

## CHAPTER 8

### MODE OF BAPTISM

#### Reformed position

##### *Statement of Westminster Confession (WCF 28:2-3)*

“2. The outward element to be used in the Sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.

“3. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.”

Concerning the method of baptism the Confession makes a number of statements:

- Necessity of water
- Performed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
- Performed by a lawfully ordained minister
- Dipping (immersion) not necessary
- Rightly administered by pouring (affusion) or sprinkling (aspersion)

##### *Interpretations of the Standards regarding mode of baptism*

#### Historic interpretation

This position was held by the majority of the Westminster Assembly (e.g., writings of John Lightfoot), and has been maintained traditionally by the Presbyterian churches.

Immersion cannot be shown from Scripture; therefore, it is unnecessary, and (according to the exclusive principle of divine worship) should not be practiced in Reformed churches.

Pouring and sprinkling can be shown from Scripture, and therefore should be practiced.

### **Inclusive interpretation**

This viewpoint is of more recent origin, and is intended to permit immersion in Reformed churches. The goal with many is better interdenominational relations and broader membership.

Immersion, while perhaps the ancient mode, is not necessary for valid baptism.

Pouring or sprinkling are other proper modes of baptism.

Mode is relatively unimportant, and may be left up to the churches or even to the individuals baptized.

### ***Terms used in evaluating mode***

#### **“Valid”**

A “valid” mode means that baptism has taken place—the person is baptized.

Reformed position: as long as there are a minister, water, and the Triune formula, baptism has taken place. All three modes produce a valid baptism.

Baptist position: only immersion is the valid mode. Other modes do not accomplish baptism. This belief requires separate denominations. Some groups are even more exclusive: Brethren churches insist on trine immersion; some groups, on baptism by their group.

#### **“Proper”**

A “proper” mode means that the mode is the method taught by Scripture and/or apostolic practice.

Reformed position: pouring and sprinkling are proper modes (WCF, “rightly administered”); immersion is an improper mode. Yet an improper mode does not negate the sacrament. Cf. other improper modes: kneeling at communion, baptizing by immersing the head only, etc.

Baptist position: since immersion is the only valid mode, it must also be the only proper mode. There is no distinction between “valid” and “proper.”

### ***Proof texts used by the Westminster Assembly***

The Westminster Assembly taught that the modes of pouring and sprinkling were closely tied in the Scriptures to water baptism. They included the following proof texts in this section:

Mark 7:4, baptism of pots, etc., by sprinkling; “baptism” of people by pouring water on hands

Mark 7:4, “When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)”

Acts 1:5; cf. 2:3-4, 17, 41; 10:45-47; 11:15-16, baptism parallel to pouring out of Holy Spirit

Acts 1:5, “For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 16:33, circumstances of baptism of Philippian jailer

Acts 16:33, “At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.”

1 Cor 10:2, Hebrews baptized in sea; Egyptians immersed in sea

1 Cor 10:2, “They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”

Heb 9:10, 19-22, baptism = sprinkling in OT

Heb 9:10, “They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.”

Heb 9:19-22, “When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and

branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

## Arguments from the terms employed

### *Use of βαπτίζω baptizo*

Many immersionists argue that the term “baptize” itself means immerse, and that therefore immersion is the only possible form of baptism. This argument needs to be studied by noting the actual usage of the word.

### Method of study

Many claim that *baptizo* means *immerse* (e.g., Kenneth Wuest, *Studies in the Vocabulary of the NT*, p. 75). This impression can be gained by a superficial study in various lexicons.

For example, the BDAG lexicon, p. 164, meaning 2, “to use water in a rite for purpose of renewing or establishing a relationship with God, *plunge, dip, wash, baptize*. Yet note meaning, “wash ceremonially for purpose of purification, *wash, purify*, of a broad range of repeated ritual washing rooted in Israelite tradition.”

So careful study of the lexicons does not reveal “immerse” as the simple meaning of the word.

It appears that *baptizo* in and of itself does not specify mode, but rather, effect. While baptism normally involves an outside element (but not always), it always produces a change or effect in the person or thing baptized. Perhaps the clearest example is the use of the term for “dye.”

