



STATEMENT DB050

THE MODE OF BAPTISM

There are three modes (or methods) of water baptism used in Christian churches today: immersion (in which the person is completely submerged), affusion (that is, pouring), and aspersion (sprinkling). Evangelical Christians are divided on the question of which mode or modes are proper forms of baptism. Some Christians (typically those who believe that only believers should be baptized) think that immersion is the only valid mode, while other Christians (usually those who recognize the validity of infant baptism) consider all three modes to be acceptable. Some of the main points to consider are the following:

1. The word baptizo in Greek, translated "baptize" in the New Testaments, meant to "dip" or "immerse." It is sometimes argued that in Mark 7:4 and Luke 11:38 the word means "to wash by pouring," not "immerse"; but in those texts the actual meaning (as historical information substantiates) is to "wash by dipping or immersing in water."
2. Baptism is specifically stated in the New Testament to represent the Christian's spiritual union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-7), which is remarkably and dramatically pictured in immersion. To this it is usually pointed out that baptism may also serve as a picture of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17, 33, 38; 10:45-48), and also of the sprinkling, either of the blood of Jesus for forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:19-22; 10:22, 12:24; I Peter 1:2), or of the "clean water" representing the impartation of the new nature and the giving of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:25-27). It is true that in Acts, Peter makes a connection between the pouring of the Spirit and the rite of baptism, but the connection is not as direct as the kind found in Romans 6:3-7; and the Bible never connects baptism with the imagery of sprinkling.
3. Whenever the act of baptism is described in the New Testament (which is rarely), the one who is baptized actually goes into the water. Thus, after Jesus was baptized, He "came up out of the water" (Mark 1:10), and when Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, "they both went down into the water" (Acts 8:38). These descriptions do not quite prove complete immersion, however, since they could have stood, let us say, ankle-deep in water while one of them scooped up some water and poured it over the other's head. Furthermore, we are not told in Scripture that we must baptize in exactly the same way as John or Philip.
4. The mode used by the early Church in the first few centuries was immersion, with affusion reserved for occasions when immersion was impossible due to lack of sufficient water, and aspersion used for individuals too sick or weak for either immersion or affusion. Thus, immersion was the norm and the other two modes were substitutes in exceptional circumstances. This situation, however, began to change fairly early and by the 13th century was actually reversed, with aspersion the norm. Even after the Reformation, immersion as the norm became accepted only by a segment of Protestantism and only after a period of transition during which affusion was the norm.

5. Those who believe that all three modes are valid would point out that only in the most ritualistic view of baptism can the amount of water be considered important. The immersion-only view, they say, appears absurd: What if one hair fails to be immersed? What if a finger or a hand? Where does one draw the line? But the opposing argument can be made to appear absurd also: If a small amount of water is permissible, is one drop enough? How about no water at all (not a view to be laughed away, since the "Quakers" take this exact view)? Where does one draw the line at this end? Therefore, the better approach is to realize that it is the general form of the act and the intention of those involved that matter, not the precise amount of water used. The issue is: Shall we obey the command of Christ as He intended or shall we obey the command in a way that pleases us?

What shall we conclude from these observations? It seems clear to us that immersion is the biblical norm, but that it is not an inflexible norm. That is, Scripture and common sense indicate that the water is not all-important and that, therefore, other modes may be used as substitutes in exceptional circumstances. God accepts the believer on the basis of his faith in Christ and his desire to obey Him, not on the basis of how much water covered his body when he was baptized. The doctrine that immersion is the only valid mode of baptism and that only those so baptized should be admitted into the fellowship of the Church body would, therefore, appear to be a bit extreme and not based on Scripture. The Church should welcome into its fellowship all those whom Christ has accepted (Romans 15:7, I John 1:3).

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299