

## Is Immersion Essential For Unity?

Judging from the response that I have received from these viewpoints concerning unity, there is general agreement that unity is divinely created. It happens in our conversion process, “*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.*” If you missed those lessons, please read the last several. Having established that baptism is essential in this process, the next question is: “Is immersion the essential form of baptism?”

Few would question the acceptability of immersion. A greater number of those who profess Christianity, however, practice such forms as the dipping of part of the head (a form of immersion), pouring (affusion), or sprinkling (aspersion). Does the Spirit employ these forms in initiating persons into the one body even as he does immersion?

“Baptism” and “baptize” come from the Greek root “*bapto*” which means *to dip*. So, that real meaning is undeniable by anyone who respects the authority of the Lord expressed in the Scriptures. Right? That’s what I was taught from youth, and I then taught it during a long career. So, it has been hard for me to approach this matter without prejudice.

Words evolve. The current usage of a term may not convey the exact meaning of the original word from which it developed. To ascertain the present day sense of words, we go back to their root meanings both in English and Bible dictionaries. We have done this in regard to baptism. But do we follow this procedure consistently with other words? Let us do a little exercise here to test our intellectual honesty.

We are instructed to “*Abhor that which is evil*” (Rom. 12:9). Abhor is a translation of the Greek word “*apostugeo*” which means *to shudder*. Then should it not have been translated *shudder* instead of *abhor*? Who dares to change the prescribed form of expressing detestation of evil? If we go back to the root meaning, shuddering becomes essential in obeying God. Yet, I have never shuddered at evil. Woe is me!

Our translators have rendered “*oikodomeo*” as *edify*. But the root meaning is *to build a house*. Disciples are taught to edify each other (1 Thes. 5:11; 1 Cor. 14:26). Efforts are made to obey this through teaching and encouraging, but who ever built a house by teaching and encouraging? Who has the authority to change the prescribed procedure?

We all must worship God. Agreed. In many passages the word *worship* is rendered from “*proskuneo*” whose root meaning is *to kiss toward*. Thus the root word specifies the essential form of our approach to God as kissing toward God. Do you kiss toward God, or do you substitute some other method in your effort to worship him?

A “*poimen*” is a sheep herder, a shepherd, a pastor. So far, I have never known a sheep herder in one of our congregations. However, the original meaning of that word evolved so that one who tends a congregation is called a shepherd metaphorically.

These four examples of root meanings are enough to make the point. You may check these words out in *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, by W.E. Vine.

If you are still with me, you are probably wishing to remind me that the current meanings of these words are adapted from the root words rather than being literal translations. Agreed! Except for one of the words!

The etymology of these words had already evolved by the time the New Testament Scriptures were written. We can agree readily that a strong detestation of evil is what God wants rather than a literal bodily shudder. And we can understand that building each other up by teaching and encouragement is a modification of the idea of building a literal structure. Also, the bowing and kissing toward a person or object would indicate veneration and love. Veneration and love expressed to God is worship even though it takes other forms of action. So, the evolved meaning abandons the mode of kissing toward. Likewise the work of an overseer of disciples is similar a shepherd's work.

When it comes to baptism, however, we have tried to cling to the original root connotation of dipping and have resisted modification of the meaning of the word. The literal form has been kept sacred so that the meaning must always be *to dip*. But in reality, we have accepted some adaptation. *To dip* more literally means *to put a vessel into a liquid in order to lift some out*. We have accepted a modification to make it mean *to plunge, immerse, or submerge*. But those are literal meanings. Does baptism have only a literal meaning of dipping, or could it be that time and usage had developed other more general connotations? Let us now consider evidence that both the form of the ritual and the meaning of it had already changed when John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles came on the scene.

In describing the falling of the Holy Spirit on the apostles on Pentecost, three times that baptism is referred to as a pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:16-18, 33). In fact, it was "*distributed and resting on each one of them*" (2:3). Its falling in such a dispersed manner looks more like affusion or aspersion than immersion! In other references, the falling upon, pouring out, and receiving of the Holy Spirit are all related to the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-47; 11:15f; Titus 3:5f). The giving of the Spirit which enabled disciples to know the truth was called an anointing rather than a burial (1 John 2:20, 26; John 14:26).

The pouring out of the Spirit spoken of by Joel was identified by Peter as the outpouring, falling, or baptism (See Joel 2:28; Acts 10:44f; 11:15-17). Paul speaks of Israel's being under the cloud while passing through the parted waters of the sea as a baptism (1 Cor. 10:1f). Again, Paul speaks of "the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5f; compare Eph.5:26; 1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 10:22). Saul's baptism involved a figurative washing (Acts 22:16; see Lk. 11:38). So are we not forced to conclude that Biblical usage reveals prior evolution of the original meaning of "*bapto*"?