While lexicons give helpful information, controversies must ultimately be settled by usage of terms. This is how lexicons themselves operate.

It is important also to remember that terms change their meanings over periods of time, as the English words “manufacture, prevent, let, cleave.”

## ***Baptizo* in classical Greek**

In classical Greek the term often has the meaning of dipping or plunging (Liddell & Scott); but the emphasis is on the result of the action, not the action itself: cf. a ship is sunk, a man is drunk, garments are dyed, people “flood” Jerusalem.

Even in classical Greek, the mode employed is not always dipping or immersion. Kenneth Wuest himself (*Studies*, p. 71) points out three examples from classical Greek where the mode is not immersion. Each case involves something being dyed with blood:

“In the Battle of the Frogs and Mice, it is said that a mouse thrust a frog with a reed, and the frog leaped over the water, (*baptizo*) dyeing it with his blood. . . . Lucian dreams that he has seen a huge bird shot with a mighty arrow, and as it flies high in the air, it dyes (*baptizo*) the clouds with his blood. An ancient scholium to the Fifth Book of the Iliad makes a wounded soldier dye (*baptizo*) the earth with his blood.”

## ***Baptizo* in the LXX**

This verb is found four times in the LXX; and it is apparent that these usages show that no single mode is suggested by the word.

(1) 2 Kings 5:14

(Naaman in the Jordan)

Here the word translates the Hebrew **טָבַל** *tābal*, which normally is translated “dip.” But *tābal* can mean “moisten,” by applying the subject to the element; it does not always imply a complete immersion; e.g.,

Lev 14:6, dip living bird in blood of dead bird

Lev 14:16, dip finger in oil in hand

While an action of dipping is appropriate to this verb, total immersion is not implied. Actually, Elisha had simply commanded Naaman to “wash,” **רָחַץ** *rāḥaṣ*, perhaps according to the regulation in Lev 14:7-8.

Apparently, the LXX translators used *baptizo*, because they wished to emphasize the results of the washing, not the mode.

(2) Isaiah 21:4

“My heart wanders, and lawlessness overwhelms (baptizes) me, my soul is brought unto fear.” This passage in the Hebrew is simply, “horror has made me afraid.”

This is a common usage in classical Greek, the figurative usage, emphasizing the effect of the fear. It bears no relation to mode.

(3) Judith 12:7

“And she would wash (baptize herself) in the camp at the fountain of water.”

The book of Judith is in the Jewish Apocrypha. It tells of Judith, a pious captive in the camp of General Holophernes, “chief captain of Nebuchadnezzar King of the Assyrians” (?), Judith 4:1. The camp contained 182,000 soldiers, and a fountain of water was in the middle of the camp. Each night Judith would wash herself at the fountain.

Since this was written in the 3rd century B.C., and Judith is pictured as a pious Jewess, this “baptism” must be a ritual washing, required to cleanse from Gentile defilement; not an immersion, in view of the circumstances.

(4) Ecclesiasticus 34:25

“The one being cleansed (baptized) from the dead and again touching it, what profit is there in his washing?”

Ecclesiasticus (Son of Sirach) was written in Hebrew ca. 190 B.C., and translated into Greek before 132 B.C.

This passage refers to the required ceremony for those who touch a corpse, which involves sprinkling and washing, Num 19:11-19.

### ***Baptizo in the NT***

This verb is found 74 times in the NT, but there is no example of a specifically stated mode. In the context Mark 7:4 seems to favor aspersion, and Luke 11:38, affusion (see pp. 5.2-3). In other cases, circumstances seem to rule out immersion (see below).

## ***Baptismos, baptisma, and baptistes***

Βαπτισμός *baptismos* (“ceremonial washing, baptism”) is used three times in the NT. In Mark 7:4 and Heb 9:10 it favors the mode of sprinkling; in Heb 6:2, where it refers to Christian baptism, no mode is indicated in the context.

The terms βάπτισμα *baptisma* (“baptism”; 20x) and βαπτιστής *baptistes* (“[the] Baptist/Baptizer” 12x) are not used in the NT with sufficient context to indicate any particular mode.

