

Baptism and Immersion
The Short Version
By Jon Parks

This is a shortened version of a much longer document (22 pages) that states my research and my position on the baptism by immersion question. It is also an attempt to answer some of the questions that swirl around this issue.

My point is not to DEBATE this issue. Debate is something that happens in politics, and I don't think it's very constructive in the spiritual setting. I think it is more important that we sit down together and discuss it. Baptism by immersion is a very complicated and emotional issue for Baptists, and it takes a great deal of work on our part to put our emotions aside long enough to look at the theological implications of what we are saying.

I also want to state my position in the discussion more clearly – I am one of you, just a church member looking at this issue together with you. Whenever this all comes to a vote, I am just one vote among 200 or more. My voice does not carry any more weight in the vote than any of yours. So as we discuss, I want my voice to be as one among 200 or so.

At the beginning, this was an emotional issue for me. I saw how it made other people feel, talked with people about being re-baptized, and came to the conclusion that re-baptism was an insult to someone's previous baptism. I am not so sure about that anymore. But in the meantime, I studied and I dug. I did research, even pulling out old Greek commentaries and dictionaries that I haven't used in a year or so. I looked at the internet at first, and found a lot of arguments. I found some points that were well made.

I also found some points that were well-stated, but *the research behind them was not solid*. It's one thing to look at an English translation, but what do you find when you look at the Greek text itself? When I looked closer at the actual Greek and the language surrounding the stories, I realized that the research behind those points was not solid. I KNOW this is difficult for you to hear because most of you have not had the chance to study the original languages. I wish that all of us could take a crash course in Greek, then look at this again together. But that's not possible.

Moreover, I began to question the WAY at which we have come to our conclusions about immersion, using circumstantial evidence. In a question below, I will address this more clearly.

I looked hard at the matter, and to me there are two important questions at work here: 1) How are baptism and immersion related? Is immersion the ONLY way? Is immersion the BEST way? 2) How are baptism and immersion related to church membership? And these questions (again, this is the way I see the issue) come down to the final and most important question of all: WHAT ARE WE SAYING WHEN WE RE-BAPTIZE SOMEONE?

You'll see my answer to these questions as we go along. I've decided to put this document in Question-Answer format – as if you have done your research as well, and are asking me the questions you had come up with. Know that the answers all reflect a good deal of

thinking and work in the original languages. You can read all that research in the longer version of the paper.

Q1: Doesn't the Bible say that Jesus was baptized by immersion?

A1: Not necessarily. Many have made the point that the text says, "Jesus came up out of the water." This is true in Mark's account (Mark 1:9-10). There are two possibilities: 1) When Jesus had been put under the water and was coming back out, or 2) After Jesus had *stepped down into the river*, and when he *stepped back out*.

However, in Matthew's account, the text reads, "*After Jesus was baptized*" (or "when he had been baptized"), immediately he came up out of the water..." *After* the act of baptism, Jesus stepped back out of the river, and then the heavens opened. Again, the text is not clear. It could be read either way. But it is typical in Greek narrative to speak of this kind of coming up and going down, and to use the word "water" instead of "river," which is already understood earlier in the passages. In other words, the Bible writers probably did not place these words here to give us a special clue as to the method of Jesus' baptism.

The final point in this answer comes from the account of Phillip baptizing the eunuch in Acts 8:38-39 – a passage many have again used to defend immersion. There, the text says (here, I'm translating from the Greek) "and THEY BOTH went down into the water, BOTH Phillip and the eunuch, and Phillip baptized him. Now when THEY came up out of the water..." The text here, again, seems to imply that the "going up and coming down" refers to stepping down into a source of water, not the literal going under of immersion.

I am not saying Jesus was baptized by any other means. Luke simply says that he was baptized (Luke 3:21-22), and John only makes casual mention of the event (John 1:30-34). For my own part, I imagine that Jesus probably WAS baptized by immersion, but I DON'T think that's what the text is telling us.

What I'm calling into question is our method of using circumstantial evidence to make such a strong case for immersion. We can use this "circumstantial evidence" method of interpretation to justify slavery (Colossians 3:22), taking women out of all leadership positions (1 Timothy 2:12), or dismembering ourselves (Matthew 5:29-30). When we look at a passage and refuse to consider its context, we are on dangerous ground of missing entirely what the text has said.

In no place does anyone give specific instructions on baptism, and I ask myself: If God found the debate about the mode of baptism so important, why did he not have give us clearer clues?

