

# Debate on The Mode of Baptism

**David N. Landon**  
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and

**Keith Sharp**  
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## Propositions

The only baptism authorized by Jesus Christ is immersion.

Affirmed: \_\_\_\_\_ (Keith Sharp)

Denied: \_\_\_\_\_ (David N. Landon)

Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person as well as by dipping of the person into water.

Affirmed: \_\_\_\_\_ (David N. Landon)

Denied: \_\_\_\_\_ (Keith Sharp)

## Affirmative Keith Sharp

This debate is completely unique of any in which I have ever engaged. The entire discussion is over the definition of a single Bible word - “baptism.” This is my twelfth written debate with my Presbyterian friend David N. Landon and our third and final discussion of the subject of baptism. I affirm **“The only baptism authorized by Jesus Christ is immersion.”**

In reality I contend that the noun “baptism” means “immersion.” The word “immersion” means “baptism in which the whole body of the person is submerged in the water” (**Webster’s**, 957). If this is the meaning of the word “baptism,” the act of baptism is specific rather than generic. It would make no more sense to speak of baptism by sprinkling or pouring than it would to speak of flying by walking or running. In each case the action is specified.

### Word Studies

Since we are discussing the meaning of a Bible word, we will begin by citing the definitions of the terms in question, the noun “baptism” and its corresponding verb “baptize,” given in standard biblical word studies. Thayer defines “*baptisma*” (Greek word transliterated “baptism”) as “*immersion, submersion*” (94). He renders “*baptizo*” (Greek for “baptize”) as “**I. 1.** prop. *to dip repeatedly, to immerge, submerge.... 2. to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water....* (Ibid). The Greek word “*bapto*” is the root of these words. Thayer defines this term as “**a. to dip, dip in, immerse.... b. to dip into dye, to dye, color**” (95). Vine defines baptism as “consisting of the processes of immersion, submersion, and emergence (from *bapto*, to dip)” (1:96). He defines “baptize” as “primarily a frequentative form of *bapto*, to dip, was used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment, or the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another....” (1:97). Arndt and Gingrich choose to leave “*Baptisma*” as the transliterated “*baptism*” (132). They define “*Baptizo*” as “*dip, immerse, mid. dip oneself, wash*” (131) and the root term “*Bapto*” as “*dip, dip in*” (Ibid). Beasley-Murray states that “*bapto*” means “dip” and that “*baptizo*” denotes “dip, immerse, submerge, baptize” (**DNTT**, 1:144). He simply renders “*baptisma*” as “baptism” (Ibid). Oepke defines the root term “*Bapto*” as “to dip in or under” (**TDNT**, 1:529). He renders “*Baptizo*” as “to immerse”(530) and “*Baptisma*” as “Immersion” (545). Zodhiates defines “*baptizo*” as “to dip. Immerse, submerge for a religious purpose, to overwhelm, saturate, baptize” (309). Mounce defines “*baptizo*” as “pr. *to dip, immerse to cleanse or purify by washing; to administer the rite of baptism, to baptize*” (1104-5), he renders “*baptisma*” as “*immersion; baptism, ordinance of baptism,*” and he translates “*bapto*” by “*to dip ... to dye*” (1105). In summary, when the lexicographers choose to define the terms in question rather than transliterate them, they define the root term “*bapto*” as “to dip, dip in, dip under, immerse,” they define the noun “baptism” as “immersion, submersion, and emergence,” and they render the verb “baptize” as “to dip repeatedly, to immerge, submerge, to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water, to dip, immerse, overwhelm, saturate, to cleanse, to purify by washing, submerge for a religious purpose.” Thus, scholarship in New Testament Greek from Thayer (1886) to Mounce (2006) to which I have recourse unanimously supports my proposition.

## **Biblical Usage**

Lexicographers determine the meanings of words by examining their usage in context. They study the words “*bapto*,” “*baptizo*,” and “*baptisma*” in secular Greek literature from Classical times through the first century A.D., in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the) Old Testament, and in the New Testament. I will limit this study of the terms to their New Testament usage for three reasons: we are limited in space, the average reader can only check the accuracy of New Testament references, and, most importantly, ultimately, the meaning of a biblical word is determined by biblical usage.

