

“Baptism”
(WCF 28.3)

WCF 28.3 Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.

III. What is the proper mode of baptism?

A. There is a difference of opinion.

1. Some believe baptism should be by immersion.
 - a. They believe that this is what the word “baptize/baptism” means.
 - b. They believe it is meant to symbolize our death, burial and resurrection with Christ (Rom. 6:3-5).
2. Others believe the mode is not important.
 - a. Sprinkling, pouring, and immersion are all acceptable.
 - b. The symbolism is not in the mode, but in the washing of water.
3. The problem with defining any word in an ancient context is that we’re not there to see what it actually refers to.
 - a. We often come with preconceived ideas of what the Bible ought to say or ought to mean, and read that into each context – this can happen in any area.
 - b. The same is true of baptism.
 - (i) Some believe it refers only to immersion.
 - (ii) Some believe it never refers to immersion (Dale).
 - (iii) Most Lexicons say it can mean either washing or immersion.

B. The Word baptism, though it may sometimes mean “immerse,” in the context of Christian baptism means “wash.” The mode of washing is not the essential element.

1. This was certainly the view of the Westminster divines.
 - a. “What is Baptism? A. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ hath ordained *the washing with water* in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life; and whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord’s” (WLC 165).
 - b. “What is baptism ? A. Baptism is a sacrament, wherein *the washing with water* in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord’s” (WSC 94).
2. A. A. Hodge, in his *Confession of Faith*, argues that baptism was taken from the Old Covenant rite of purification and the symbolism is primarily that of washing, not burial.
 - a. “Washing the body with water, to represent spiritual purification and consecration, was a natural symbol which prevailed among all ancient Eastern nations—as the Persians, Hindus, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, and preeminently among the Jews. Paul summarily describes the ancient ceremonial as consisting “in meats and drinks, and

divers baptisms” (Heb. 9:10). The KJV and NAB translate “baptisms” (βαπτισμός) in this passage, washings.

- b. The position maintained by paedobaptists is that the command to baptize is a command to wash with water to symbolize the purification done by the Holy Spirit.
 - (i) Mode has nothing to do with it.
 - (ii) The essential element is the application of water in the name of the Trinity.

- c. What are his arguments?
 - (i) “The word βαπτίζω [baptize] in its classical usage, means *to dip, to moisten, to wet, to purify, to wash.*” (Classical usage).
 - (ii) In the Septuagint, βαπτω and βαπτίζε occur five times. Thus, Dan. 4:33, Nebuchadnezzar is said to have been wet (*baptized*) with the dew of heaven. Eccles. 34:25: “He that baptizes himself after the touching of a dead body”; - but this purification was performed by sprinkling.” (Use in the Septuagint).
 - (a) “Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was *drenched* with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagles’ *feathers* and his nails like birds’ *claws*” (Dan. 4:33). Nebuchadnezzar was not immersed by the dew, but was wetted or washed by it.
 - (b) “He that washeth (βαπτίζω) himself after the touching of a dead body, if he touch it again, what availeth his washing (λουτρον)?” (Sirach [Ecc.] 34:25).
 - (1) First, the word baptism is used interchangeably with a word for washing (λουτρον), the same word used in Ephesians 5:26, “So that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by *the washing* of water with the word.”
 - (2) Second, this passage refers to the ceremonial cleansing required for touching a dead person – but this was accomplished through the sprinkling of the water of purification: “Anyone who touches a corpse, the body of a man who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from Israel. Because the water for impurity was not sprinkled on him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is still on him” (Num. 19:13).
 - (iii) “In the New Testament, βαπτίζω, is used interchangeably with νιπτω which only means to wash. Compare Mark 7:3,4; Luke 11:38; Matt. 15:2,20: and observe—(a) That to baptize is there used interchangeably with to wash. (b) The washing was to effect purification, for the unbaptized hands are called the unwashed and unclean hands. (c) The common mode of washing hands in those countries is to pour water upon them. The rich have servants to pour the water on their hands; the poor pour the water on their own hands.”
 - (a) “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash (νιπτω) their hands, *thus* observing the traditions of the elders; and *when they come* from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse (βαπτίζω) themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing (βαπτισμός) of cups and pitchers and copper pots” (Mark 7:3-4).
 - (b) “When the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed (βαπτίζω) before the meal” (Luke 11:38).
 - (c) “Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash (νιπτω) their hands when they eat bread” (Matt. 15:2).

