

Meaning and Mode of Baptism

Dr. Richard Pratt, Third Mill

Question

In his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem presents some rather compelling arguments regarding the mode and meaning of baptism. How would you respond to these?

Mode: "The practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out in one way: the person being baptized was immersed or put completely under the water and then brought back up again" (see pp. 967-969). In the footnote, he also makes a compelling argument against Berkof's understanding of Greek meaning here.

Meaning: An intrinsic difference between the old and new covenants is the physical versus the spiritual nature of the two. Grudem cites six or seven examples of this (p. 977).

Also, even if proper mode in the New Testament was immersion, does this mean that we have to do it this way today? How far can we legitimately deviate? I mean, they certainly didn't use shot glasses, grape juice, and cracker bits at the Last Supper...

Answer

Grudem presents three main arguments for immersion as the biblical mode of baptism:

"Baptizo means 'to plunge, dip, immerse.'"

There is no single instance in the New Testament in which it is stated that baptism took place by immersion. This should incline us away from dogmatic assertions that it must be done by immersion. Certainly "immerse" is within the semantic range of the Greek word *baptizo*. The real question is: How broad is *baptizo*'s semantic range?

In fact, no example in the New Testament *requires* the meaning "immerse." All could be explained by the word "wash," which appears to be the primary meaning of *baptizo* in the New Testament. Regarding John's baptism (from which Grudem frequently argues), "the basic conception is still that of a cleansing bath" (Kittle, *TDNT*, vol. 1, p. 537). Immersion is not required for a bath. The picture could just as well be one of wading, or of pouring, or of a combination of modes.

Moreover, even if it could be demonstrated that people were baptized standing waist-deep in water, it still would not prove that this was essential to the baptism. It could just as well have been the case that John poured water over their heads while they stood in the water, and that the pouring was the essential element in John's mind. It is speculation either way, and thus not grounds for dogmatism.

"'Immerse' is appropriate and probably required for the word in several New Testament passages."

Not true - it's frequently appropriate but never required (see above). Grudem also appeals to prepositions such as *en* and *ek* to prove his point here. The problem is that these prepositions have far broader semantic ranges than Grudem lists. For one thing, *en* does not always refer to location - it can also refer to means or instrumentality (e.g. "John baptized people with or by means of the Jordan River, i.e. with its water").

Consider also the example of Mark 1:5,10 to which Grudem appeals. There, the preposition *en* refers to the location where the baptism took place, not to the mode of baptism. A baptism may take place "in" the water

without requiring one to be submerged in the water (to this end note that Mark does not say that people were baptized *hupo* or "under" the water). Ankle-deep is in the water, and it makes sense to stand in the water even if the means of baptism is pouring or sprinkling (easier to reach the water, no containers to refill, etc.). *Ek* would be a proper pronoun to use to describe leaving the location where such a baptism took place.

Only immersion symbolizes burial with Christ.

The symbolism of association/burial with an atonement has its roots in the Old Testament sacrificial system. In the Old Testament, one outward means by which the people visibly participated in the death of the sacrificial animal was by the sprinkling of the animal's blood on the people (e.g. Exod. 24:8), or even simply dabbing it on the priest's ear, toe, and thumb (e.g. Exod. 29:20). In no instance was anyone ever immersed in blood. Of course, this does not prove that baptism can't be by immersion, and it is not to say that immersing someone doesn't effectively demonstrate burial and raising. The point is simply that this is not the only way to make such an association, and that it was not the way the association was made in the Old Testament.

In addressing the question of the meaning of baptism, I must confess that I do not have a copy of Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. Rather, I have in front of me the "reduced" version of Grudem's systematic theology: *Bible Doctrine*. As a result, the arguments are somewhat shorter and the examples somewhat fewer. Still, I think I have a good idea of what he must have said in your text.

First and foremost, Grudem appears to mistake the old and new covenants for different covenants, when in fact they are one and the same (one covenant of grace under various administrations, etc.; cf. WCF 7.5). As we learn in Hebrews 6:13-20, the covenant which Christ mediates is the Abrahamic covenant. It is a "renewed" covenant, not a "brand new" or "replacement" covenant. Because it is the same covenant, we ought to expect significant continuity across different administrations (such as was always the case with every Old Testament administrative change).

Second, Grudem's examples of differences between the covenant administrations in various portions of *Bible Doctrine* are simply incorrect. Take for instance his insistence that the children of believers are not members of the church. Paul refutes this error in 1 Corinthians when he says on the one hand that the children of believers are "holy" (*hagios*; 1 Cor. 7:14), and on the other hand that the church is composed of all those who are "sanctified" (*hagiazō*) and "saints" (*hagios*; 1 Cor. 1:2). The children of believers are *hagios*, which makes them part of the church.

Or consider his example that Old Testament saints offered things to God on the altar, while New Testament saints offer God "spiritual sacrifices." This is all well and good, except that the Old Testament saints also offered God "spiritual sacrifices" (cf. Ps. 51:17), and the New Testament saints offer physical things in sacrifice (e.g. "sharing" in Heb. 13:15) as well as depend upon the actual, physical sacrifice of Christ on the cross for their sufficient atonement. Even now in heaven Christ continually pleads his shed blood on our behalf in order to maintain our salvation (Heb. 7:25; 9:11-15). And when there was still an altar, early Christians felt free to use that too (Acts 21:26). These are points of continuity between the administrations of the covenant, not points of difference.

Without getting into every detail Grudem offers, suffice it to say that from my perspective he skews the data too much in order to support his arguments. As a result, I think his ultimate conclusions are flawed.

You also wondered how closely we need to adhere to biblical modes, citing our modern observance of the Lord's Supper as an example of a clearly different mode from that which Jesus instituted. Personally, I think we ought to stick more closely to biblical mode than we often do (e.g. I think we should use wine in the Lord's Supper). But we also need to be careful not to confuse circumstances that accompanied mode with mode itself. Our dogmatism on mode ought not to be greater than our certainty about these distinctions. I believe the New Testament does not demonstrate any singular mode for baptism. Certainly I believe that immersion is one good option, but I think good cases can be made for pouring and sprinkling too.