## **Circumstantial Evidence**

“Circumstantial evidence,” “proof of facts offered as evidence from which other facts are to be inferred (contrasted with *direct evidence*)” (**Webster’s**. 376), may not be conclusive by itself, but is cumulative. As circumstances in favor of a conclusion mount, the probability of that conclusion being correct increases.

The Greek word “*baptizo*” is translated “wash” in Mark 7:4 in reference to the ritual baths of the Pharisees. The Mosaic covenant demanded a washing of the entire body when a Jew was legally unclean (Leviticus 15:16).

John chose to baptize in the Jordan River in “Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there”(John 3:23). “Much water” was needed only if baptism is immersion.

After being baptized by John in Jordan, Jesus came “up out of the water” (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:9-10). Of course this implies He went down into the water, which would have been totally unnecessary if baptism is sprinkling or pouring.

When Philip baptized the eunuch of Ethiopia, “they came to some water,” “they both went down into the water,” the preacher baptized the treasurer, then “they came up out of the water” (Acts 8:36-39). This is perfectly logical if baptism is immersion but not if it is sprinkling or pouring. Surely the treasurer of the nation of Ethiopia would have had sufficient water with him in his chariot for sprinkling or pouring. Why did a man of such dignity go “down into the water” if baptism is anything other than immersion? Why don’t Presbyterian ministers and those whom they sprinkle water upon go down into the water when they administer what they call baptism?

## **Direct Evidence**

The apostle Paul reminded the Roman brethren, “Therefore we were buried with him through baptism” (Romans 6:4; cf. Colossians 2:12). Baptism is figuratively a burial. What action would symbolize a burial: sprinkling, pouring, or immersion?

In fact it symbolizes the fact we “were also raised with him” (Colossians 2:12). What action would symbolize a burial and resurrection: sprinkling, pouring, or immersion?

Thus, the fact baptism is immersion has great spiritual significance. When we are baptized we symbolically are buried and raised with Christ, demonstrating our faith in his death, burial, and resurrection as the basis of our salvation. Sprinkling and pouring totally miss the point.

### Hostile Witnesses

Great Presbyterian scholars recognize the force of these two passages on the mode of baptism.

Dr. James MacKnight, eighteenth century Moderator of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), commented on Romans six:

*... the baptized person is buried under the water, as one put to death with Christ on account of sin....Moreover, in the same rite the baptized person being raised up out of the water, after being washed (84).*

Dr. Albert Barnes (Presbyterian) wrote:

*It is altogether probable that the apostle in this place had allusion to the custom of baptizing by immersion. This cannot, indeed, be proved, so as to be liable to no objection; but I presume that this is the idea which would strike the great mass of unprejudiced readers. But while this is admitted, it is also certain that his main scope and intention was not to describe the mode of baptism; nor to affirm that that mode was to be universal*

Indeed, that Romans 6:4 refers to immersion “is the idea which would strike the great mass of unprejudiced readers” (the crucial term being “unprejudiced”). Nothing can be so proved as not to be liable to some objecting. No one claims the mode of baptism was the apostle’s primary point, but he certainly alludes to it. If baptism is being buried with Christ and raised with Him, and it is, then the mode is certainly universal. And, if “baptism” includes sprinkling or pouring, Presbyterians must prove it and show how this harmonizes with the fact it is a burial.

Without even examining the many nonbiblical sources that cause lexicographers to unanimously agree that baptism is immersion, it is overwhelmingly apparent from the New Testament alone that this is indeed its meaning.

### Conclusion

The testimony from lexicons and dictionaries along with the hostile witness of great Presbyterian scholars unite with the inspired witness of the Scriptures, circumstantial and direct, to sustain the proposition: “**The only baptism authorized by Jesus Christ is immersion.**” In fact, the only action that can even correctly be called “baptism” is immersion. One might as well speak of seeing by hearing or feeling or refer to singing by playing or humming as to speak of baptism by sprinkling or pouring. The action of baptism is specific, and it is immersion.