## ***Bapto***

βάπτω *bapto* (“dip, wet, dye”) is never used for ritual baptism; rather, it is a secular term. *Bapto* is linked closer to the idea of immersion than are the other related words:

- (1) In classical Greek, it normally means “dip, plunge, dye.”
- (2) In the LXX it is used 18 times, often translating the Hebrew *ṭābal*, “dip.” But even here, the immersion may not be complete (cf. Lev 14:6, 16; Ruth 2:14). And in Daniel, it does not even mean dip at all, but rather “make wet” by the dew (Dan 4:33; 5:21).
- (3) In the NT it is used four times:

Luke 16:24, immerse, dip tip of finger

John 13:26 (twice), dip (not immerse) piece of bread

Rev 19:13, dye, not by immersion, but by splattering (cf. Isa 63:3, Heb. נָזַח  
*nāzāh* in the Qal)

These usages show that *bapto*, while it often is accomplished by immersion, is not a modal term as such, but, as the other related terms, emphasizes the results more than the method.

## ***Use of prepositions***

### **Claim of immersionists**

It often is said that baptism by immersion is implied by the use of the Greek prepositions, normally translated *into*, *down into*, *in*, *out of*, or *up out of* the water. These prepositions, it is said, imply the act of immersion.

Examples:

Matt 3:6 = Mark 1:5, John was baptizing in (ἐν *en*) the Jordan.

Matt 3:16 = Mark 1:10, Jesus was baptized, and immediately went up (ἀναβαίνω *anabaino*) out of (Mk. ἐκ *ek*) or from (Mt. ἀπό *apo*) the water.

Acts 8:38-39, Philip and the eunuch went down (καταβαίνω *katabaino*) into (εἰς *eis*) the water, . . . then they came up (*anabaino*) out of (ἐκ *ek*) the water.

### Range of meaning for common prepositions

It is dangerous to base doctrines on precise definitions of Greek prepositions, because they cover broad areas of meaning. Their meaning in any particular place must be determined by the context. For an idea of the broad range which these words possess, note the lists in the back of Young's concordance, which shows the number of times each Greek word is translated by various English words in the KJV. Here are some examples:

*En*    Among (114)  
          As (22)  
          At (106)  
          By (142)  
          In (1,863)  
          Into (11)  
          On (45)  
          Through (37)  
          To (15)  
          Unto (9)  
          With (139)  
          Within (13), etc.

*Eis*    Against (25)  
          Among (16)  
          At (20)  
          For (91)  
          In (131)  
          Into (571)  
          That (30)  
          On (57)



To (282)  
Toward (32)  
Unto (208)  
(e.g., Matt 17:27, “go to the sea”; John 11:38; 20:4-5, “come to the tomb”)  
Upon (25), etc.

*Ek* Among (5)  
At (3)  
Because of (3)  
By (55)  
By reason of (3)  
For (2)  
From (182)  
(often parallel to *apo*, as in Matt 3:16 = Mark 1:10; or *away from* [cf. Luke 2:4, Joseph went up *ek* Galilee; John 11:55, many went up *ek* the country to Jerusalem])  
From among (3)  
From up (2)  
In (6)  
Of (402)  
On (10)  
One of (8)  
Out of (131)  
Over (4)  
Some of (6)  
Through (2)  
With (25), etc.

### **Interpretation of prepositions in baptism**

In the examples cited, and in other similar examples, the prepositions indicate that the parties to the baptism went down to where the water was (river, stream, fountain), and the baptism took place. Then the parties went up the banks to normal ground level. The prepositions are not dealing with the actual baptism.

This order is evident especially in the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, Acts 8:38-39. Note also that the text emphasizes that they both went down and came up, but obviously Philip did not immerse himself.

Acts 8:38-39, “And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up

out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.” (NIV)

Acts 8:38-39, “And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.” (KJV)

## **Arguments from the significance of baptism**

### ***Immersionist argument***

This area presents probably the most forceful immersionist argument. Immersionists state that baptism should symbolize the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and along with that, the spiritual death, burial and resurrection of the believer.

Rom 6:3-4, “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Col 2:12, “having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Many proponents of each position believe that these passages are speaking of spiritual baptism, not water baptism. Yet immersionists say that water baptism should adopt this same symbolism. (cf. discussion in Robert Rayburn, Sr., *What About Baptism?* [Baker])

### ***Total symbolism of baptism***

Concerning the significance of baptism, see ch. 6, esp. “Baptism’s underlying significance.”

