

THE HISTORY OF HOW SPRINKLING REPLACED IMMERSION AS A BAPTISMAL FORM

It is commonly known that baptism originally involved the total immersion of the body in water. In fact, the Greek term "baptizo" means "to immerse." Baptism signified the burial, and the resurrection of Christ. For the person being baptized the descent into the water signified the death and burial of the old life, while the ascent from the water signified the resurrection to the new life in Christ (Romans 6:3-8). The nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea are dotted by immersion baptisteries dating from the early centuries of the life of the church. In recent years, some Catholic Church buildings in the U.S. have installed immersion baptisteries for those who want to return to the original form.

The privilege of being baptized was to be given only to those who believed in Christ, repented of his/her sins (being sorry, and pledging to turn away from sin), and orally confessed that he/she believed Jesus to be the Son of God (Mark 16:15-16, Acts 2:38, Romans 10:8-10).

As indicated in the quotations below, baptism was eventually changed from its original form and came to involve having a little water sprinkled or poured on ones head. Two reasons brought about this change. The first was the practice of waiting until late in life to accept baptism so that one could die very soon thereafter before having amassed a big load of sins. By waiting so late, some risked dying before getting to a pool of water sufficient for a total immersion. As a compromise, the practice of sprinkling began to occur. This was in fact referred to as "clinical" baptism, and was considered suspect by many, especially in North Africa. As an example, Emperor Constantine, in 337 was baptized on his deathbed by Eusebius of Nicomedia.

A second reason was the beginning of baptizing infants, something neither commanded nor illustrated in the New Testament. There probably began to be occasional baptisms of infants in the late 2nd century, but it did not gain wide acceptance until the time of Augustine (AD 354-430). Augustine took the position that infants inherit the sin of Adam and Eve, and therefore are born sinners and should be baptized soon after their birth. The opposing view, championed by Pelagius (415), claimed infants are born without sin, and become sinners when they are able to understand right and wrong and choose wrong. At that point, they should be baptized. Unfortunately, Augustine convinced the bulk of the church to accept his view.

The purpose of baptism was to receive the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and to be added by the Lord to His spiritual body, the church (Acts 2:36-41, 47). At the beginning of the church no infants were baptized. While the Bible teaches that infants are born into a fallen world, and will eventually by their own choices become sinners, the Bible does not say they are born sinners. Little children are born innocent, without sin! In fact, Jesus said little children are examples for adults to follow (Matthew 18:1-4). It was clearly stated in the Old Testament that sin does not pass automatically from father to son (Ezekiel 18:19-20).

An effort has been made to prove the New Testament teaches the baptism of infants by appealing to the baptism of families. The reasoning is, as they say, that there must surely have been infants included. However if one looks carefully at the cases cited, in each one something is indicated that shows no infants were involved. The cases are: (1) Cornelius and his house spoke in tongues and extolled God before being baptized (Acts 10:44-48), (2) Lydia and her household, which was composed of women, were the first to be baptized in Philippi (Acts 16:11-16), (3) Crispus' household is said to have heard, believed and were baptized (Acts 18:8), and (4) The Philippian jailer and his family were baptized after having been preached to, and all rejoiced after their baptism (Acts 16:25-34). Note: if infants are to be baptized, their parents would have to have been clearly told to do so. Such teaching is not found in the New Testament. Infants cannot hear, believe, repent, or confess their faith in Jesus, all conditions which preceded baptism. Hence, as in the case at Samaria, "When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12).

Please note the following quotes from a variety of sources validating how over the years, the New Testament teachings about baptism has been changed in many churches.

"It is impossible to mark the precise period when sprinkling was introduced. It is probable, however, that it was invented in Africa, in the second century, in favor of clinics. But it was so far from being approved by the church in general, that the Africans themselves did not account it valid.....It was not till 1311, that the legislature, in a council held at Ravenna, declared immersion or sprinkling to be indifferent." (Edinburgh Cyclopaedia, Vol. 33, pp. 245, 246).

