

THE MODE OF BAPTISM 8-7-16

(Mark 7) Our subject today is the proper mode for Christian baptism. By “mode” I mean “way” or “method.” Essentially we will look at the debate over whether or not we should sprinkle or immerse, pour or dip. During the week I had someone tell me that he was praying for the Spirit of wisdom to be poured out upon me. Another prayed that I would become immersed in the word as I prepared. I trust that both of those things have occurred and “thanks” to all of you who continue to pray faithfully on my behalf. The fundamental question that I want to address is this: In water baptism, is it proper that the element, which is water, be applied to the person being baptized or is it proper that the person be applied or dipped into the element. Get that question clearly in your head. Is the water applied to the person or is the person applied to the water? That is the great question over which the Christian community has been split for many years. Now, I want again to say at this point that in my seven years plus teaching from this pulpit this is the very first time I have devoted a sermon to this subject. It is not to me a critical issue of Christian practice. In fact, our denomination and our confession recognizes the validity of immersion baptism. The only baptism I and many of you have experienced is by immersion. All the Westminster Confession of Faith says on this is found in 28:3 where we read, *Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.* We believe that it is best to apply the water to the person not the person to the water. But I’m not prepared to fuss over it. Some churches, however, refuse to recognize the validity of any baptism other than immersion. If you come as an adult to be baptized in our church and later move away and join a Baptist church they will likely require you to regard your baptism here as invalid. That bothers me, and I believe harms the unity of the Spirit. But, the greatest perpetrator of division on these things is not any church, it is ignorance – and, primarily, ignorance as to why we regard sprinkling or pouring as the preferable mode of baptism. So, I intend to fight against ignorance today and lay before you the reasons why Presbyterians believe as we do. I can only hope that if my presentation does not persuade you to change your opinion, it may at least enable you to respect ours.

My first point is a completely defensive one, but a most necessary place to begin. Point one is that the word “baptize” does not simply mean “to immerse.” If you asked your average Baptist pastor why they baptize by immersion he would probably tell you that the word *baptize* means *to immerse*. Now, if that were true, if the term *baptize* meant *to immerse* then there could be no debate and the question under discussion would be easily solved. If that were true. But that is not true and all you need to do is study how the term “baptize” is used in the Scriptures to see what I mean. Take a Princess Bride

Break: *Inconceivable! You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.*

Mark 7:**1-4** *The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.)* Now the term in verse 4, translated “wash” and “washing” is the Greek word *baptizo* or *baptize*. What Mark is saying is that the Pharisees would not eat a meal until they had been baptized. Am I to believe that before they sat down to eat they had to completely go under the water; that every fine Jew was immersed head to toe before chow? What do you think about such a proposal? Look also at Luke 11:**37-38** *Now when He had spoken, a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; and He went in, and reclined at the table. 38 When the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal.* Again the word here is *baptize*. The Pharisee was surprised that Jesus had not baptized himself before lunch. What is your judgment on this? The word *baptism* here, as Luke uses it, does it mean to completely immerse oneself in water? Clearly now. But if the term *baptizo* means “to immerse” and nothing else that is what you are left to deal with. The concern here and in Mark is clearly not that one be immersed but that one wash his hands which the straight-laced Jew was expected to do whether they needed washing or not. It was a ceremonial cleansing of the hands. But you know what? Not even the hands were expected to be dipped. The detailed law of the Mishnah, the Jewish oral tradition, called not for a dipping of the hands but said that water was to be poured over the hands.

Besides the two texts that we have just seen I would point you briefly to two others wherein the word “baptize” is used so that it clearly cannot mean an immersion in water. Mark 10:**38-39** *Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? 39 They said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.* What exactly that baptism is we don't have time to get into but it certainly was not an immersion in water. I Corinthians 10:**1-2** *For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.* There it speaks of a baptism which linked the Old Testament people of Israel to Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, and neither the baptism in the cloud nor

the baptism in the sea even got the people wet. Clearly this has no reference at all to an immersion. So, am I arguing that the term “baptize” means to wash by pouring or sprinkling? No. I am arguing that it refers to a ceremonial washing regardless of the mode. It may refer to an immersion, but it also may not. A study of the word *baptizo* does not solve the debate over the proper mode of baptism but it should eliminate the insistence that the word only means “immerse.”