The Reformed standards recognize a number of strains of significance in baptism: union with Christ, regeneration and cleansing from sin, initiation into the visible church.

Baptism should symbolize all of these elements, not just that of regeneration. In the Scriptures the modes of sprinkling and pouring are most often associated with these concepts.

Further study has shown the centrality of the new covenant, and the place of baptism as the initiatory rite bringing one under its sanctions—the sanctions being pictured:

- (1) While regeneration is an important part of baptism’s significance, it is not the entire or even the basic meaning symbolized.
- (2) Sprinkling and pouring appear to be the Scriptural modes which are most often associated with the new covenant:

Jer 31:31, 33, new covenant, write law in hearts

Ezek 36:24-27, sprinkle, put Spirit in hearts

Isa 52:15, sprinkle many nations (*nāzāh* in Hiphil)

Heb 8, new covenant replaces Mosaic covenant

Heb 9:10-15, “baptisms” of Mosaic covenant accomplished by sprinkling of blood of animals or of water; under new covenant, we are sprinkled by blood of Christ

Heb 10:19-22, “bodies washed” parallel to “hearts sprinkled”

1 Pet 1:2; 3:21, baptism similar to sprinkling of blood of Jesus, produces sanctification and good conscience

Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17; promise of new covenant, pouring out of Holy Spirit; cf. Zech 12:10 and WCF proof texts from Acts (see section earlier in this chapter); linked there to water baptism

- (3) Since sprinkling often was of blood, it also represented the sanctions of punishment under the new covenant (cf. Christ’s “baptism”); and this mode therefore symbolizes death and burial, as well as new life under the resurrection.

## Arguments from ancient practice

### *Immersionist argument*

- Many eminent theologians and scholars state that immersion was the mode practiced by the ancient church.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4:15:19, “But whether the person being baptized should be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, whether he should only be sprinkled with poured water—these details are of no importance, but ought to be optional to churches according to the diversity of countries. Yet the word ‘baptize’ means to immerse, and it is clear that the rite of immersion was observed in the ancient church.”

The French edition of Calvin is even stronger, “. . . Although the mere term Baptize means to immerse entirely, and it is certain that the custom of thus entirely immersing was anciently observed in the Church.”

Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, p. 508, “The baptistery was usually a small, separate building in the center of which was a round or octagonal pool (fons or piscina), entered by a flight of steps, for the act of immersion.” (but note the exception on p. 541, and the logic on p. 499)

The argument continues: since baptism originally was by immersion, that mode should be retained.

### ***Reformed response to this argument***

- 1) Many Reformed theologians respond by saying that, even though immersion be granted as the ancient mode, the essence of baptism is not found in its mode, but in the use of water with the triune formula. Hence, mode is immaterial, and may be left to the discretion of the various churches. Cf. Calvin, in above quotation; Fr. “For the sign is represented in either (mode).”

This principle is stated by A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, p. 614:

“It has been abundantly shown above that the command to baptize is a command to purify by washing with water, and it hence follows that even if it could be shown that the apostles baptized by immersion, that fact would not prove that particular mode of washing to be essential to the validity of the ordinance, unless it can be proved also that, according to the analogies of gospel institutions, the mere mode of obeying a command is made as essential as the thing itself. But the reverse is notoriously the fact. The church was organized on certain general principles, and the public worship of the gospel ordained, but the details as to the manner of accomplishing those ends are not prescribed.

“Christ instituted the Lord’s Supper at night, reclining on a couch, and with unleavened bread. Yet in none of these respects is the ‘mode’ essential.” (note his remarks on p. 614-15)

- 2) In addition, few scholars of any persuasion would insist that immersion was the only mode practiced and considered valid by the early church. Cf. Finegan, p. 541; *Didache*, quoted below.
  
- 3) Further, many Reformed scholars doubt that the ancient church practiced immersion as the normal mode, or even, in the early centuries, at all.

### ***Mode in the intertestament period***

See notes above, ch. 5, “Jewish proselyte baptism” and “Ritual washings at Qumran.”

