

Immersionism

NOT A BIBLICAL DOGMA

by
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Extracts from the book "Immersion and Immersionists" originally published by William Briggs of Toronto c.a. 1880

The Romish theory adopted by the Baptists, that baptism is a burial, is founded on an entire misconception of the mode of burial practised in the East. We bury our dead under the earth, and this, by a stretch of the fancy, may be conceived as something like putting a person under water; but there was no such custom known to the Apostles or those to whom they preached or wrote. The Greeks and Romans who were numerous in Judea, and almost the sole inhabitants in the other countries where the Apostles laboured¹, always burned the dead bodies of their friends, and collected the ashes and bones that remained into an urn. Such a burial had surely no resemblance to a dipping in water. And so also with the mode of burial practised by the Jews. It had not the most distant resemblance to dipping.² How was Christ buried? Not in our manner, by being put into a coffin, and covered up with earth, but by being carried into a cave cut out of the face of a perpendicular rock, and laid on a niche in the wall. Many such tombs are still to be seen around Jerusalem. If four men took up a dead body, carried it into a room, and laid it on a table, would there be any likeness between that and immersion? Yet just this was the burial of Christ. Neither Paul, nor any Jew or Gentile of his time could perceive any resemblance between the dipping of a person in water and a burial.

The Romish and Baptist theory very conveniently overlooks the fact that the Apostle does not say that burial is baptism, or that baptism is burial. He says, "We are buried with Him by (*dia*) baptism into (*eis*) his death." Here observe that the burial and the baptism are not the same as immersionists make them, but the "baptism"

¹ "sole inhabitants" is better amended to "major inhabitants", if one reflects on the indigenous populations of Syria, and Asia Minor. However Mackay is right to draw attention to the universality of "Roman" and "Greek" culture pervading everything. (Ed.)

² On Jewish burials, see Schaff-Herzog and the IVP "New Bible Dictionary". Both sources substantiate Mackay's assertions here, though they both say that some burials did take place amongst the Jews similar in style to modern European burials, they note that this was not general. But to the point, the apostle says we are "buried with Christ", and Christ was interred in a rock-hewn tomb, as per the usual custom amongst the Jews. Entry to such a tomb was lateral, there was no "going down into" motion entailed anywhere in the proceedings. Hence the Baptist figure fails to do justice to Rom.6:4/Col.2:12. (Ed.)

is the *cause*, and the word "buried" describes the *effect*; and unless a cause and its effects must resemble each other in respect to mode, it cannot be concluded from these scriptures that there is any resemblance between baptism and a burial. If a man buries with a spade, the spade does not become the burial, nor has it any necessary resemblance to the mode of the burial. Yet this absurdity the Romanists and Baptists would force upon the Word of God by confounding the baptism here spoken of with the burial.

The popish inventors and first propagators of the "burial theory," and its ablest defenders for sixteen hundred years, taught explicitly that "*e-mersion*" (taking out of the water) was as much a part of the act of baptism as immersion (putting into the water). Such Romish writers as Basil, Cyril, Chrysostom, Gregory Naz., Photius, Theophylact (see Conant,³ pp. 102-110), distinctly affirmed that "taking out of the water" was as certainly a part of the word "*baptizo*" as "the putting in."

Seeing then that the Bible knows nothing of immersion, where, it may be asked, are we to look for its origin? I reply, just in the same fertile Romish brains that, as we have seen, invented the "burial theory."

Fallen humanity has always been disposed to exalt the outward and ritualistic in religion, at the expense of the inward and spiritual. And Rome, that mother of abominations, has never hesitated to gratify this disposition, by adding to, or taking from, the Word of God. We know how very soon after the time of the Apostles the ordinance of the Supper was perverted, till, instead of being a symbol feast as Christ designed it, it came to be regarded as a real sacrifice, in which the "body and blood" were really and physically present. Every essential principle and fundamental doctrine of what is now called popery, originated and made considerable progress during the second and third centuries. The doctrine of the "Invocation of the Saints," "Baptismal Regeneration," "That there is no Salvation out of the Visible Church," "Purgatory," "The Supremacy of the Bishop of Rome," "That the Supper was a Vicarious Sacrifice," "The Virtue of Work of Penance and Supererogation," etc., etc., can all be found in germ or fully fledged before the end of the third century. Dipping into water for baptism grew out of a perversion of the ordinance from its original symbolic design into a real spiritual cleansing. It comes to be believed that just as the "body and blood of Christ" were really and physically present in the supper, so the Spirit was really though mysteriously, present in the water so that it cleansed from sin. There was what was called a "*vis baptismatis*" in the water which, applied to the body, reached to the soul, and cleansed it from all past sins. It therefore became the general practice to immerse both infants and adults, males and females, in a state of *entire nudity*, because it was feared that their garments might prevent the

³ Dr. T.J. Conant was a 19th cent. Baptist scholar who wrote a book entitled "Baptizein", which ostensibly "proved" the immersionist position by showing that the "baptizein" group of words was always used in ancient Greek literature to indicate "dipping" or "immersion". His work has been reprinted by Baptists in the 20th cent. who appear to be ignorant of the fact that it was utterly demolished by the massive 4 volume treatise by James Wilkinson Dale, also reprinted now in the late 20th Cent.

water from reaching every part of the body, and thus the regeneration would be imperfect.