Okay, now we can move on to more positive things and point #2 which is that sprinkling was the apparent method of Biblical baptisms. Here we can look at circumstantial evidence in favor of sprinkling by examining the major cases of baptism to see how it was done. The man known as the first baptizer was John and too many people begin their study of baptism with him. To start with John would be a mistake because by the time you read of John 75% of the Scriptures have been passed by and the Old Testament is not silent on this matter. The Old Testament, remember, provides the foundation on which the New Testament was built. The New Testament was written assuming the authority of the Old Testament. So, let’s look first at what the Old Testament might tell us about the proper mode of baptism. The term *baptizo* being a Greek term was, of course, never used in the Old Testament. But the Old Testament people of God were commanded to and did practice ritual cleansings both of people and objects. Most notable in this respect was Moses. We could look at some Old Testament passages that tell us of how Moses baptized but it will be easier to read of it in Hebrews 9 which sums up for us the Old Testament practice. Here the author is comparing the benefits of the Old covenant with what we have in the new. Hebrews 9:**13** *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.* Here he refers to how they would sprinkle this animal blood on the unclean person for cleansing. **14** *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?* **19** *For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, they took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people.* What did he do? How did Moses ceremonially sanctify the people? He sprinkled them with water and with blood. **21** *And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood.* There is mention there of hyssop in verse 19. Maybe you remember hearing of it from Psalm 51, David’s great prayer of confession. There David prayed, “Purify me with hyssop.” Hyssop was a plant, the soft branches of which had a sponge-like quality. When dipped in water it would soak up the water so that when you wave it or shake it

water would sprinkle out of from it. The Jews would use the hyssop branch for their baptisms, their ritual cleansings. That is why David would say, "Purify me with hyssop." He alludes to baptism which was done with the hyssop branch and was done by sprinkling. (Ezekiel 36) Here we read a prophecy that finds its fulfillment in the return of the Jews from Babylon and also in the new covenant. **24-27a** *"For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. 25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27" I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes.* Here God promises the coming of His Spirit who will work to change hearts, to cleanse within. And how does God describe this cleansing work? As a shower or a bath? **25a** *Then I will sprinkle clean water on you.* This is how the Jews thought of the work of God. These are the ideas that would go through their heads as they thought of baptism. They pictured a hyssop branch and they pictured sprinkling.

With that understanding we can now look at the baptism of John in Matthew 3. Did John apply the water to his converts or did he put his converts into the water? The Scriptures do not tell us how he baptized. It says that he baptized with water just as Jesus would baptize with the Spirit, which sounds to me like he applied the water to the person not vice versa but I won't make much of that and I'll stick with my claim that we aren't told how John baptized. But we are told why John baptized. In particular we are told why he baptized Jesus. Matthew 3:**13-15** *Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. 14 But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" 15 But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him.* What did that mean? Jesus says, "It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." What is righteousness except obedience to the law of God? If baptism was necessary for Jesus to fulfill all righteousness there must have been some law requiring that he be baptized. And there was. It is a law pertaining to the priesthood. Jesus, as you know, is called our great High Priest. He is the Real thing of which the first Old Testament priest Aaron and the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe of Israel, were only types. When the Levites were set apart to be priests God commanded that they be consecrated unto that service with a holy ceremony. Now we find Jesus, as He begins His priestly work, coming to John for a consecration, sort of an ordination service unto that position. But how was the priest consecrated to his work? If we but knew that it would shed light on how Jesus was consecrated for his priestly work.