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**Negative**  
**David N. Landon**

Keith, in his affirmative, has violated one of the common sense rules of debate, namely, never to do the same things you have charged upon your opponent. In our debate on free will Keith noted that I had used up 604 words before ever citing one text of Scripture. Well, Keith, in his affirmative on the mode of baptism, has written 679 words before finally reaching a verse. In the debate on free will I demonstrated that the subject itself demanded an examination of the distinctions between ability, responsibility, liberty, and necessity. But what need do we have of dictionaries and lexicons to determine the meaning of a biblical word? Especially when Keith himself, after quoting all his lexicographers, admits that ultimately, “the meaning of a biblical word is determined by biblical usage.” Besides, dictionaries and lexicons are frequently found to contradict each other. “No learned man,” wrote Alexander Campbell, “will ever rest his faith upon dictionaries.” Keith did not help his cause when, purposing to define baptism, gave us Webster's definition for “immersion.” My Webster gives the following as a definition of baptism: “The application of water by sprinkling or immersion to a person.” Concerning lexicons, Campbell writes, “The lexicons frequently contradict each other on various points.” Some lexicographers contradict themselves in the same book. Keith quotes Thayer in defense of immersion, yet in the same book Thayer writes, “The theory that baptizo expresses a definite act, ‘mode and nothing but mode,’ is shown to be pitifully helpless when applied to all the Greek literature.” The biggest problem with lexicographers is their preoccupation with classic Greek. Keith admits that “They (lexicographers) study the words baptizo, baptisma in secular Greek literature from Classical times ... “ The problem is with the considerable number of words that have taken on new meanings when brought over into the New Testament. W.A. Makay, in his book Immersion and Immersionists has listed several examples. Most notable is the word “*deipnon*,” which in classic Greek meant “a feast,” but emphatically does not mean that when referring to the Lord's Supper. Baptism is another such word.

Keith's **hostile witnesses** are in the same category as his dictionaries and lexicons. For my part I will accept the testimony from any number of such witnesses as soon as Keith is willing to believe the testimony of an equal number of such witnesses that I can produce. But consider Keith's witnesses. Barnes, on the very next page of the commentary cited, shows that the apostle's argument for holiness in believers is built, not upon the mode of baptism, but upon the fact of baptism. And MacKnight, in the same book Keith cites, calls baptism the “Christian Circumcision.” (Commentary on Colossians 2:12). Does Keith accept that baptism is the new covenant equivalent of circumcision? A brief comment on Keith's remark on the quotation by Barnes,- Keith seems to imply that to reject immersion after even a casual reading of Romans ch. 6 is to be prejudiced in favor of our own views. Keith misses the point. Presbyterians are not prejudiced against the possibility that Romans 6 might teach the validity of immersion. We are prejudiced against the idea that Romans 6 teaches that immersion is the only valid mode. This, according to Keith's proposition, is what he is required to prove, and the 6th chapter of Romans will never afford him what he requires. Besides, as the 17th century minister Robert Baillie demonstrated, pouring or sprinkling is equally able to signify burial and resurrection; the subject in either case is still under the water. Baillie correctly asks why a small amount of water may not work as well as a larger. In the Lord's supper, small amount of bread and wine is able to signify

our full communion with the whole body and the whole blood of Christ. And in circumcision, a cutting off of a small portion of skin still signified the cutting off of the whole body of sin.

The six verses Keith gives under the heading **Circumstantial Evidence** fare no better than the above. Not one of these verses prove what Keith has set out to defend, that the only valid baptism is immersion. If that is the case, there is no cumulative evidence. Six times zero is still zero.

The washings described in Mark 7:4 were almost certainly performed with a cupped hand, drawing water from a laver or basin, and pouring that water over the other hand. (See 2 Kings 3:11). If the washing described in Mark 7:4 is a total immersion, then the washing of tables, mentioned in the same verse, was also by immersion.

Concerning John's baptizing in Aenon, because there was "much water" there does not prove immersion, much less immersion only. There was need of much water for the large crowds. Also, the word Aenon, is a word that means a place of springs (Mackay, pg 36). The phrase "much water" (*polla hudata*) also means many waters, or many fountains, and is so rendered in 2 Chronicles 32:2-4 and in Revelation 1:15; 14:2; and 17:1.

The Greek preposition *apo* (out of) in Matthew 3:16 and Mark 1:9-10 can also be translated by the word *from*, and in most cases in Scripture is so translated. According to Duane Spencer, "John and Jesus could have stood ankle deep in water while the baptizer poured water upon the head of our Lord. This, by the way, is the way the scene is represented in the oldest paintings of baptism, those found in the catacombs of Rome."

