18. Immersion only?

Often heard: "*Baptizo* means to immerse. Sprinkling isn't baptism."
Also heard: "The earliest church manual, the Didache, allows pouring. Immersion was normal, but never the only valid way."

Baptism must be by immersion

HELD BY Orthodox triple immersion, by canon · Baptist

Immersion is the only valid mode: the word means "dip," Jesus and others came up out of the water, and only immersion pictures burial and resurrection.

VERSES CITED

Matt 3:16; Mark 1:9–10; John 3:23 ("much water"); Acts 8:38–39; Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:12.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Early Anabaptists usually baptized by pouring. English Particular Baptists adopted immersion around 1641–42 (after Richard Blunt's contact with Dutch Collegiants), and the First London Confession (1644) required "dipping."

Immersion or pouring, both valid

HELD BY Catholic triple immersion preferred · Lutheran mode not fixed · Reformed pouring or sprinkling · Anglican dipping named first · Methodist any mode

Immersion and pouring are both valid; immersion is permitted and symbolically rich. *Baptizo* can also simply mean "wash": the Pharisee was surprised Jesus did not "baptize" before dinner, and Jews "baptized" cups and pots. Hebrews calls Old Testament sprinklings "baptisms." Three thousand were baptized in one day in Jerusalem, and the jailer's household at night in his house.

VERSES CITED

Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38; Heb 9:10, 13, 19; Ezek 36:25; Acts 2:17, 41; 16:33.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Didache 7 (c. 50–120): baptize in running water; if there isn't enough, pour water on the head three times. Cyprian (Letter 69, ANF 75, c. 255) defends sickbed baptism by sprinkling. Early art often shows the candidate standing in water while water is poured over the head.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 1239–1240; Code of Canon Law, can. 854.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition baptizes, and whether it accepts other ways of baptizing, from its own documents.

Catholic

Immersion and pouring are both valid: the Catechism calls triple immersion the most expressive form, but baptizo can simply mean to wash, and pouring has been used since the Didache. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Catechism of the Catholic Church 1239-1240; Code of Canon Law, can. 854; Didache 7.

Orthodox

Triple immersion in the name of the Trinity is, in Philaret's words, what is "most essential" in baptism, and Apostolic Canon 50 orders the deposition of any bishop or priest who baptizes with one immersion instead of three; infants are immersed as well. Canon 95 of the Council in Trullo received some converts by chrismation and others by baptism, and practice today is not uniform: some jurisdictions receive those baptized in the Trinitarian name by chrismation, others baptize all converts.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St Philaret, Q 288, 290; Apostolic Canons 50 (and 49 on the Trinitarian form; 46-47 on heretical baptism and rebaptism), NPNF2 vol. 14 numbering; Council in Trullo (692), Canon 95; Matthew Namee, "Fr Seraphim Rose and 'Corrective Baptism'", OrthodoxHistory.org, 4 May 2023.

Lutheran

The Lutheran confessions do not fix the mode. Luther explained that the word means to plunge something entirely into the water, and wished the baptized to be sunk wholly under it and drawn out again, since that best pictures the drowning of the old Adam and the rising of the new; yet he did not think immersion necessary, and his Large Catechism speaks of the body being sprinkled. A baptism once given stands and is not repeated.

Sources: Luther, A Treatise on the Holy Sacrament of Baptism (1519), sections 1-2 (Works of Martin Luther, Philadelphia ed., vol. 1); Luther, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520), on baptism, "The Second Part of Baptism: The Sign" (Works of Martin Luther,

Reformed

Dipping is not necessary: baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water on the person, though the Westminster Confession does not forbid immersion. The Belgic Confession sees in the water the sprinkling of Christ's blood. Baptism is given only once, so Reformed churches do not rebaptize; the Belgic Confession faults the Anabaptists for not being content with the one baptism they had once received.

Sources: Westminster Confession 28.3, 28.7; Belgic Confession, art. 34.

Philadelphia ed., vol. 2); Large Catechism, Part IV (Baptism), paras. 45, 65, 78.

Anglican

The 1662 Prayer Book names dipping first: the priest is to dip the infant in the water "discreetly and warily," or, if the sponsors certify the child is weak, it suffices to pour water upon it; adults are dipped or have water poured on them, and emergency baptism at home is by pouring. A child already baptized with water in the triune name is lawfully and sufficiently baptized and is not baptized again; where that is doubtful, a conditional form is used.

Sources: Book of Common Prayer (1662), Publick Baptism of Infants (rubric at the baptism); Baptism of Such as Are of Riper Years (rubric at the baptism); Private Baptism of Children in Houses (rubrics and conditional form).

Methodist

Wesley held that baptism may be performed by washing, dipping or sprinkling, since Scripture does not determine which. The United Methodist statement By Water and the Spirit says water may be administered by sprinkling, pouring or immersion and that the Spirit's power does not depend on the mode. Because God is faithful, baptism is received only once; United Methodists do not rebaptize, seek mutual recognition of baptism with other churches, and offer reaffirmation instead.

Sources: John Wesley, A Treatise on Baptism (1756), I.2; United Methodist Church, By Water and the Spirit (1996).

Baptist

Immersion is the only valid mode: the word means dip, Jesus and others came up out of the water, and only immersion pictures burial and resurrection with Christ. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. VII; Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689), 29.4.

Where it gets contested: Immersion was the normal ancient practice, and those who accept pouring (Catholics, Lutherans, the Reformed, Anglicans and Methodists) freely grant this. The real disagreement, with the Orthodox and Baptists who require immersion, is whether the mode is essential, and the *Didache* shows the earliest church said no.

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