Following our old hermeneutic of approved example, or any other hermeneutic, from the above considerations, are we not authorized to define baptism as pouring, sprinkling, washing, or anointing as well as dipping? We have tried to evade this point by explaining that the baptism of the Spirit was an overwhelming or submerging of the person by the Holy Spirit. But the Scriptures still say that the Spirit was poured out and fell on them in a distributed manner.

There is no definitive example of immersion in the Scriptures. In the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, the going into and coming out of water was not a part of the baptism. Whatever baptism is, it was performed between the going into and coming out of the water. Let us suppose that “baptize” meant “*to wash one's wounds.*” It would then read that they both went into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he washed his wounds, and they came up out of the water. Would that exemplify immersion? Unless baptize meant immersion only, the baptism of the Ethiopian could not be an unquestioned example of dipping. Philip went into and came out of the water also, but he was neither baptized nor partially baptized. While I may assume that the Ethiopian was immersed, as I do with confidence, the text does not prove it.

When we were baptized into Christ and his death, “*we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death*” (Rom. 6:34; Col. 2:11f). That passage does not picture burial in water. In baptism we are buried with Christ in his tomb rather than Jesus being buried with us in water. Whatever baptism is, in it we are buried symbolically with Jesus in his tomb nineteen centuries ago. Again, I may assume that Paul refers to our immersion, but it is not proven. We are to be crucified, buried, and raised with Christ in obeying the gospel. It is *with* Christ symbolically, not *like* Christ literally in his water baptism. Why accept a figurative crucifixion and resurrection and demand a literal burial?

“*Baptismos,*” denoting a ceremonial washing of articles, is given that meaning in Mark 7:4 and Hebrews 9:10. In Hebrews 6:2 it is variously translated *baptisms* (KJV); *baptisms*, or *washings* (ASV); *ablutions* (RSV); and *cleansing rites* (NEB). These uses and renderings definitely indicate a variation from the meaning of the root word “*bapto.*” So much for the form; now let us consider the meaning.

When John came preaching baptism, he did not have to explain it as though it were a new thing. It was already practiced among the Jews. Throughout their history, circumcision was a mark of identification of a Jew. When a Gentile would convert to Judaism, the proselyte not only accepted that fleshly identifying mark, but in later times, he was also baptized as a public expression of initiation and commitment. Leroy Garrett wisely reasons that the Jews understood the meaning of baptism to be *initiation*. Please read his convincing presentation in Chapter 37 of my edited book, *Our Heritage Of Unity And Fellowship*.

John was calling for a change of life and a public expression of commitment to the approaching Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus made known his allegiance also by submitting to that ceremony. The meaning of the ritual was understood as an initiation into the family of Israel and a commitment of citizenship. The concept was not so much that a person obeyed a ritual of dipping as that one had submitted to a ceremony expressing allegiance, acceptance, and dedication.

Evidently, Nicodemus, as a circumcised and committed Jew, thought he would have ready acceptance in Christ's kingdom on those grounds. Jesus informed him in veiled language that he would have to be born into his kingdom. That would require a new circumcision symbolized by baptism (Col. 2:11f). And his commitment and initiation as a proselyte into this new kingdom would be expressed in a public ceremony called baptism. Assuming that the ritual involved immersion, the core meaning of it was not *to become dipped* but *to be initiated and express commitment*.

When Jesus asked James and John if they would be able to be baptized with the baptism with which he was to be baptized, he was asking about their commitment to be crucified with him (See Lk. 12:50; Mk. 10:38f; Matt. 20:22f) rather than a willingness to undergo some ritual of immersion.

When the Pharisees rejected the purpose of God, having not been baptized of John, they were not rejecting the form of a ritual, but they were refusing acceptance of the kingdom John was proclaiming. The person who is sprinkled today considers his initiation important rather than the form of the rite by which he declares it.

To make Ephesians 4:5 read "There is one immersion" would be to miss the meaning that Paul was expressing that there is only one initiation into Christ's community for all people.

We cannot deny that the evolution of language allowed inspired writers to speak of the form of baptism as also including pouring, dispersing upon, washing, and anointing. The rite necessarily took a form, but without emphasis of the form, they looked upon baptism as a public initiation and commitment.

I am not urging anyone to be sprinkled. I was immersed and I teach all believers to follow that undeniably safe course. Others with equal sincerity and conviction accept the evolved meaning expressed in other modes. Must I become the judge in such a debatable matter? Can I with certainty make immersion essential to salvation and unity? To demand conformity to my convictions would be divisive. God is still the judge. I can teach but not bind; so let us continue to teach our convictions.

Only God can judge the validity of each person's baptism. My aim should be to accept you on the basis of your testimony and, if I accept you on that basis, should I not also extend that acceptance to others? Tell me -- is God's will promoted better by our rejecting and working against others who disagree on debatable issues or by our accepting, teaching, and working with them as one united body while letting God be the judge?

This is a revision of Chapter 8 of *Free To Accept*. You may order it from me by email for \$8.50 postpaid. If this essay hit home with you, you will want this book. []

(Cecil Hook: July 2005)

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"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).