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"Make Disciples Of All Nations, Baptizing Them"

- Mt 28:18

Nearly every church "baptizes" its converts, either by pouring, immersing, or sprinkling. The Greek behind our English word "baptize" is *baptizo*. According to Thayer's lexicon, this word was used outside the Bible to refer to sunken ships. G. R. Beasley-Murray, in his article on baptism in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Colin Brown, editor), stated that in Classical Greek it meant "to cause to perish (as by drowning a man)." BAGD defines *baptizo* as "dip, immerse" and points out that even in non-Christian literature it meant "plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm." J. D. G. Dunn wrote in the *New Bible Dictionary* (J. D. Douglas, editor) that New Testament baptism was "probably by immersion." Even *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, in giving the Greek root for "baptize," defines *baptizein* as "to dip." Those proficient in Koine Greek are fairly well agreed that *baptizo* means "immerse," though some then argue that the exact mode is insignificant (it is the meaning that counts, they say).

Why is it the case that those who translated the Bible from Greek into English have, since the sixteenth century, chosen to transliterate *baptizo* rather than to translate it? It is a fact that "baptize" remains an untranslated word in our English Bibles even to this day. Since the word means "immerse," why not translate it as such? It has been said that the translators of the seventeenth century were not free to render *baptizo* as "immerse" because the state church that "authorized" their efforts (i.e., the Anglican church) practiced sprinkling. Not wanting to upset the governing authorities, and yet not wanting to translate Scripture incorrectly, they simply did neither and instead transliterated *baptizo*. Why, 400 years later, do modern translators persist in doing this? Could it be that they do it so as not to upset potential readers or threaten popularity? What church which believes in sprinkling or pouring would subscribe to an English translation that reads, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, immersing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:18)?

Some argue that immersion is inconvenient, embarrassing or impractical, and that it is the thought that really counts anyway. But suppose you were asked to see a picture of my wife, and I, in turn, showed you a picture of a sailboat. You might well exclaim, "What? That's not your wife!" To which I would reply, "No, but it's the thought that counts!" Of course the thought really does count, but then so does the obedience! There are specific terms for "sprinkle" (*rantizo*) and "pour" (*ekcheo*), but those were not the words Jesus chose to use in Mt 28:18. He used the word *baptizo*. Since the Lord Jesus told us specifically to "immerse" people, why would we want to do it any other way? Indeed, what authority have we to change it?

Notice in Mk 1:9-10 that Jesus and John were not just "by" the Jordan, but were down "in" (*eis*) it. Then, after being submerged, Jesus came up "out of" (*ek*) the water. All this would have been unnecessary if full immersion were not the mode used here. Similarly, according to Jn 3:23, why was John baptizing at Aenon near Salim? Because it was such a lovely place? Because it was conveniently close to the synagogue? Neither of these. The text says it was "because there was plenty of water." It doesn't take much water to sprinkle; the entire populace of a large city could be

sprinkled with a washtub full of water. John's method of baptism was by immersion, and that takes "plenty" of water.

According to Ac 8:36-39, Philip and the Eunuch "went down" (*katebesan*) "into" (*eis*) the water and after the baptism "came up" (*anebesan*) "out of" (*ek*) the water. J. L. Dagg commented that "the style in which [Philip] traveled forbids the supposition that he had no drinking vessel, in which a sufficient quantity of water might have been brought into the chariot to wet the hand of the administrator. But, if they chose not to perform the rite in the chariot, there was certainly no need for both of them to go into the water, if the mere wetting of Philip's hand was sufficient (*Manual of Church Order*, 36). It appears that when it came to baptism, the eunuch was all wet!

Liddel and Scott point out in their *Greek-English Lexicon* that *baptizo* means "to dip repeatedly, to dip under." That this is the obvious meaning is seen in the fact that immersion has always been the practice of the Greek church, even to the present day. Immersion even prevailed in the Latin church until near the time of the reformation. It is true that pouring was allowed in cases of sickness or extreme danger, but all such cases were manifestly regarded as exceptions to the common practice of immersion, and were considered to be second best.

Since God promised to "pour out" (*ekcheo*, Ac 2:33; 10:45) His Spirit, wouldn't pouring water be a more fitting mode of baptism? Well perhaps, it if could be shown that *baptizo* ever meant "pour," but there is no lexical evidence that it ever meant anything other than "immerse." Those who believe in pouring argue that Ac 1:5 (viewed in light of *ekcheo* in 2:33) is just such a case where *baptizo* means "pour out." But this is faulty reasoning. One might just as forcefully argue that *ekcheo* in Ac 2:33 really means "immerse" since it is paralleled with *baptizo* in Ac 10:44-48! A more likely explanation for *ekcheo* in Ac 2:33 is that, just as in the days of Noah when God opened the flood-gates of heaven and poured forth the waters resulting in the immersion of every living creature (except those with Noah), so at Pentecost God poured out the Holy Spirit resulting in the immersion of His people into the Spirit.

King David was quite sincere in wishing to please God when he had the ark carried toward Jerusalem on an oxcart (2 Sa 6:1-5); but because he neglected to follow God's previous instructions to carry it on poles (Ex 25:12-14; 1 Ch 15:13-15), tragedy resulted (2 Sa 6:6-7). David was sincerely wrong. Though one must not be divisive over the correct mode of baptism, it nevertheless is critical that we genuinely understand God's instructions. Sincerity is indeed important, but it is also important to be sincerely correct!

- S.A.

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