Information concerning mode must be found in archaeological remains, the Mishnah and Talmud, the *Zadokite Document*, and the *Manual of Discipline*. William Sanford LaSor argues convincingly for immersion in “Discovering What Jewish Miqva’ot Can Tell Us About Christian Baptism,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13:1 (Jan.-Feb., 1987) 52-59. However, all the information taken together does not give an entirely clear picture of the actual mode or modes used.

Often considered as a complete washing

Containers large enough for complete immersion

Actual modes not specified as immersion

*Manual of Discipline* specifies sprinkling

These ceremonies not the same as Christian baptism

### ***Mode in the NT***

In no case is immersion specified in the NT. See above for arguments derived from the meaning of *baptizo* and from the prepositions.

In nearly all the cases of baptism in the NT, there is some circumstance in the historical situation or in the Scriptural context which would argue against the mode of immersion in those cases.

#### (1) John baptizing at the Jordan

The traditional site of John’s baptizing in the Jordan is unsuitable for immersion. Most of the year it is too muddy and shallow; when the water rises to an

acceptable depth, it becomes a rushing torrent. The place in the Jordan where many Baptist groups perform immersions is just below the Sea of Galilee, far to the north of Judah.

(2) John baptizing at Aenon near Salim

For location, see above, ch. 5, “History of Baptism. John’s Baptism.” There are no bodies of water near Aenon suitable for immersions; the “many waters” are wells, which were necessary for drinking. The question raised at that time was about “purifying,” suggesting the current and OT modes of sprinkling or pouring.

(3) Baptisms at Pentecost

The large numbers baptized (3000; cf. 5000 in Acts 4:4), apparently in the temple precincts; and the scarce water supplies in Jerusalem, with the desire to keep water used for ritual purposes free from contamination, all argue for a quick, simple ceremony, using little water.

(4) Baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch

Cf. Acts 8:37-39. There are no large bodies of water in the Negev, and the traditional site has very little water. The “going down” and “coming up” refer to both Philip and the Eunuch. Just before his baptism, the Eunuch was reading the Suffering Servant passage in Isa 52:13 - ch. 53, which begins with the prophecy of Jesus’ “sprinkling” many nations.

(5) Baptism of Saul

The Greek of Acts 9:18, “and having stood up, he was baptized (ἀναστὰς ἐβαπτίσθη *anastas ebaptisthe*),” indicates that he was baptized standing up, apparently in the same room.

(6) Baptism of Cornelius and his family

Peter compared this baptism to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-17. His demand, “Can any forbid the water?” seems unlikely if he had an immersion in mind, but fits quite well if he expected water to be brought to them.

(7) Baptism of the Philippian jailer and his family

Cf. Acts 16:33. Paul and Silas were both in bad physical condition; yet the jailer and his family were all baptized immediately, at night. Normally there were not large tubs in jails or houses. The situation calls for a simple, easily administered ceremony.

Conclusion—In these instances, baptism seems to have been a very simple and quick ritual, performed easily, often where little water was available. This approach to the mode of baptism argues in favor of sprinkling or pouring, and against immersion.

### ***Mode in the early church fathers***

We should note first that the mode used in the early church is not normative for us; e.g., all evidence indicates that people were baptized naked. Yet, any continuity between the apostles and the early church respecting mode is important to notice.

There are two sources of information concerning mode in the early church—literature and archaeology. This section will discuss the first source, the evidence for mode in the early church fathers.

- 1) There are several early sources which mention the idea of “going down” and “coming up” for baptism:

- (1) *Shepherd of Hermas*, Parable 9:16 (ca. A.D. 100-150; *ANF* 2:49b)

“We went down into the water. . . . They go down into the water dead, and they come up alive. . . . These went down dead and came up alive.”

- (2) *Epistle of Barnabas* 11 (ca. A.D. 70-130; *ANF* 1:114b)

“We go down into the water full of sin, and we come up from it bringing fruit in the heart.”

- (3) Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66 (ca. A.D. 150; *ANF* 1:183b)

“Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated. . . . They receive the washing with water. . . . He who leads to the laver the person that is to be washed (calls on God) . . . he who is illuminated is washed.”