Q2: Doesn't the Greek word *baptizo* mean "to immerse," and aren't there other words the writers could have used to show a different method?

A2: Yes, the word *baptizo* TYPICALLY (but not always) means to immerse. Other Greek words that could have been used include: *nipto* (to wash), *ekcheo* (to pour), or *ranitzo* (to sprinkle). But the meanings of these words are often interchanged.

In Mark 7:3-4, *baptizo* and *nipto* are used interchangeably, and in verse 4 Mark even explains that the Pharisees often “baptized” their dining couches (also translated “beds” or “tables”). By using the word *nipto* before, it’s clear that Mark is not saying the Pharisees immerse their tables, beds, or sofas – but rather, that they cleanse them by “baptizing” them, using some kind of cleansing ritual that involves water.

Baptizo is also used figuratively in the Bible to describe instances that overwhelm (e.g. Luke 12:50), or to describe the experience of the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit” (e.g. Acts 1:5), which, ironically enough is “poured out” (*ekcheo*) on the believers, rather than their being “immersed!”

Ranitzo is used in the New Testament only in Hebrews chapters 9-10, which refer specifically to the Old Testament practice of sprinkling water, blood or oil on an item or person in order to cleanse them. But once again, the evidence is mixed – in 9:10, the writer says, “They [the gifts and sacrifices made in the OT] served only for matters of food and drink and various *baptisms*.” The word used is *baptizo*. The writer of Hebrews is talking about the cleansing taking place, and uses the terms “baptize” and “sprinkle” interchangeably.

Finally, *ekcheo* means “to pour or spill out,” but it is almost always used figuratively (“poured out his blood” means he died; the Spirit is “poured out” on the believers). And in no place is it used to describe a cleansing or washing – a basic idea that is inherent in *baptizo*, *ranitzo* and *nipto*.

My point, again, is not that baptism does not mean immersion. My point is that we cannot say with certainty that it ONLY means immersion – not with the kind of certainty that we would need to base our whole church practice on it. While it is true that God could have used another word for baptism, it is also true that he could have given us a passage that deals with this problem directly. My conclusion, therefore, is that THE MODE OF BAPTISM IS NOT AS IMPORTANT TO GOD AS THE FACT THAT IT IS PRACTICED.

Q3: Doesn’t Paul say that we are buried and raised with Christ to refer to baptism?

A3: Yes. In Romans 6:3-4 and in Colossians 2:12, Paul specifically uses the image of burial and resurrection in reference to baptism. And this alone makes the best case for immersion-only baptism.

But again, we must look at the context. Paul is not writing a textbook on how we baptize people – he is making the point that we have *died with Christ* when we die to our sins and that we are *raised again to new life*. He’s using an illustration that probably shows that immersion was the method Paul and his readers were most comfortable with.

Q4: So then, what IS immersion baptism.

A4: As Baptists, we agree that immersion is the BEST method of baptism. It is the most symbolic, the most memorable, and probably (but not certainly) the way Jesus himself was baptized. But I don’t think we can make a case that it is the ONLY method. However...

Q5: So, will we baptize people by other methods if they ask us to sprinkle or pour?

A5: Absolutely not. Unless there were absolutely no other way (for example, there was no large water source, or someone was deathly ill and not able to be immersed), I believe strongly enough in immersion that I can definitively say *I will not baptize someone by any other means*. And as a Baptist church, I don't believe we should.

I hate to use the words “inferior” and “superior,” but to me, immersion is the superior method. Most of the images in scripture point to immersion. There is no better symbolic way to show what has happened in our lives. Early church writings show that the earliest Christians preferred to be baptized by immersion – and most preferably, to be immersed in warm running water to show that we are “washed” in the “living water” of God!

But I also defer to great men who have come before me and thought otherwise. John Calvin (founder of Presbyterianism) and John Wesley (founder of Methodism) among many others have opted for other methods of baptism. They have looked into this more deeply than I have.

And so this stands to me as the second greatest sticking point of this matter (for the greatest, see the last question): Someone who has been baptized by another mode is no less a Christian than I am. Someone who grew up in another church, who made their profession of faith, and who was baptized by sprinkling, *was doing what they felt God was leading them to do at that time*. I cannot question that. It's not that their minister said to them, “Now you know, immersion is the best method, but would you like to be sprinkled anyway?” They made a joyful and willing affirmation of faith through another form of baptism. To me, that's what baptism is all about (again, see the last question).