And I am pleased to announce that we do know that. Numbers 8:**5-7a** *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 6"Take the Levites from among the sons of Israel and cleanse them. 7"Thus you shall do to them, for their cleansing: sprinkle purifying water on them.* That is the law which Christ said he must obey to fulfill all righteousness. There is no other law to which Jesus could possibly have reference. And if this is the law being fulfilled how would Jesus have been baptized? But, but, but you say, "we know that Jesus was immersed because the Scriptures say he came up out of the water." I know you have this picture in your mind from Sunday School where Jesus comes up soaking wet after being immersed and the Holy Spirit falls upon Him, but look at what the text really says. Mathew 3:**16** *After being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water.* Does that indicate that Jesus was under the water and then came up, or that he was in the river and then walked out of it? Even in English it sounds as if Jesus simply walked up out of the river onto shore. But in Greek there is no doubt. The preposition *apo* translated "from" indicates that Jesus moved away from something not that he came out from under something. All the passage tells us is that Jesus did not stay in the river but came out and when he did, when he reached dry land He was baptized with the Spirit who descended upon Him. But, but, but why, if John did not immerse did he do his thing at a river? It seems strange that they would go there unless it were for immersion. Well, I think the riverside baptizing may make us think of immersion but if you consider the facts it would be strange if they had not gone to such a place. The history tells us that immense multitudes flocked to John and were baptized by him. He was even regarded by some as being the Messiah. Anticipating such crowds to attend on his ministry and be baptized by him, and required by the nature of his mission and the Old Testament prophecies concerning him that he would be a voice crying in the wilderness, to what place should he go to find water, not only for the many baptisms but also for the needs of the multitudes and their animals? However he would baptize, the obvious choice would have been the Jordan River. Such a choice tells us nothing about the mode of John's baptism. Indeed, the oldest paintings of the baptism of Jesus depict Him being baptized by sprinkling at the Jordan.

On now to Acts 2. We have seen that Old Testament baptism was performed by sprinkling and the evidence indicates that John's baptism would have been by sprinkling. Now let's look at the baptismal records of the book of Acts. The first is in Acts 2:41 which indicates that in one day 3000 were baptized. Were they immersed or sprinkled? It doesn't say. But to insist that they were immersed leaves one with a bit of a problem. One is that there were no rivers in or near Jerusalem in which to baptize and furthermore, with the opposition of the Jews being so great, it is doubtful they would have

been allowed to secure any other place without great resistance. Furthermore, you have the problem of time. Just try to figure it out for yourself. The baptizing may have started as early as 10 in the morning. With 12 apostles doing the baptizing, if you allowed 7 hours before dark and if they managed to pull off an immersion every two minutes you would still fall way short of 3000. That is supposing that they found a place large enough to do 12 immersions at a time and supposing that the water was at hand and all things were in readiness. If immersion were the method it would have been extremely difficult to pull this off, but if it were by sprinkling with a hyssop branch it could have easily been done in a couple of hours. The circumstantial evidence of Acts 2 favors sprinkling.

Now, Acts 8 and the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Important notes about this case. Verse 26 says we are on a desert road. And you all know what makes a desert a desert. It is lack of H₂O. Second note - Philip discovered the eunuch reading from the prophet Isaiah chapter 53. Acts 8:**36** *As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized? 38 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.* I have heard some folks use this as a proof of immersion. "Look," I am told, "the eunuch went down into the water and came up out of the water." But the eunuch didn't do those things alone did he? If going into the water or coming out of it meant immersion then Philip was also immersed. Again the text does not give away the mode of the baptism. All we can look at is circumstantial evidence, and here again we see little to commend to us immersion as the method. First of all, it is highly improbable that on a desert road in that region they would find a body of water sufficient for an immersion. More than likely what they found was a shallow pond. Secondly, if we examine the passage we will learn that the eunuch heard of Christ and, no doubt, his need for baptism from reading and learning about a portion of the Old Testament Scriptures, namely the later portions of the book of Isaiah. Right when Philip arrived he was in chapter 53 which is about the suffering servant. Is there anything in this passage that would suggest the subject of baptism? Yes, there is. Remember now that at that time there were no chapter divisions as we have them. And just eight verses before the one quoted in Acts 8 the eunuch would have read this in 52:**13** *Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted...***15a** *Thus He will sprinkle many nations.* No text could have been more applicable to a Gentile believer at that point than this one. It is from this text that he would have learned his need for baptism and it is this text that would suggest the mode. So again the