- 2) The two earliest and most detailed statements are in the *Didache* and Tertullian.

- (1) The *Didache*, ch. 7 (ca. A.D. 150; *ANF* 7:379b)

“But concerning baptism, thus you shall baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (running) water. But if you have not living water, then baptize in other water; and if you are not able in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

This statement of the *Didache* can be taken in two ways:

- (a) Immerse if possible, otherwise pour.
- (b) Baptize, if possible, in running water or in a receptacle; otherwise, the person baptized may stand on the floor. In either case, pouring would be used.

(2) Tertullian, *On Baptism*, ch. 6-8 (ca. A.D. 200; *ANF* 3:672-73)

“Not that in the water we obtain the Holy Spirit; but in the water, under the angel, we are cleansed, and prepared for the Holy Spirit. . . . Thus, too, does the angel, the witness of baptism, ‘make the paths straight’ for the Holy Spirit, who is about to come upon us, by the washing away of sins. . . .

“After this, when we have issued from the font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction. . . . In our case, the unction runs carnally (i.e., on the body) but profits spiritually; in the same way as the act of baptism itself too is carnal, in that we are plunged in water, but the effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins.

“In the next place the hand is laid on us, invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit through benediction. . . . Then, over our cleansed and blessed bodies willingly descends from the Father that holiest Spirit. Over the waters of baptism, recognizing as it were His primeval seat, He reposes. . . . To our flesh, as it emerges from the font, after its old sins, flies the dove of the Holy Spirit.”

3) Cyprian’s letters (ca. A.D. 250) appear to favor varying modes:

Letter 69:1 (*ANF* 5:376a), “It is required, then, that the water should first be cleansed and sanctified by the priest, that it may wash away by its baptism the sins of the man who is baptized; because the Lord says by Ezekiel the prophet: ‘Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be cleansed from all your filthiness.’”



Letter 70:1 (p. 377), describes heretical baptism with the term “dipping”: “For I know not by what presumption some of our colleagues are let to think that they who have been dipped by heretics ought not to be baptized when they come to us.” On the other hand, Tertullian, ch. 5, speaks of cults practicing “sprinkling.”

Letter 75:12-17 (pp. 400-02), in a long discussion, argues for the equal validity of baptism by “washing” or by “sprinkling,” especially in clinical cases, or even cases of temporary illness.

#### 4) Conclusion from the church fathers

While the early church fathers’ language often is ambiguous, it seems that they concur in the early practice as normally being done while standing in water. Statements about actual mode are not at all definite until the third century, where they appear mixed (cf. “water-bath, plunged, washed, sprinkled”).

The fathers must be interpreted in the light of more definitive data—i.e., that provided by archaeology. Cf. the remarks of Clement F. Rogers, *Baptism and Christian Archaeology*, p. 240; popular custom often is on a different level from the idealized statements of church leaders. Rogers gives this example: “So, were a stranger to examine our customs today, he would find frequent allusions in sermons to the symbolism of baptism which would seem to assume the practice of total immersion; on turning to the Prayer Book he would suppose it to be the custom, and affusion to be permitted occasionally, but an examination of the fonts in our churches would prove submersion always impossible for adults and nearly for infants.”

#### ***Mode in ancient frescos and drawings***

Most of these drawings come from the Roman catacombs, starting ca. AD 100. Others come from cemeteries and baptisteries.

- B. B. Warfield, “The Archaeology of the Mode of Baptism,” *Works*, Vol. 9, Ch. 12
- Clement F. Rogers, *Baptism and Christian Archaeology* (Oxford, 1903), contains 60 examples
- J. G. Davies, *The Archaeological Setting of Baptism*, agrees with Rogers’s conclusions
- Nelson’s *Atlas of the Early Christian World*, has some photos

These frescos and drawings usually show the person standing in water, sometimes on dry ground, usually naked. Water is poured over the head; in one case, sprinkled by a branch (ca. A.D. 200, Rogers, p. 246). Frequently a dove is in the picture.