- (d) “These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed ($\nu\lambda\pi\tau\omega$; adj. form) hands does not defile the man” (v. 20). (Koine usage).
- (iv) “When John’s disciples disputed about baptism, it is expressly said to have been a dispute about *purification*”: “Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John’s disciples with a Jew about purification. And they came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him’” (John 3:25-26).
- (v) “The same idea is uniformly expressed by the word *baptism* or *baptisms*, in the New Testament. In Mark 7:2–8 we read of the baptisms of cups, pots, brazen vessels, and tables (couches upon which several persons reclined at table). These things could not be, and were not, immersed. The whole object of the service was not burial, but *purification*. In Heb. 9:10 Paul says that the first tabernacle “stood only in meats and drinks, and divers baptisms”; and below, in verses 13,19,21, he specifies some of these divers baptisms—“For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies to the purifying of the flesh”;—and “Moses sprinkled both the book and all the people, and the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry.”
- (vi) “Baptism with water is emblematic of baptism by the Holy Ghost, the object of which is spiritual purification. (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26,33; Acts 1:5; 11:16).”
- (a) Water baptism is a symbol of the baptism of the Spirit, which is what washes away our sins.
- (1) “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11).
 - (2) “I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8).
 - (3) “John answered and said to them all, ‘As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire’” (Luke 3:16).
 - (4) “I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit’” (John 1:33).
- (b) “Spiritual baptism is called ‘the washing of regeneration, and renewing, of the Holy Ghost’ (Titus 3:5.). Baptism with water symbolizes baptism by the Holy Ghost. But baptism by the Holy Ghost unites us to Christ, and makes us one with him in his death, in his resurrection, in his new life unto God, his righteousness, his inheritance, etc., etc. Spiritual baptism carries all these consequences, and water baptism represents spiritual baptism; *therefore* we are said to be baptized into Christ, into his death, into one body – to be buried with him, to rise with him, so as to walk with him in newness of life – to put on Christ (as a garment), to be planted together with him (as a tree), etc.”
- (1) “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?” (Rom. 6:3).
 - (2) “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:7).

- (3) “For if we have become united (planted) with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection” (Rom. 6:5).
- (4) NB: “None of these have anything to do with the mode of baptism, because it is simply absurd to suppose that the same action can at the same time symbolize things so different as burial, putting on clothes, and planting trees. *The real order is: washing with water represents washing of the Spirit; washing of the Spirit unites to Christ; union with Christ involves all the consequences above mentioned*” (italics added).
- (vii) “Baptism of the Holy Ghost, of which water baptism is the emblem, is never set forth in Scripture as an ‘immersion,’ but always as a ‘pouring’ and ‘sprinkling.’ (Acts 2:1–4,32,33; 10:44–48; 11:15,16).”
- (a) The reality of the Spirit’s work behind the symbol is accomplished by a pouring out or a sprinkling.
- (b) “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all *filled* with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance . . . Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has *poured forth* this which you both see and hear” ((Acts 2:1-4, 33).
- (c) “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been *poured out* on the Gentiles also” (Acts 10:44-45).
- (d) “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as *He did* upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be *baptized* with the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 11:15-16).
- (e) “Of the gift of the Holy Ghost it is said, he ‘came from heaven,’ was ‘poured out,’ ‘shed forth,’ ‘fell on them.’ Isa. 44:3: ‘I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed.’ Isa. 52:15: ‘So shall he sprinkle many nations.’ Ezek. 36:25–27: “Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean,” etc. Joel 2:28,29. “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.”
- (viii) “The universally prevalent manner of effecting the rite of purification among the Jews – from the analogy of which Christian Baptism was taken – was by sprinkling, and *not* by immersion. The hands and feet of the priests were to be washed at the brazen laver, from which water poured out through spouts or cocks. (Ex. 30:18–21; 2 Chron. 4:6; 1 Kings 7:27–39. See also Lev. 8:30; 14:7,51; Ex. 24:5–8; Num. 8:6,7; Heb. 9:12–22.)
- (a) Whether there were spouts or not, it doesn’t seem likely that the priests immersed themselves in the laver. It’s more likely that they simply *washed* in the laver.
- (b) It’s also true that the ceremonial purifications were accomplished through sprinkling.
- (1) “So Moses took some of the anointing oil and some of the blood which was on the altar and *sprinkled* it on Aaron, on his garments, on his sons, and on the

garments of his sons with him; and he consecrated Aaron, his garments, and his sons, and the garments of his sons with him” (Lev. 8:30).