"In 1311 the Council of Ravenna allowed free choice between immersion and aspersion." (Bonet-Maury, Letter to Dr. Christian, in Immersion, pp. 133,134).

"Change leads to change. Immersion was the only mode of baptism in the Apostolic Church. No other would have been understood. But when baptism no longer immediately followed conversion, when it was frequently deferred till death was near, immersion in such a case was impossible. When infant baptism became common the necessity for some relaxation of the rule became still more pressing. You could not take a dying man from his bed, nor a sickly child from his mother's lap and plunge it in cold water....Here was the first beginning of what were afterwards called clinical baptisms---baptisms accommodated to the babe of a day old, to the sick and the dying." (Cunningham, John, The Growth of the Church, pp. 190,191).

"It is but fair and right to acknowledge at once that Scripture does not bid us baptize children." (Cardinal Newman, Parochial and Plain Sermons, Vol. VII, p. 219).

"In the time of the apostles, the form of baptism was very simple. The person to be baptized was dipped in a river or a vessel, with the words which Christ had ordered, and to express more fully his change of character, generally adopted a new name. The Greek Church retained this custom; but the Western Church adopted in the 13th century the mode of baptism by sprinkling, which has been continued by the Protestants, the Baptists only excepted. The introduction of this mode of baptism was owing to the great inconvenience which arose from the immersion of the whole body in the northern climates of Europe. (Zell's Encyclopedia, Art. Baptism, Vol. I, p. 236).

"Sprinkling as a form of baptism took the place of immersion after a few centuries in the early Church, not from any established rule, but by common consent, and it has since been very generally practiced in all but the Greek and Baptist churches, which insist upon immersion." (McClintock and Strong's Cyclopedia, Art. Sprinkling, Vol. IX, p. 968). "Sprinkling was still (in the period of 323 - 692) confined to Baptismus Clinicorum (clinical baptism) and was first generally used in the West in infant baptism in the 12th century, while the East still retained the custom of immersion." (Kurts, a German Lutheran Historian, in Church History, Vol. I, p. 367).

"For several centuries after the establishment of Christianity, Baptism was usually conferred by immersion, but since the twelfth century, the practice of baptizing by infusion has prevailed in the Catholic Church, as

this manner is attended with less inconvenience than Baptism by immersion." (Cardinal Gibbons, Faith of Our Fathers, p. 318).

"The Scripture makes it clear enough that water is to be used, but it is not so plain at first sight that the sprinkling or pouring of water will suffice. In Apostolic times the body of the baptized person was immersed, for St. Paul looks on this immersion as typifying burial with Christ, and speaks of baptism as a bath (Rom. 6:4, Eph. 5:26)....even St. Thomas, in the 13th century speaks of baptism by immersion as the common practice of his time. Still, the rubric of the Roman Ritual, which states that baptism can be validly given by immersion, infusion, or aspersion, is fully justified by tradition." (Catholic Dictionary, Art. Bapt., p. 60).

"New Testament baptism is for believers (Acts 2:38, 8:12-13, 36- 38, Eph. 4:5). Baptism comes after conviction of sin, repentance of sin, confession of Christ as Lord and Savior. To be baptized is to preach a personal testimony through the symbol of baptism. Baptism occurs once. Rebaptism in the NT seemingly occurred only when a group of people had never received the Holy Spirit." (Holman Concise Bible Dictionary, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, 1997, p. 62).

"When he (Paul) thanks God that he baptized none but a handful of his Corinthian converts, saying that Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach the gospel, he is not belittling the importance of baptism. He indicates rather that by leaving the work of baptizing to others he avoided giving any one ground to charge him with setting up a church or party of his own. It was into Christ's name—that, as followers of Christ, not of Paul—that his converts were baptized, or as the Colossian Christians are told, it was with Christ that you were 'buried....in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead' (Col. 2:12)." (Bruce, F.F., "The Apostle of the Heart Set Free, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., p. 282).

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