." (v. 16).

The Ethiopian Eunuch Acts 8 vv. 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". (v. 38).

"And when they were come up out of the water" (v.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 to the fact that this area was a desert (Acts 8: 26). Second, we read that they had encountered "certain 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 a large

pool. That it was a body of water sufficient enough to immerse someone in is purely presumption. It may be said that *the eunuch went down into the water* but this does not prove immersion because precisely the same is said of Philip - if it proves it of one then it proves it of both! And as if to make matters quite clear the passage goes on "when they were come up out of the water" (v. 39) 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 the rock face that Philip used. For although the most usual translation of the Greek word: εἰς is "into" it may simply mean "to" or indeed quite a number of other things depending on the context; similarly the word ἐκ/ἐξ 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 Saul of Tarsus. We read:

"....and (he) arose, and was baptized." (v. 18)

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

A simple reading of the narrative, without preconceptions, suggests that having risen Saul 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 River Abana or the River 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, close friends. Acts 10 vv. 44, 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." (Acts 10:47; 48).

The natural reading of the passage is that water was then brought into the house and the party were baptized - either by pouring or sprinkling. This interpretation is strengthened by Peter's defence of his actions in Acts 11: 15; 16 :

"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."

They had experienced that the Holy Spirit "fell" or was "poured out" on them. Analogy would suggest that baptism with water would involve a similar fall or pouring!

Lydia and her Household : Acts 16 vv14 and 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 are: 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 and her household were baptized*".....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 habits....Paul....was not the man to do unnecessary violence to these feelings of delicacy.....Beyond all shadow of doubt Lydia was not immersed" One only has 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 Jailor and his Family: Acts 16 vv.33, 34.

The second incident in Philippi concerned Paul and Silas's imprisonment. The facts are very familiar. Around midnight there was an earthquake, the jailor 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, and rejoiced.."

Now the account tells us that the jailor 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 and were there 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 and his Household: Acts 18: 8

The Ephesian Disciples: Acts 19 vv. 1 - 7.p

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 the Book of Acts 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..." (Acts 19: 5 and 6).

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 - 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 our study of the Gospels - and indeed the meaning of Baptism itself. It remains, if the Lord will, to round off what may be deduced about the mode of Baptism from the Epistles and Revelation.



In fact, there is not one instance in which the record makes it even probable that the apostles baptized by immersion, and in the great majority of instances it is rendered in the last degree improbable.

A.A. Hodge.