- (2) “He shall then *sprinkle* seven times the one who is to be cleansed from the leprosy and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the live bird go free over the open field” (Lev. 14:7). This is why Naaman was told to go and wash in the Jordan seven times in order to be healed from his leprosy (2 Kings 5:10).
 - (3) “Take the Levites from among the sons of Israel and cleanse them. Thus you shall do to them, for their cleansing: *sprinkle* purifying water on them, and let them use a razor over their whole body and wash their clothes, and they will be clean” (Num. 8:6-7).
 - (4) “And not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer *sprinkling* those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Heb. 9:12-14).
- (ix) “In 1 Cor. 10:1,2, the Israelites are said to have been “baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” (Compare Ex. 14:19–31.) But the Egyptians who were immersed were *not* baptized; and the Israelites who were baptized were not immersed. Dr. Carson (p. 413) says Moses got “*a dry dip!*”
- (a) “In 1 Pet. 3:20,21, it is said that Baptism is the antitype of the salvation of the eight souls in the ark. Yet the very gist of their salvation consisted in their not being immersed.”
 - (b) “Who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through *the* water. Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:20-21).

3. Edwards arguments.

- a. First, that the anti-type, or reality, behind baptism favors pouring: “That the pouring of water on the person to be baptized, is properly called baptism in the Scripture use of the phrase, and is also a more lively representation of the thing signified by baptism, than dipping or plunging are both evident by the words of John the Baptist, who said to the Pharisees & Sadducees, “I indeed baptize you with water: but he that cometh after me, shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost & with fire.” Here John’s baptizing, & the baptizing with the Holy Ghost, are both called: baptizing, and the one is the anti-type and end of the other. But what is here called *the* baptizing with *the Holy Ghost* is the pouring out of the Holy Ghost upon them, which was also typified by the pouring of oil on the heads of those that were anointed; and it was especially fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost was so remarkably poured out on the Christian Church. Because that baptizing with water was designed as a shadow of baptizing with the Holy Ghost, therefore both were conjoined (?) when Christ was baptized; when John baptized him with water, God remarkably poured out the Spirit from Heaven upon him & it seems to me much the most probable therefore, that John baptized by affusion & not by dipping or by plunging; & that so there was a greater agreement between the type & the anti-type

that were then conjoined, than there would have been, if John had baptized by dipping” (M 694).

- b. The baptism of the Israelites in the Red Sea and Moses favors sprinkling.
- (i) “Hence we may learn what the apostle Paul meant by 1 Cor. 10:2, where he says that ‘their fathers were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud, and in the sea,’ he means that they were baptized in the cloud, by the cloud’s showering down water abundantly upon them, as it seems to have done at *two times*, especially; one was while they were passing through the Red sea, for there seems to have been a remarkable storm of rain, and thunder, and lightning, out of the cloud of glory, while the children of Israel were passing through the Red sea, Psa. 77:16-19. (“The waters saw You, O God; the waters saw You, they were in anguish; the deeps also trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth a sound; Your arrows flashed here and there. The sound of Your thunder was in the whirlwind; the lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was in the sea and Your paths in the mighty waters, and Your footprints may not be known” [Ps. 77:16-19]). And thus God looked through the pillar of cloud and fire about the morning watch, and troubled all their hosts; he confounded them with perpetual flashes of thunder and lightning, which greatly affrighted the horses, and made them run wild, and jostle one against another, so as to overturn and break the chariots that they drew, and many of them lost their wheels; but it was only a plentiful shower on the Israelites. And so they were baptized by the water that came out of the pillar of cloud, representing the blood that came out of Christ, and the Spirit that comes forth from him; and so God now at the time when they were coming out of Egypt (for the Red sea was the bounds of Egypt) baptized them, to wash and cleanse them from the pollutions of Egypt, and to consecrate them to himself.”
 - (ii) “Another time was at mount Sinai, when God had brought them to himself there, when he first entered into covenant with them there, whereby they became his people, and he their God; he consecrated them to him, and sealed that covenant by baptizing them by water out of the cloud.”
 - (a) “The earth quaked; the heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God; Sinai itself quaked at the presence of God, the God of Israel. You shed abroad a plentiful rain, O God; You confirmed Your inheritance when it was parched” (68:8-9).
 - (b) Edwards believes that the Israelites were twice baptized into Moses by sprinkling. This sprinkling was a symbol of the future blessing of His Spirit (Joel 2:23).
 - (iii) “Hence we prove an argument for baptism by sprinkling or affusion, for the apostle calls this affusion or sprinkling, baptism [they were baptized into Moses], comparing it to Christian baptism; and when God himself immediately baptized his people by a baptism, by which he intended to signify the same thing that christian baptism signifies, he baptized by affusion and sprinkling.”
- c. The conclusion is that the symbolism of baptism is that of purification, not burial. The mode of baptism is not the significant factor here, but the application of water is. Baptism then may be accomplished by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion, since all are applications of water.