circumstantial evidence favors sprinkling not immersion. Acts 10 and the case of Cornelius and his household. We find toward the end of this chapter Peter preaching the gospel for the first time in his life to a group of Gentiles. **44-48a** *While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. 45 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. 46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, 47" Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" 48 And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.* The basis for the baptism with water is that they had been baptized by the Holy Spirit who was poured out upon them. And then Peter says this, **47** *Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?* That sounds to me as if Peter has in mind applying water to them. If he envisioned that somewhere nearby was a river in which they should be immersed how would he have said this? I would expect him to ask, "Can anyone forbid us from going to the water?" But instead he speaks as if the water would be brought to them and indeed you gain the impression that they were baptized right then and there in the house of Cornelius. The evidence again favors sprinkling. Acts 16 and the Philippian jailer. The conversion of this jailer took place in the middle of the night. Verse 25 tells us that it was about midnight when the earthquake hit that shook up the jailer and freed the prisoners. As the story goes **32-33** *they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. 33 And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household.* What mode is suggested by this account? Again if it were immersion you would have a number of difficulties. Virtually no buildings in those days had a pool adequate to immerse and certainly a jail would not. This would mean that the jailer and his wife and his kids and Paul who was a prisoner would have left the jail unguarded, gone out in the middle of the night to a local river and been immersed, returning to their home dripping wet in time to have a lovely breakfast. Does that seem likely to you? Again I ask which method is supported by the circumstantial evidence of the baptismal account? And the answer is obvious.

So where is immersion? It is in the mind of the person who, like me, was brought up seeing pictures of Jesus and the others being immersed. But, when we examine the evidence we find not one clear case of immersion baptism in the New Testament. Indeed we find much evidence to the contrary. One other thing I would have you consider that is related to the stories we have just read is

that if immersion is the only acceptable form of baptism then our Lord has given us a rite to be performed at the onset of one's spiritual life which is impossible for many people in many places in many times. Oh, it's fine for us in modern Pittsburgh with our rivers and our swimming pools, and our heated baptismal pools. But there are places on our planet so dry during parts of the year that immersion would be well-nigh impossible. There are places so cold during much of the year that immersion would be impossible or at least impractical. It strikes me as strange that in the simplicity of the new covenant Jesus would give us a command so difficult to fulfill in many times and places.

All of that study is under main point #2 which is that sprinkling or pouring is the apparent method of Biblical baptisms. My third point is that sprinkling or pouring best fits the thing being symbolized by water baptism. To me this is the most important concern of all. Baptism serves as a sign or a symbol. The framing of a symbol is wholly dependent on what it is you are symbolizing. So, without a clear command as to how we should perform baptism our most important consideration is to do it in such a way that best fits its purpose. If you can think back three Sundays ago you may remember that the first and primary purpose of baptism is to signify and seal the spiritual cleansing of the Holy Spirit. In a moment I will show you how this fact should shape our administration of baptism. First, I need to dispense with another popular but false notion about baptism. Many people hold to the idea that baptism represents our death, burial and resurrection with Christ. A popular argument is that we should immerse since going under the water represents Christ's burial and coming out represents the resurrection. Where does one get such an idea? It comes from the sixth chapter of Romans. Before we look there, I want you to think about the connection between immersion baptism and the burial of Jesus. First, consider what role the burial of Jesus played in our redemption. Was it redemptively necessary in some way for Jesus to be buried? I cannot think that it was. The essential part of the work of Jesus involved his death and resurrection. His burial was only an incidental matter and hardly worthy of remembrance through a sacrament of the church. But then too I would ask you how was Jesus buried and how does immersion relate to it? Burial as we usually perform that sad duty is not the sticking of someone into the ground; it is the pouring of dirt on someone until they be completely covered and, if you know the story, you are aware that Jesus was not buried in the sense that we think of it. His body was never put into the ground. Instead it was placed in a tomb which happened to be a cave. He was no more immersed when he was buried than my car is immersed when I pull it into my garage. If baptism was meant to represent the burial of Jesus immersion would not do it. Sprinkling would not do it either but that is okay since baptism is not meant to represent burial anyway. Some