The very first distinct mention of dipping, as a mode of baptism, is by Tertullian, who lived about the beginning of the third century, and he mentions it as associated with such Romish practices as those indicated above,—"in a nude state"—for the purpose of "washing away the sins of the soul," accompanied by the "sign of the cross," "anointing with oil," "blessing the water," etc.; and Tertullian himself acknowledges that all these (dipping included) are "based on tradition, and are destitute of scriptural authority." (See "*De Corona Militis*," chaps 3 and 4.)

Baptists are fond of claiming the practice of the early centuries as wholly in their favour. But if they take this as authority for immersion they must take the other superstitions mentioned above along with it. There is the very same evidence in favour of immersing, divested of all clothing, and accompanied with numerous Romish rites, that there is for immersing at all: so that these practices must stand or fall together. Robinson, a Baptist historian, speaking of the nude baptisms of the ancients says, "There is no historical fact better authenticated than this."

It took a great deal more than dipping into water to constitute baptism in the estimation of "the ancients," to whose practice Baptists are constantly appealing as authority. "Tell us," says Dr. Dale in "*Christic Baptism*," p. 24, "of one man who, during a thousand years after the institution of baptism, wrote or said, or believed, that dipping into water was Christian baptism?" "To dip," was in the estimation of these persons, only a small part of the meaning of *baptizo*. Nor was the dipping practised by Rome and the Eastern churches required to be total. The head was not necessarily put under the water, and frequently there were severe laws against so doing. This dipping would not therefore be recognized by modern Baptists as baptism at all. Where then is the sense or honesty of appealing to it as precedent and authority?

Dipping, (i.e., exclusive immersionism) as now practised by Baptists, Tunkards, Campbellites, Mormons, etc., cannot be traced further back in the history of the past than September 12th, 1633, when John Spilesberry and a few others began the first regular Baptist church on earth—and the first exclusive dippers on earth. Prior to that date, immersion was regarded only as *a* mode not *the only* mode of baptism. The theory of *exclusive* immersion is a modern novelty, it trusts "much water" between the soul and Christ, and its tendency is to make its advocates bitter and intolerant.

It ought here to be mentioned that the Waldenses of Piedmont, those pure Apostolic churches that never became corrupted with the abominations of Rome, always baptized in the scriptural way, by sprinkling:—(1) They say so in so many words. (2) They put down dipping as among the superstitions of Rome. (See Perrin, *History of the Ancient Christians* [Waldenses] ch. 3, p. 231.) (3) No trace of the "burial theory" can be found in their writings, but their Confessions make **baptism an external sign of internal grace**—the sprinkling of the soul by the blood of Christ.

(4) It was through the influence of these pure Apostolic churches that Rome, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was compelled to abandon her heathenish dipping, and come back to the scriptural mode of baptism, by effusion or sprinkling.

There is no baptism by immersion in the Bible, nor in any ancient version of the Bible—*not one case*. From Genesis to Revelations, there is no *example, precept or warrant* for plunging people into water and calling that baptism. God never, so far as the record tells us commanded one man to put another into and under water for any religious purpose whatever. It has pleased Him in his wisdom and grace to appoint pure water as the element, by the application of which to the person, is set forth the spiritually cleansing power of the blood of Christ applied to the soul by the Holy Ghost, who regenerates and gives repentance and faith. Additions have in late times been made to this simple, clear, and precious teaching of the Word of God; but God's revelation was finished eighteen hundred years ago, and if any one thinks that He has had a dream, or a vision, or a revelation, in these last times, which He would add to our Bible, our answer is, *God has left no room in our Bible for the commandments* of men. Shew us one word in any neglected corner of our Bible, which God has spoken as to the use of water in baptism beyond that of a symbol of the spiritual purification of the soul by the blood of sprinkling and we will engrave it in gold, and write it as a frontlet between our eyes, but until then we shall be satisfied with the Word of God as He has given it, willing to endure the questioning of our Christianity, the denial of our sacramental rights and our assignment to a lower place in the kingdom of heaven. Nevertheless, the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, "*The Lord knoweth them that are his.*"