An interesting feature of these pictures is the water level; it follows a definite pattern:

First 3 centuries, water up to ankles

4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, water up to knees (cf. pp. 262-63)

5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, water up to waist (cf. pp. 277-78)

But often standing on ground, or up to knees (pp. 281-83)

Jesus up to waist, but John on ground (pp. 268, 289)

6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, in fonts, water to chest

Baptizer outside (pp. 293-97)

Sometimes smaller fonts (p. 298)

9<sup>th</sup> century, 3 examples of immersion, all of infants (pp. 301-04)

It should be noted that it was possible to show submersions, if this had been desired; cf. the Egyptians in the Red Sea on p. 258.

On pp. 303-04, Rogers states his conclusions:

“We notice from these sixty examples, ranging from the first to the tenth century and coming from Rome, Gaul, Spain, Milan, Ravenna, Armenia, Syria, Egypt, Byzantium, Sicily, Ireland, and the Kingdom of Lombardy, and the court of Karl the Great, that the type is persistent, . . . As far as there is any development in the actual mode of administration it is towards submersion, but the furthest step in that direction consists in representing the water as rising (in most cases miraculously) as high as the neck. . . . We have seen then that all the evidence of archaeology goes to prove that the essential part of baptism was considered in the early Church to be the pouring of water over the candidate’s head by the bishop, or the guiding his head under a descending stream, followed by the laying on of hands.”

### ***Mode and ancient baptisteries and fonts***

## Examples known to Rogers

Rogers lists and discusses 38 baptisteries dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries; cf. his chart on p. 349.

Observations from Rogers's findings:

Normally contain 2 or 3 steps down

Depth varies, from 8¼ inches to 4½ feet

Diameter varies, from 2 feet to 62 feet

- The biggest baptistery: the Lateran, 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.; 62 feet long, oblong; 3 feet deep; but it has carvings on both sides showing baptism being administered by pouring
- All fonts, and many baptisteries would forbid any immersions (except perhaps of infants); some, although the dimensions are sufficient, are so constructed to forbid immersions (as the baptistery at Stefano, p. 337)

## Examples discovered more recently

(1) Church of St. Babylas, at Kaoussie in Syria

- Discovered in the 1930s
- Baptistery added to the church ca. A.D. 425
- “In the baptistery the baptismal basin was large enough to receive a candidate into the water but not large enough to provide for his immersion, so the ceremony must have been carried out by affusion.” (Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, 540-41)

(2) House-church in Dura-Europos

- Earliest baptistery intact
- Dura-Europos is in the Syrian desert
- House-church built in A.D. 233
- Discovered in 1930's

- Discussed by Finegan, *LAP*; in detail by Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, esp. ch. 6-7 (pictures on pp. 97, 107); see also *New ISBE* 1/998; detailed photos in Christopher Haas, “Where Did Christians Worship?” *Christian History* 37 (12:1; 1993) 32-35 (description of baptistry on p. 33)

“The greatest interest attaches to the small room known as the chapel. At its west end is a niche set against the wall with an arched roof resting on pillars. This contains a sunken receptacle which may have been a baptismal font. Like the baptistry in the later church at Kaoussie, this was too small to have permitted the practice of immersion, and if it was really a baptistry it must be assumed that the rite was performed by affusion.” (Finegan, *LAP*, 499)

Finegan has some reservation about this conclusion, since, citing Tertullian and Latourette, he assumes the early church practiced immersion: “Since the more general custom among the early Christians was that of immersion, other explanations have been sought such as that this was the tomb of a martyr.” Note, however, that the archaeologist involved contradicts that possibility: “That the room was a baptistry rather than a martyrrium was clear from the absence of any signs of bones or covering for the basin we found beneath the canopy” (Hopkins, 91). We note also that, as we have seen, the total evidence from the early church does not justify the assumption that immersion was the normal mode in the ancient church.

### **Conclusion from evidence of archaeology**

Early baptisteries and fonts agree with early drawings, and give evidence that the normal practice of the early church was pouring water over the head, often with the candidate standing in water, usually with the baptizer standing on dry ground. The tendency toward more water, and the immersion of infants, became marked in the ninth and tenth centuries, A.D.

This conclusion concerning the mode of baptism in the early church agrees quite well with the second interpretation suggested for the *Didache* (see above), and with all the other evidence from the early writers. Likewise, this conclusion provides good continuity with the available evidence from the NT itself regarding the mode of baptism.