

Is dipping completely into water the only permissible form of baptism?

The references to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan and the Ethiopian by Philip in water alongside the highway (Ac 8:36-39) are not decisive. If phrases like "into the water" and "out of the water" prove that they were immersed, they prove too much, for then both John the Baptist and Philip would have been immersed too! A picture of the baptism of Jesus by John in the Roman catacombs shows Jesus standing in the water up to His waist. That would have been all that was necessary.

So is it true that the Greek verb *baptizw* and its two related nouns cannot mean anything but submersion? The Greek verb *bapto* (*bavptw*) did mean dip. However, the verb connected with it, *baptizo* (*baptivzw*) is a different verb. Its usage must be determined by the contexts in which it is used, specifically in the New Testament. It cannot mean "submerge" in a number of passages.

Consider the following: Mark 10:38-39 "Jesus answered them, 'You do not realise what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am drinking or be baptised with the baptism with which I am being baptised?' 'We can,' they told Him. 'You will drink the cup that I am drinking,' Jesus told them, 'and be baptised with the baptism with which I am being baptised.'" Luke 12:50 "I must be baptised with a baptism, and how I am troubled until it is done!" Comment Jesus' death on the cross was not an immersion. There was no literal submersion in blood or other fluid. The blood that came from his hands and side would not have been enough to drench His whole body, and even if it had covered Him completely, His body could not have been immersed in blood. There would have had to be a container full of it to do that. The water and blood that came from His side after His death when the soldier pierced His side would not have immersed the parts of His body above His side.

Luke 11 :37-38 "During the time that Jesus spoke, a Pharisee invited Him to eat at his home. So He went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee was astonished to see that He did not wash (literally "baptise") before the meal. Comment Greek had separate words for "have a bath" (*louvw*) and wash hands, or wash feet (*nivptw*). In this passage the Greek for "baptise" refers to the Jewish practice of washing hands .and feet before a meal. These Jewish ritual washings were not in a bath, and not full submersions. Religious cleansings were often sprinklings (Compare Hb 9:13 "For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer that are sprinkled on people who have been defiled make them holy, so that their bodies are clean, how much more will the blood of Christ, who, through the eternal Spirit, has offered Himself without blemish to God, make our consciences clean from dead works, so that we may serve the living God?)." "

Mark 7:3-4 "Now the Pharisees, like all other Jews, do not eat without washing their hands up to the wrist - to follow the tradition of their fathers. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat without first washing (*antivzwntai*, variant reading: *baptivzwntai*); and there are many other rules they have been taught to follow, such as the washings (*baptismouvç*) of cups, huge wine jars, brass pots, and dining couches." (A few of the older manuscripts omit "and dining couches"). Comment: Here the noun *baptismos* (*baptismovç*) is the regular one for forms of Jewish ceremonial washing. The noun for the baptism of John the Baptist and Christian baptism is a different noun, *baptisma* (*bavptisma*). Both are derived from the same verb *baptizo*. Jewish ceremonial washings did not involve complete submersion. In this passage the reference to huge wine jars, brass pots and dining couches (in the variant reading, which, even if not original, indicates that Greek copyists of manuscripts saw no difficulty in applying the word to them) indicates that complete submersion was no possible. Even today a normal kitchen would not provide a sink large enough to completely submerge such items.

1 Cor 10:1-4 "I want you to know, fellow Christians, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea. They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food, and they all drank the same spiritual drink." So they all baptised themselves (*ejbaptivsanto*) into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.) Comment. By this "baptism" in the cloud and in the sea they were all united with Moses. It is foolish to insist on the meaning "immerse" or "submerge" in this passage. The only people immersed in the Red Sea were the Egyptians, and no one wants to follow their example! As everyone knows, the Israelites crossed the sea on dry land. The word is, in any case, not used in a strict literal sense here. The Israelites were brought into a close religious association with their leader, Moses, by means of the cloud and the sea at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea. However, the language of this passage deliberately draws a parallel between Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper and what the believers of the Old Testament had. They ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. They, too, had a kind of baptism. Strictly, the

parallel to baptism in the Old Testament was circumcision, and in Colossians 2: 11-12 Christian baptism is referred to figuratively as a circumcision of Christ. If Paul had not wanted infants of eight days baptised, he would have added that when making this comparison.

Hebrews 6: 1-2 “Let us leave behind the elementary teaching about Christ, and let us move on towards maturity. Let us not lay again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith in God, of teaching about ceremonial washings (baptismw'n), of laying on of hands, of the resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment” Comment: The translation “baptisms” here is wrong. If the reference had been to Christian baptism, the word would have been *baptismavtwn* from the Greek word *baptisma*. However, this word used for the baptism of John the Baptist and Christian baptism is never used in the plural, and the word here is plural. The New Testament knows of only one baptism (Eph 4:5), with water and the Spirit in the same action (Joh 3:5, Titus 3:5). It refers to Jewish ritual cleansing of the body and off utensils used for eating and drinking (as in Mark 7:4 and also Hebrews 9:10). This comes from the other noun *baptismovs*, which refers to Jewish ceremonial washings.

The meaning of words is determined by the context in which they are used. These passages above indicate that the verb baptizo in the New Testament cannot always be understood of complete submersion.

Romans 6:1-4, and Colossians 2:12 should not be used as defences of immersion. “buried with Christ” has nothing to be with submersion. Paul’s point is the important one that through baptism people were joined to Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection by baptism. Baptists and Pentecostals usually deny that this really takes place, because they view baptism merely as a symbolic act by human beings, in which nothing is really done to them.

However, we too recognise immersion as a valid mode of baptism, alongside of pouring, sprinkling, and washing. The point is not the amount of water, but whether it applies to infants as well as to adults, and whether it is merely a human act in which believers symbolise what has already happened in them, or whether it is an act of God, which bestows forgiveness, life, and salvation. The problem is that proponents of “believers’ baptism” understand faith as a conscious decision, a work of man, not simply receiving God’s gracious gift.

What about people who have themselves baptised again? This is nothing short of heresy, because a person who is baptised again after he has been baptised as an infant is really saying that when he was baptised as an infant he received nothing at all, no forgiveness, no life and salvation, no re-birth, no gift of the Holy Spirit, no union with Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, no incorporation into Christ’s body, the church, and, worst of all, no placing of the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit on him. To be baptised all over again denies that these took place in infant baptism. That, I say again, is heresy, and completely denies what the New Testament has to say about baptism.