I am glad Keith appeals to logic when considering Acts 8:36-39, for this verse records that both Philip and the eunuch went to the water, and both came up from the water. Were they both then immersed?

It would seem that Keith, under his heading **Direct Evidence**, would cite the strongest texts, but Romans six, at best, only teaches that immersion may be a fit emblem to signify burial. But baptism also symbolizes blood being sprinkled on our conscience. And, in fact, this is what is taught in Hebrews 10:22. The thing signified (sprinkling of blood) and the sign (washing of water) are linked together. If a washing that symbolizes burial can only be by immersion, then a washing that symbolizes the sprinkling of blood can only be by sprinkling.

Our chief concern with Keith's proposition is with the word *only*. According to this proposition, all those who have been baptized by pouring or sprinkling have not been baptized at all. They cannot be saved then, for Keith, in our debate on the purpose of baptism, wrote the following, - "... water baptism is essential to the justification, sanctification, and salvation of alien sinners." And further, "Christ has made baptism as much a condition of salvation as belief." Clearly then, immersion is necessary for salvation, for, according to Keith, immersion is the only valid baptism. We Presbyterians have but one question for Keith. In what sense does Scripture make immersion necessary for salvation? For, as the 17th century apologist W. Chillingworth pointed out, there are two senses in which scripture may make a thing necessary. In the first sense

a thing may be so necessary that for its sake Scripture was written in order to reveal it. In the second sense a thing may be necessary only because it has been revealed. Repentance from dead works and faith in Christ are doctrines of the first sort. That Paul left his cloak at Troas (to use Chillingworth's example) is a doctrine of the second sense. Scripture was written to make known to us the absolute necessity of repentance and faith. We cannot be saved without them. But one may be saved without believing that Paul left his cloak at Troas. But if the matter of Paul's cloak is sufficiently revealed to one, and they deny the same, it is all one with calling God a liar; they have denied the faith, they cannot be saved. In which category does Keith place the doctrine of immersion only? Surely in the first sense, for I have quoted him as saying that baptism is as necessary as belief. Here is the dilemma: If Keith confesses immersion to be as necessary for salvation as faith, he represents God as being uncharitable in giving such scant notice of so vital a doctrine. The necessity of repentance and faith are so clear that there is no disagreement amongst Christians. Their necessity is clearly taught on virtually every page of Scripture. But of the necessity of immersion there is nothing but controversy. We are left every one of us to gather this doctrine from dictionaries, lexicons, hostile witnesses, and our differing abilities to assess the strength of cumulative evidence. If, on the other hand, Keith says this doctrine is necessary in the second sense, he makes himself uncharitable in declaring that to be necessary for salvation that God hasn't made necessary.

We conclude, pouring and sprinkling are valid forms of baptism.

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Baille, Robert, **Anabaptism.**  
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## Response Keith Sharp

My Friend once again skillfully tries to dismantle the proof of a true proposition, i.e., **“The only baptism authorized by Jesus Christ is immersion.”**

His counterattack on the witness of lexicons is “whistling past the graveyard.” His clever comment on word count ignores the fact that we agree this debate is unique among all those we have conducted; it deals with the definition of a word. My comment in the affirmative is still true, “To determine the meaning of an English word, we consult an English dictionary. To determine the meaning of a New Testament Greek word in English, we consult a Greek lexicon.” Thus, I searched every commonly recognized Greek lexicon to which I have recourse. Dave has yet to cite one which agrees with him. No wonder he denigrates their scholarship.

I never claimed that “*baptizo*” refers to “nothing but mode,” but Thayer and I agree it does denote mode, namely “*immersion, submersion.*”

His charge that lexicographers rely too heavily on classical usage of Greek is blatantly false. Every lexicon recognizes the difference between the classical Greek used by such writers as Aristotle and the *koine* (common) Greek of the New Testament. The ten volume **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament** not only distinguishes between classical and biblical usage, but distinguishes between Old Testament Septuagint Greek and New Testament Greek, and explores every usage of the word in the Bible to arrive at its definitions. Even some one volume works, such as Thayer/Grimm and Arndt and Gingrich/Bauer, characteristically cite every New Testament use of a Greek word so the student can check for himself.

