

IMMERSION FOR SALVATION!

Douglas Jacoby, 1987

This article originally appeared in the July 1987 issue of A Light to London, the bulletin of the [then] Central London church of Christ.

There is an amazing wealth of evidence, even outside the New Testament, that

- (1) scriptural baptism is immersion, and
- (2) its purpose is the forgiveness of sins.

In this article, evidence for the first fact is taken from the NT Greek, and from two of the many languages into which the Greek NT was translated in the early centuries: Syriac and Latin. Evidence for the second fact is drawn from the patristic writers (early “church fathers”).

I. BAPTISM IS IMMERSION

a. Insights from the Greek:

Four words are worth looking at in the NT for the purposes of our discussion, and they correspond to what denominational Christianity calls “modes of baptism”: immersing, sprinkling, pouring, and affusion (applying water to the head of the individual).

1. **Baptidzo** = immerse. The word always used for NT baptism. (It comes from the verb *bapto*, which means to dip.) *Baptidzo* literally means dip or immerse (in the active voice), dip oneself, plunge, sink, or even drown (in the middle voice). Classical Greek authors used this word to describe ships sinking in naval warfare. The clear implication is total immersion.

2. **Hrantidzo** = sprinkle. Never used in the NT in connection with baptism. It is true that the OT practice of sprinkling blood (which conveys sanctification) is associated through the death of Christ with NT baptism (Hebrews 10:22), but there is no evidence the first century Christians attempted to give a new meaning to the word *baptidzo*.

3. **Cheo** = pour. Never used in the NT for baptism.

4. **Hydraino** = apply water. Never used in the NT for water baptism. This would have been the ideal word, however, if the “mode” of baptism were left to our discretion.

Baptism is not sprinkling. It is not pouring. It is not applying water (wetting). *Baptisma* is the Greek word for immersion, and those familiar with the language readily admit the fact.

Insights from the Syriac:

In the Syriac translation, which probably dates from the second century, **hamad** is the word for baptize. Its derivative, **mamaditho**, appears in John 5:4 and 9:7, and means pool. In Syrian authors, *mamaditho* means a bath or baptistery. Immersion is the action of the word *hamad*, not affusion, pouring, or sprinkling.

Insights from the Latin:

Often it is noted that the King James translators (1605-1611) opted to transliterate the word **baptidzo** instead of to translate it, in order to avoid embarrassing the king, who had not been immersed. Whether or not this is true, the fact is that the custom of transliterating this word dates back at least to the fifth century.

The Latin Vulgate translation (completed in 405 AD) of Acts 2:38 reads: *Petro vero ad illos: Paenitentiam, inquit, agite, et baptizetur unusquisque vestrum in nomine Iesus Christi...* ([But] Peter replied to them, “Do penance, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...)

The Catholic Church adopted *baptidzo* into their language (Latin)—in the western part of the empire, at any rate—as *baptizo*. Why? Infant baptism appears to have been occasionally practiced in the late second century, although it was rare until the fourth century. By the fifth century infant baptism was widespread. In light of this, it is hardly surprising that the Latin church chose to create a new word (*baptizo*) instead of using the normal word for immerse (*immergere*).

II. BAPTISM IS NECESSARY FOR SALVATION

References to baptism in the patristic literature abound! It is extremely clear that for the first few centuries everyone was in agreement that baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, and was the only way to be saved. We will limit our survey to the earliest patristic writers.

- Hermas, c. 140-150 AD: *... when we went down into the water and received remission of our former sins...* (Shepherd, IV.iii.1) Note: Remission is simply another word for forgiveness.
- Justin Martyr, c. 150-165 AD: *As many as... believe that the things are true which are taught by us... and decide to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their past sins, and we pray and fast with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are born again...* (Apology, 1.61)

Then, in discussing John 3:5, Justin continues: *In order that we... may obtain the remission of sins... there is pronounced in water over whom who has chosen to be born again, and has repented of his sins, the name of God the Father and the Lord of the universe. (1.61) In his discussion of the Eucharist (Lord's Supper), he says that no one is allowed to partake of the communion except the man who... has been washed with the washing that is for remission of sins and unto a second birth, and is so living as Christ has enjoined (1.66).*

- Irenaeus, c.130-200 AD: *We have received baptism for the remission of sins... And this baptism is the seal of eternal life and new birth unto God.* (Dem. 3.41f., Haer. 5.11.2)
- Creed of the Council of Nicaea, 325 AD This fourth century creed is well known. It is ironic that, although it is cherished by churchgoers the world over, the import of its words is frequently overlooked: *... I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins...*

Naturally, these affirmations do not stand on a par with the authority of scripture, but they do shed light on the early Christians' understanding of baptism.

CONCLUSION

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, baptism in the New Testament and afterwards was immersion for salvation—at least: for the first few centuries! And even though things began to shift a few hundred years after the beginning of the New Testament church, the dominant understanding of baptism as for the forgiveness of sins was retained well into the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s.

This article is copyrighted and is for private use and study only. © 2003. Reprints or public distribution is prohibited without the express consent of Douglas Jacoby.