

# The Mode of Water Baptism

## Why Baptism by Immersion is the Proper Biblical Mode

This paper demonstrates that baptism by immersion is the proper Biblical mode for water baptism. The other modes of baptism that are practiced by churches are baptism by sprinkling or baptism by pouring.

### 1. The meaning of the term “baptize” [*baptismō*] demands baptism by immersion.

The Greek Lexicons are unanimous that this Greek verb means “to dip, to immerse.” Consider the following examples:

*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* by W. E. Vine: to dip, used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment, used of the drawing of wine by dipping the cup into the bowl.

*Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Arndt and Gingrich: to dip, to immerse.

*Critical Lexicon and Concordance* by E. W. Bullinger: to dip or dye, to immerse.

*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Thayer: to dip repeatedly, to immerse, submerge, used of vessels sunk, an immersion in water.

*Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek* by Cremer: to immerse, submerge.

*Greek-English Lexicon* by Liddell and Scott: to dip, plunge, to be drowned, of ships that are sunk, dyeing garments, dipping in water, immersion, of water being drawn by dipping vessels.

*The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* by Moulton and Milligan: Used of a submerged boat.

#### Other uses by ancient Greek writers:

It was used of an iron-headed spear being plunged into a sword-fish [*Polybius, History, book XXXIV. C. 3, 7*].

[Speaking of an underground channel] “And to one who hurls down a dart, from above into the channel, the force of the water makes so much resistance, that it is hardly immersed.” [*Strabo, Geography, book XII. Ch. 2, 4*].

[Speaking of the march of Alexander's army: "they marched the whole day in water, **immersed** as far as to the waist." [*Strabo, Geography, book XIV. Ch. 3, 9*].

[Describing the murderous drowning of a boy] "Continually pressing down and **immersing** him while swimming, as if in sport they did not desist till they had entirely suffocated him." [*Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, book XV. Ch. 3, 3*] Note: Again and again Greek writers use this verb to describe sunken ships (totally submerged or immersed in water) and people drowning under water as in this case.

[Used of a sword so plunged into warm blood as to be heated by it] "Similar also is that: 'And the whole sword was warmed with blood.' For truly in this he exhibits very great emphasis; as if the sword were so **imbathed** (baptized), as to be heated." [*On the Life and Poetry of Homer, II. 26*].

[Of a man killing himself] "And stretching out the right hand, so as to be unseen by none, he **plunged** the whole sword into his own neck." [*Josephus, Jewish War, book II. Ch. 18, 4*]

"*Baptizo* is used in Classical Greek of a blacksmith who immerses a piece of hot iron in water, tempering it. Also, of Greek soldiers placing the points of their swords, and barbarians the points of their spears, in a vat of blood. E.g., Xenophon in the 4th cent. BC tells of Spartan soldiers dipping their spears into pig's blood before going into battle. By identifying the spears with blood, the nature of the spear was transformed from a hunting tool to an instrument of warfare." [*An Eternal Identity, Rick Webb, page 2*]

[Of a cloth dipped in oil and then lit on fire] "A certain man, having a grudge against a fox for some mischief done by her, after getting her into his power contrived a long time how to punish her; and **dipping** tow [yarn or cloth made of tow] in oil, he bound it to her tail and set fire to it." [*Aesopic Fables; Fable of the Man and the Fox*]

For scores of other examples, see *The Meaning and Use of Baptizein* by T. J. Conant. [Kregel Publications, 1977]

This Greek verb is used in the Septuagint in 2 Kings 5:14: "And Naaman went down, and **immersed** himself in the Jordan, seven times."

**The Reformers understood the meaning of the term (even though many if not most Reformed churches today do not practice baptism by immersion):**

**Luther**, *On the Sacrament of Baptism*: "First, the name *baptism* is Greek; in Latin it can be rendered immersion, when we immerse any thing into water, that it may be all covered with water. And although that custom has now grown out of use with most persons (nor do they wholly submerge children, but only pour on a little water), yet they ought to be entirely immersed, and immediately drawn out. For this the etymology of the name seems to demand."

**Calvin**, *Institution of the Christian Religion*, Book IV. Ch. 15; On Baptism, 19 (*at the end*). “Though the word baptize itself signifies immerse, and it is certain that the rite of immersion was observed by the ancient church.”

It should be noted that in the King James Version (and many other versions), the term “baptize” is not translated, but the Greek verb is merely transliterated. To transliterate means to print a Greek word using the closest corresponding letters in English. Another example of a Greek word transliterated is the word “angel” [Greek=**angelos**]. The word means “messenger.” So a transliteration would be, “The angel said...” A translation would be, “The messenger said...” So also for the word “baptize.” A transliteration would be, “He was baptized.” A translation would be, “He was immersed.”

**2. If the mode of baptism were sprinkling or pouring, then why didn't God use words that mean sprinkling or pouring when speaking of water baptism?**

There is a Greek word for **sprinkling** (rhantizō). See Hebrews 9:13 where it is used of the sprinkling of blood. The noun (rhantismos) is used in Hebrews 12:24 and 1 Peter 1:2 of the sprinkling of the blood of Christ. But this word is never used of water baptism. There are several Greek words for **pouring** [see Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament words* under “pour”], but none of these words is used for water baptism. These Greek words for sprinkling or pouring are not used to describe water baptism because they are not appropriate descriptions of immersion.

**3. In the New Testament, when people were baptized, they went into the water and then they came out of the water, suggesting baptism by immersion.**

“And were baptized (immersed) of (by) him in the Jordan” (Matt. 3:6; see Mark 1:5).

“And Jesus, when (after) He was baptized, **went up** straightway **out of the water**” (Matt. 3:13—speaking of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus).