To ask someone to be re-baptized, in my mind, is either telling them, “You weren't baptized correctly before and you have to do it again,” or to somehow imply that someone baptized by sprinkling or pouring is somehow less a Christian because they were baptized incorrectly.

Q6: Do people have to be baptized to be saved?

A6: No. There is absolutely no evidence in the Bible that says someone must be baptized to be saved. For every bit of circumstantial evidence that might say so (see Acts 2:37-38 for instance), there is even more evidence that salvation happens by grace through faith alone – “not by something a person does, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9, my own translation).

Besides, why would Jesus – perfect in every way – need to be baptized if he did not need to be “saved?”

Q7: Doesn't the Baptist Faith and Message say that baptism is by immersion?

A7: The BFM says, “Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit” (section VII, both 1963 and 2000). This is the traditional Baptist definition of baptism, and I have no reason to think otherwise. However, it is important for us to understand that the Baptist Faith and Message is our Doctrinal *Guideline*, not our

complete *statement of doctrine*. As Baptists, we are free to interpret the scriptures for ourselves, and to differ in opinion depending on how we see God leading us.

On a side but related matter, the BFM also says, “Being a church ordinance, [baptism by immersion] is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord’s Supper.” We also seem to be in disagreement with this part of the document, since we allow people of other denominations to participate in communion.

Q8: What does this mean for people who were baptized as infants?

A8: One thing the Bible is clear about – baptism is for people who have made a profession of faith in Christ. In theological terms, we call this *believer’s baptism*. It is a willing and joyful affirmation of our decision to follow Christ. It is *never* performed on infants in the Bible, so we cannot make a biblical case for that practice.

To me, the practice of the New Testament is *believer’s baptism*, and if someone desires to join our church but has not had *believer’s baptism* – that is, if they were baptized as an infant, or not baptized at all – then we would ask them to be baptized in our church by immersion as they join our membership.

Q9: When we re-baptize someone, isn’t this just a way for them to affirm that they are becoming Baptists?

A9: This, to me, is the sticking point. This is the hinge question of the whole discussion. We can agree as Baptists that baptism is only a symbol, and that nothing magical happens in the baptismal waters. But, *baptism is the most powerful symbol we celebrate*. There is no mode of baptism that is more beautiful and complete than immersion. I affirm this once again – if immersion is not the ONLY method, I believe it is the BEST and most preferred.

It is also clear in the Bible that baptism is a willing and joyful response of the believer TO GOD. It is a step of obedience that we make TO GOD. It happens after salvation – a symbol of what GOD has done in our lives. It is a symbol that we are identifying ourselves with Christ and with GOD.

Note that I emphasized the word GOD above. Baptism, in the Bible, is never a willing and joyful response TO A PARTICULAR CHURCH. It is not a step of obedience that we make TO A PARTICULAR DENOMINATION. It is not a sign that we are identifying ourselves with THE BAPTIST CHURCH.

When we re-baptize someone, are we making baptism into something it was never intended to be? Are we saying, “Yes, you made your affirmation to God before, and now you need to do it again to make your affirmation to US”? If so, I think we are making baptism something it was clearly never designed to be. Nowhere in the Bible is baptism mentioned as an initiation rite into one particular church group.

Q10: Shouldn't someone be willing to reaffirm their baptism and obedience to Christ?

A10: Absolutely! But is this really what we're asking someone to do? It's not what I hear most often. Mostly, I hear the argument above – "When someone is re-baptized, they're showing that they identify themselves with the Baptist church."

Now I want to ask YOU a question. Imagine you are moving from this place, and you find another Baptist church that you feel is a perfect match for you. But this church says that EVERYONE who wishes to join must be baptized by their minister in their baptistery, no matter how or when they were baptized before. Would YOU joyfully and willingly reaffirm your baptism by being re-baptized?

Your answer might reveal your true feelings on the matter.

If this really is an affirmation, and we decide to keep the current policy in place, I will gladly re-baptize anyone who wants to join the church. But I may also want to be re-baptized myself, and even recommend that we all be re-baptized from time to time to reaffirm our commitment to discipleship.

If this is truly the way we choose to view baptism, I recommend we consider a resolution on baptism that affirms what we believe and says WHY we choose to re-baptize – not as an initiation rite or as an entry ticket into Kenbridge Baptist Church, but as a re-affirmation of our obedience to Christ, an act we should ALL be willing to repeat at any time.