think Romans 6 teaches this so let's look at it. Romans 6:**3** *do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?* This is typical Pauline language referring to our union with Christ. We have been baptized into a oneness with Christ which unites us with his death so that when He died we died. **4** *Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.* Verse four goes on to say that just as we were united with Christ in His death so we were also in His burial and resurrection. And what united us to these things? **4a** *we have been buried with Him through baptism into death.* Through baptism into water? No. Through baptism into death. The baptism spoken of here savingly unites us with Jesus. Could that possibly be water baptism? Uh-uh. This refers to our baptism with the Spirit. As Paul teaches also in I Corinthians 12 it is the Spirit who baptizes us into Christ Jesus. So, what does Romans 6 say about the mode of baptism? Not a thing.

What then does baptism signify? Spiritual cleansing by the Holy Spirit. The evidence for this is abundant. It is the very nature of a sacrament to represent in a visible way the invisible workings of God's grace. Baptism is clearly a physical washing to represent a spiritual washing which is the work of whom? The Holy Spirit. The New Testament speaks repeatedly of two baptisms, baptism with water and baptism with the Spirit and the two are related as sign and reality. What did John the Baptist say? I baptize with water but when Jesus comes He will baptize with the Holy Spirit. The connection is clearly made. In Ezekiel 36 we read where God says, **25** *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.* **27a** *I will put My Spirit within you.* This is what baptism is meant to represent, and how shall we then represent the work of God's Spirit? What picture best describes what the Holy Spirit does? Consider the following Scriptures – Proverbs 1:**23** *I will pour out my spirit on you.* Isaiah 32:**15** *the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high.* Isaiah 44:**3** *I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants.* Ezekiel 39:**29** *I will have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel.* Joel 2:**28** *I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind.* Joel 2:**29** *I will pour out My Spirit in those days.* John 1:33 and Mark 1:10 speak of the Spirit descending on Jesus. Acts 2:**16** *I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND.* Acts 10:**45** *the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles.* Titus 3:**5-6** *He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.* Now friends, does it sound to you like the

best way to represent the Spirit's work would be to put someone in the element or to pour or sprinkle the element on them? Folks, it is the pouring out of water upon an individual that represents what God does to purify our hearts. I want what we do to serve as a picture of what God does when He sends the Holy Spirit upon us to make us clean. That is why we believe that sprinkling or pouring, applying the water to the person is the Biblical way and the best way to administer water baptism.

The immersion vs. sprinkling debate is an intra-mural squabble among Christians. It is one thing I wish did not divide us, but it does. What does not divide us however, one thing that is recognized by all branches of the church, is that the cleansing and renewal of the Holy Spirit is an essential if you are to be saved. Friend, if you wandered in here today as a man or woman not yet joined to Jesus, you have heard of what is for us a very practical concern of Christian practice. But as I said, whether you are baptized by immersion or sprinkling is not a big deal. What is however a big deal, even the biggest deal, is that you be baptized by God's Spirit; that you be born again. I need it. You need it. Jesus came to grant it. John baptized with water but Jesus baptizes with His Spirit. If you know you have never been changed by the power of God I invite you now to cry out to the Lord. Confess your sin and seek from the Lord Jesus mercy to cleanse. By His blood He can free you from sin's guilt. By His Spirit he can free you from sin's power. Seekers and Christians alike I invite you to join me in singing as our closing chorus and prayer "Spirit of the Living God Fall Fresh on Me."