

THE CHURCH AND BAPTISM: MODES AND SYMBOLISM

Immersion? Submersion? Affusion? Aspersion? Which mode shall it be? To ask the question in more common language, should one be “dunked,” have water poured, or be sprinkled? This is of course no insignificant question. Denominations have organized; family members have argued; and, in some places, Christians have died for the answer.

The question of “mode” arose early. No small consideration was the availability of water as the Christian faith spread around the Mediterranean Sea and east of Palestine. In arid regions, water was available only in deep wells and in rain collecting cisterns. Elsewhere there were rivers, lakes and ponds. With varied climates and geography, questions arose: how should baptism be administered, and should there be a unified practice among all the churches?

THE BIBLICAL TESTIMONY

The Bible is clear in both its command and its expectation that all Christians be baptized. However, very little of the ritual is described. What is certain is that baptism uses water applied in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19,20).

Turning to Mark’s Gospel (1:9,10) one finds a description of Jesus’ baptism. Mark reports that Jesus “was baptized in the Jordan by John. And immediately coming up out of the water he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him” (*italics added*). Some Churches have argued that this demonstrates the priority of a particular mode. However, the passage does not clarify whether Jesus was submersed or immersed. Neither is it obvious that what is descriptive of John’s method is prescriptive for the Church in every time and place. Other passages speak of John’s baptism as “in water.” In some instances this seems to portray the location of the ritual (e.g. John 1:31). In other cases the preposition holds the idea of agency (e.g. “with water,” Matthew 3:11).

Other passages are sometimes cited. One is John 3:23 in which it is observed that John the Baptist chose a location “because there was much water there.” Some assert that this implies submersion (though often they call it immersion). Acts 8:27-39 is also said by some to imply submersion. Riding along in the chariot, the Eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” Verses 38, 39 report that Philip and the Eunuch went down into and came out of the water. But neither of these verses has settled the matter for the Church. In these also, it is not self-evident that what is described is definitively prescribed. Neither is the manner of baptism clearly described.

Another line of reasoning asserts that the definition of “baptize” includes the mode. To “baptize,” it is said, means to submerge under water. Opponents argue that the definition is not so evident. They note that while the word can be used for covering the entire body with water, it is also used when a small part of the body receives the water of washing such as the feet or hands.

Some argue for a particular mode by virtue of the metaphor of Romans 6. In baptism one is buried with Christ and then raised to new life. Only complete submersion, they say, adequately conveys the metaphor. Those who disagree simply point to other biblical metaphors attached to baptism.

To restate what is absolutely clear, we know the Bible prescribes for baptism to be with water in the name of the Holy Trinity. The Church is to baptize, and Christians are to be baptized. Not so certain is the mode or manner.

THE EARLY CHURCH

The first Christians were adamant about baptism. While they worked out its full theological importance over decades, they understood it as fundamentally separating persons from the way of death to the way of life.

A very early description of the ritual is found in The Didache (c. 60-100 A.D.), among the oldest extant manuscripts that speaks specifically to ritual or mode.

“Concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having first rehearsed all these things, baptize in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running water; but if thou hast no running water, baptize in other water, and if thou can not in cold, then in warm. But if thou has neither, pour water three times on the head ‘in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.’” (Loeb Classical Library, Apostolic Fathers, Vol. 1, p. 319.)

The Didache authorizes two forms of baptism. Its preference is for triple immersion. However, if there is not enough water, triple affusion is proper. We note, however, that each method is viewed equally as baptism. This flexibility is witnessed elsewhere in the Church Fathers.

THE MODES

The Didache witnesses to two alternative modes of baptism. Each of the four prevalent modes currently practiced is a variation of those two.

The first form has two variations, **immersion**, which has been employed in the Church since at least the second century and possibly the oldest form, and **submersion**. In immersion, the candidate stands with part of his body submerged in the baptismal water which is then poured over the remainder. This form is the most prevalent depicted in early Christian pictorial representations. Submersion is the form in which water completely covers the candidates body.

The second form also has two variations. **Affusion** which is also called pouring is the method by which the water is poured over the candidate's head and allowed to run over the face and be caught in a bowl. Though used earlier in circumstances where immersion was not easily possible, it did not become the usual method until the eighth century. **Aspersion** or sprinkling, is a variation of affusion in which the candidate is merely sprinkled with the baptismal water. Until recently, this mode was considered only for exceptional circumstances.

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The United Methodist Church does not choose between the modes so as to require a particular form of baptism. In our doctrine, baptism is an essential component of discipleship. It is necessary for church membership, and valid baptism includes water, administered in the name of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) by authorized persons, and the invocation of the Holy Spirit with the laying on of hands. This ordinarily occurs in the presence of the congregation.

Each mode is rich in symbolism. Submersion portrays union with Jesus' death and resurrection (Romans 6). Immersion and pouring depict the out pouring of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13; Acts 2:17, 38). The conscience being sprinkled clean is imaged in sprinkling (Hebrews 9:13-21; 10:22). To choose among these is permitted of the candidate.

In our congregation, except in an emergency, baptism is always administered as an act of the regular Sunday worship service. The design of our sanctuary encourages sprinkling or pouring. Should one

choose immersion or submersion, we will customarily baptize as part of the Sunday morning 11:00 service making a pilgrimage to our baptismal location at the conclusion of the service and asking the entire congregation to come with us. Otherwise baptism is by sprinkling or pouring in the sanctuary at the font. The pastor is willing to practice infant submersion as do the eastern orthodox churches. However, this will require special arrangements.

Among Methodists, that one is baptized is a crucial concern. How one is baptized, while important, is secondary for we accept each mode as Christian baptism.

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