“I indeed baptized (immersed) you in water” (Mark 1:8; see verse 9).

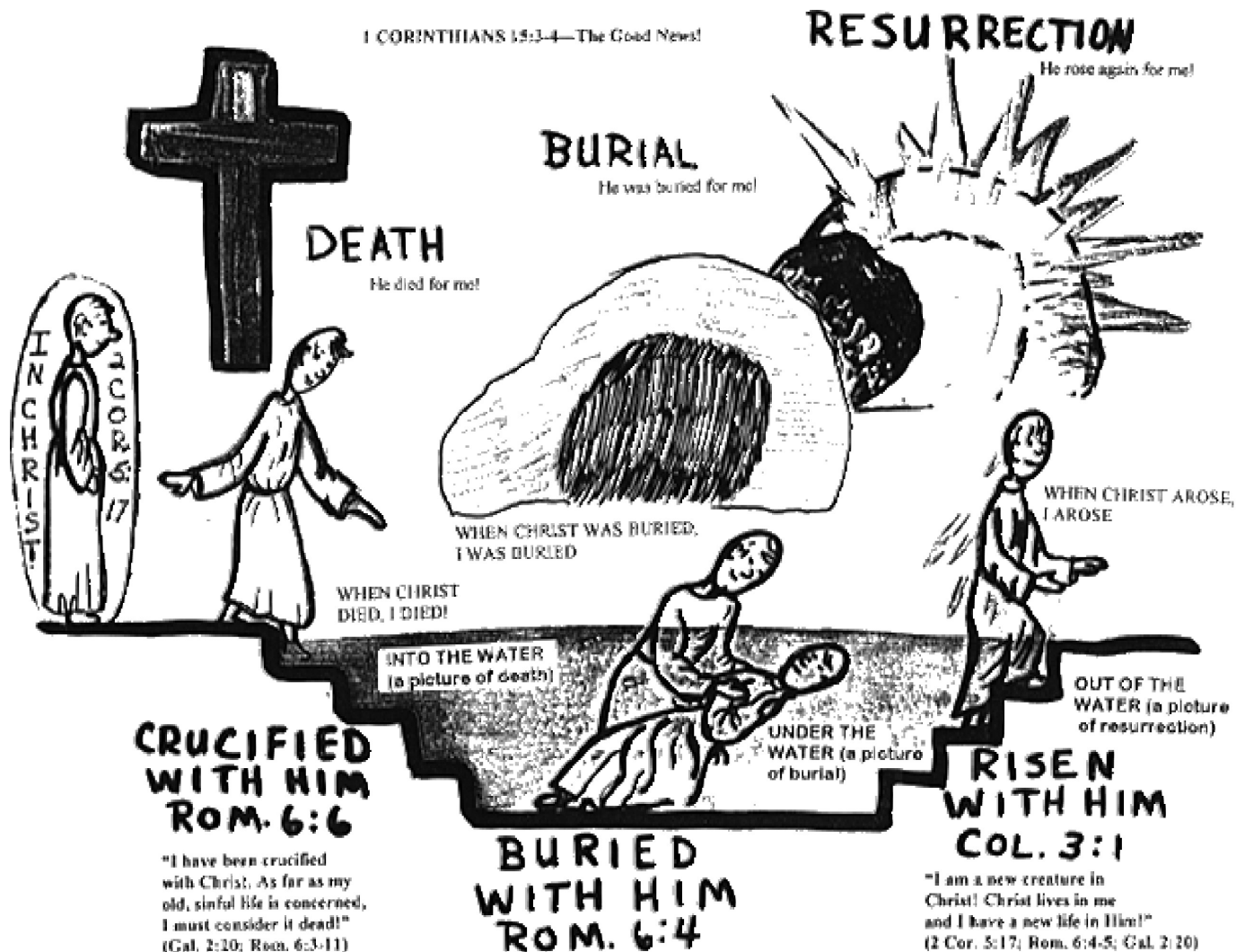
“And John was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, **because there was much water there**: and they came and were **baptized** (immersed)” (John 3:23). Note: John's baptism was not the same as Christian baptism, but the mode was the same. John's baptism involved total immersion and Christian baptism involved total immersion. You do not need “much water” to sprinkle or to pour, but you do need “much water” to immerse (to put a person totally under the water). Sprinkling would require only a cup of water; pouring would only require a pitcher of water; immersion requires “much water.”

“And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and **they went down both into the water**, both Philip and the eunuch; and he **baptized** (immersed, submerged) him. And when they were **come up out of the water**, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip” (Acts 8:38-39). Notice that they were both in the water (perhaps waist deep) and then Philip immersed him (put him entirely under the water).

**4. Baptism is a picture of the believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5).**

Romans 6 is speaking of a real baptism, not a ritual baptism. It is speaking of what happens to a believer the moment he is saved. At that moment, he is baptized (immersed) into Jesus Christ and fully identified with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. The believer is completely IN CHRIST, and fully identified with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection.

Although Romans 6 is speaking of real baptism (Spirit baptism) and not ritual baptism, and although there is no water in Romans 6, yet water baptism is a picture of these wonderful truths. Water baptism portrays what happened to the believer the moment he was saved. Water baptism pictures the believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection (compare also Col. 2:12). It should be obvious that sprinkling or pouring is not a fitting portrayal of burial. When a person is buried, he is totally immersed or placed in a tomb or under the ground. When we bury someone, we do not sprinkle some dirt on him or pour a little dirt on him. No, we place him totally in the grave with dirt all around him (or entirely in a tomb so that his body is totally enclosed).



**Conclusion:** The meaning of the Greek term, its usage in the New Testament, its usage in Greek writings, and the symbolic significance of water baptism, all argue clearly and conclusively for the mode of immersion.