

Baptism by Immersion

By Elder David Pyles

Many Christians have a bewildering indifference about whether baptism is to be done by immersion or by sprinkling. This includes some of the smartest Christians on the planet, and ones who are otherwise commendably committed to making the Bible their sole rule of faith and practice. All Christians agree that baptism and communion are religious rites having supreme importance. If our contention is that we are free to disregard biblical precedent on these things notwithstanding the importance we acknowledge them to have, then how could we successfully argue for following biblical precedent for anything else?

The Bible doubtlessly sets a precedent for immersion. John the Baptist famously commenced the ritual at Jordan River. This was obviously done because his methodology required a large amount of water. John the apostle explicitly said this in:

After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized. – Jn 3:22-23

This scripture speaks of both the baptism administered by John and the baptism administered under Christ and says nothing to indicate that one was procedurally different from the other. John of course baptized Jesus Himself, and Mark described the event with:

And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. – Mk 1:9-11

The words “*coming up out of the water*” have clear implications to any unprejudiced mind: Jesus was immersed not sprinkled. This fact really settles the question because Jesus is the standard for everything that is truly Christian. Some of His most frequent words were “follow me” (Mt 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, 19:21, Mk

2:14, 8:34, 10:21, Lk 5:27, 9:23, 9:59, 18:22, Jn 1:43, 10:27, 12:26, 13:36, 21:19). This means we are not only to obey His precepts but are to imitate the precedents He set. We see in the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch that the New Testament church was following such precedent after Christ ascended (Acts 8:36).

Paul described baptism as a burial (Rom 6:4, Col 2:12) and also as a planting (Rom 6:5). None of these things suggest sprinkling, nor does sprinkling suggest these things. Paul also said that when the children of Israel passed through the Red Sea, they “*were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea,*” (1Cor 10:2). This does not mean it was raining on that occasion; rather, it means they were enveloped in water, with the walls of the sea on both sides and the cloud being above. The Bible also speaks of being baptized in affliction (Mt 20:22) and in fire (Mt 3:11) and in the Holy Ghost (Jn 1:33). In all of these, the idea is clearly that the subject is to be plunged or immersed into the thing named.

Baptism is of course symbolic, so an understanding of what it represents will enable one to understand how it is to be done. It is, first and foremost, a symbol of death, burial and resurrection, first of Christ and then of ourselves. This is why John the Baptist said he did it that Christ might be made manifest to Israel (Jn 1:31). It is also why Paul said in Romans 6:1-6 that in baptism there is both a burial and a resurrection. Accordingly, baptism is a symbol of the triumph of the elect of God, who fell into ruin and death in Adam, but will rise again in Christ to immortality and triumph. Baptism is therefore a depiction of the primary theme of the Bible, and it is the culmination and climax of all its rich symbolism.

This is something that should be dear to us and a thing that all believers should want to experience. Nothing thrills the human more than seeing an underdog who is down and seemingly defeated fighting back to overcome the deficit and end in triumph. The thrill is even greater when the victory occurs at the moment the game clock expires. Many times have I seen entire households gathered around a television to watch the waning minutes of a football game or basketball game in which this scenario was being played out, and the energized watchers would include even those who otherwise took no interest in the sport and who had little understanding of it. Why is it our nature to become so excited about such things? Obviously, it is because our Creator designed

us to be this way. But, why did He design us to be this way? The Bible explains: Such stories excite us because they tell *our* story. We were down, almost surely defeated, even dead, but on the final tick of game clock, or when the last trumpet sounds, in Christ we will emerge in triumph! We went down, even to the grave itself, but in Christ we are coming back up! This is what baptism is intended to depict, and I think anyone can see that nothing could depict it better than baptism by immersion.