

ECCLESIOLOGY
THE VISIBLE CHURCH
 Lesson 19

Water Baptism—Affusion or Immersion?

I. THE ISSUE

- A. Some Christians believe in immersion (dipping) and some Christians believe in affusion (sprinkling or pouring).
- B. There are some Christians who reject infant baptism but believe the right mode of baptism is affusion (i.e. General Conference Mennonites).
- C. There are some Christians who believe in infant baptism who believe the correct way to baptize is by immersion (Greek Orthodox Church).

II. ARGUMENTS FOR IMMERSION

- A. The root Greek word *baptiso* means “to dip” or “to plunge.”
- B. John the Baptist baptized “in the Jordan River” (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5).
- C. Jesus is said “to come up out of the water” (*ek*) when He was baptized by John. The preposition *ek* means “out of” or “from within” (Mark 1:9).
- D. The Eunuch went “down into the water” and “out of the water” when he was baptized by Philip (Acts 8:38-39).
- E. Historically, immersionists look back to the Didache (150 AD) to prove immersion.

“And concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having first recited all things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running water. But if thou has not running water, baptize in other water; and, if thou canst not in cold water, in warm. But if thou hast neither, pour thrice upon the head in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And before baptism, let the baptizers and him that is baptized fast, and such other that can: And thou shalt bid the person to be baptized to fast one or two days before” (J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, p. 136).

III. ARGUMENTS FOR AFFUSION

- A. The Old Testament believers (Jews) knew only of cleansing by sprinkling or pouring (Lev. 14:8-9; 15:5-27; 2 Kings 3:11). Cleansing was often done by a hyssop branch (Num. 19:13, 18-20). Jews cleansed with “living water” (running water) because stagnate water was dirty (Num. 19:17). NOTE: No Jew was ever immersed and all the early Christians were Jews and they undoubtedly carried the Old Testament method of cleansing into the New Testament.
- B. The secondary meaning of *baptiso* is “to identify with” and this meaning is very common in the New Testament (1 Cor. 12:13; Rom. 6:1-4; Matt. 3:11; Mark 10:37-38; 1 Cor. 10:2; 15:29). NOTE: The symbolic meaning of John

the Baptist's baptism was to identify Jews with the coming Messiah (Matt. 3:1-12). John should be called "John the Identifier." The baptism of Christ was to identify Him publicly with the Father's will and to identify Himself with Israel and sinners (Matt. 3:13-17). Baptism for an adult Christian is to publicly identify himself with Christ and His purposes (Acts 2:41).

- C. The term "in Jordan" may mean from the Greek "in the location of the Jordan" or "at the Jordan" (cf Mark 1:4). The "in" does not mean "under."
- D. As to Jesus' baptism the phrase "coming out (*ek*) of the water" may also mean "from" or "away" in the Greek. The word "coming" in the Greek means "to go up" or "ascend." This is a picture of Christ going up from the water. Our Lord may have been in the water or at the water's edge but nothing concretely says he was under the water.
- E. As for the water baptism of the Eunuch by Philip (Acts 8), the words "into the water" may be translated "to the water." It may mean "to the water's edge" or actually "into the water" but there is no proof positive that he went "under" the water. The phrase "out of the water" (*ek*) can be translated "from the water." NOTE: If it means the Eunuch came out from underneath the water, then Philip must have been immersed too, because it says they both came up from the water. Were the baptized and the baptizer both immersed?
- F. The one preposition in the Greek to express "under" is *hupo* but *hupo* is never used in connection with water baptism. Just one mention would have cleared up the issue completely.
- G. Historically, the Didache allowed for various modes of baptism such as pouring. Furthermore, the Didache allows for fasting, running water, etc., which are not requirements for baptism today.

IV. SYMBOLS OF BAPTISM

- A. Immersionists. Water baptism is symbolic of being identified with Christ in death, burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4). Going into the water symbolizes death, going under the water, burial, and coming up, resurrection. The water would symbolize Christ who called Himself the living water.
- B. Affusionists. Water baptism is symbolic of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon a person so as to apply the death of Christ to the person, bringing newness of life (Acts 2:17,33; 10:44, 11:15). The Holy Spirit is often symbolized by water in the Bible.

V. CONCLUSIONS

- A. Because water baptism is only a symbol, it obviously has nothing to do with salvation. Also the act of a Christian's baptism is more important than the mode.
- B. Presbyterians believe the correct mode of baptism is affusion but allow for any mode of baptism. The Westminster Confession says, "Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person" (XXVIII-III). The Confession only says immersion is not necessary but it does not say it is wrong.