I employed Webster to define an English word, “immersion.” Dave taunts me on Webster’s definition of a Bible word, “baptism.” Don’t use an English dictionary to define a Bible word. Webster simply gives the common usage of English in our day. The vast majority of people, including my friend, misuse the term.

When Dave cites uninspired sources, he is relying on controversialists who have a “dog in the fight.” I simply cite the generally recognized, scholarly authorities who often define biblical words in such a way as to undermine the doctrines of their own denominational creeds.

I don’t care what Alexander Campbell said. I’m a Christian, not a “Campbellite.” And not one lexicon contradicted any others on the definition of baptism.

My friend still doesn’t understand the use of “hostile witnesses.” The very fact they agree with Dave on baptism makes their agreement with me on passages that deal with the meaning of the word “baptism” that much more significant. As scholars, their comments on Scripture transcended their own theology.

The Scriptures nowhere teach that baptism represents the sprinkling of the blood of Christ. When one is baptized in water, the blood is figuratively sprinkled on the heart, in that forgiveness of sins occurs (Hebrews 10:22; 9:13-14).

What sprinkling **might** represent is not the question. The Scriptures teach that baptism is a burial (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). Jesus was buried under the ground (Matthew 12:40). We are buried under the water. Sprinkling a few clods of dirt over Jesus’ body would not have placed Him in “the heart of the earth,” and sprinkling or pouring a little water on one’s head doesn’t bury him in water.

I acknowledged circumstantial evidence is not conclusive by itself. But, “As circumstances in favor of a conclusion mount, the probability of that conclusion being correct

increases.”

2 Kings 3:11 is a reference to washing hands. They did not sprinkle a little water on their hands; the hands were “washed.” In the Jewish washings, the unclean man had to “wash all his body in water”(Leviticus 15:16). The entire table (“couch,” **NKJV**) was washed (Mark 7:4). So much for sprinkling or pouring.

Concerning Aenon, Professor J.W. McGarvey, President of the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky in the nineteenth century, who toured the Bible lands and wrote a geography of them, remarked, “A perennial stream, with copious springs all along its course, furnishes, even in the longest, driest summers, the ‘much water’ required for baptism” (134).

There is no essential difference between “out of” and “from” in Matthew 3:16 and Mark 1:9-10. Why step into water of any depth if John was only sprinkling or pouring water on Jesus?

Why did both Philip and the eunuch go down into the water if Philip only sprinkled water on his head?

Jesus was buried by being placed “in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). Baptism is a likeness of Jesus’ death (Romans 6:4,17; Colossians 2:12). In baptism we are buried in the heart of the water.

If my friend will produce one passage that proves baptism can be sprinkling or pouring, I will remove the “only” from the proposition.

Of course immersion is necessary to salvation. Scripture plainly reveals baptism is a burial as Jesus was buried (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). The Lord plainly states the necessity of baptism. “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (The Lord Jesus Christ, Mark 16:16). “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (The Apostle Peter, Acts 2:38). “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” (The Apostle Paul, Romans 6:3) How many times must the Scriptures plainly declare it before my friend believes it? Is that uncharitable? Tell the Lord Jesus Christ, the apostle Peter, Ananias, and the apostle Paul.

All the evidence - lexicographers, circumstantial evidence from Scripture, and direct evidence from Scripture - points to the same conclusion: “**The only baptism authorized by Jesus Christ is immersion.**”

### Work Cited

McGarvey, J.W., **Fourfold Gospel.**

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**Affirmative**  
**David N. Landon**

Proposition: Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person as well as by dipping of the person into water.

The Presbyterian position on the mode of baptism actually goes beyond our proposition in that we hold not merely that pouring and sprinkling are acceptable modes of baptism, but that they are to be preferred. They alone can be demonstrated to be scriptural, while not one text supports immersion. This may be proved from the nature of the sacrament, from the word baptism itself, and from several texts of scripture.

First, we hold that the ordinance of baptism sets forth the Spirit's work in applying "the blood of sprinkling" to the soul, just as the Lord's supper sets forth Christ's work in giving His body and blood for His people. The Spirit's work in redemption is never illustrated by the figures of immersion or dipping. His work is constantly symbolized by the figures of pouring or sprinkling. This is true in the Old Testament where the work of the Spirit is predicted by such language as "So shall he sprinkle many nations," Isaiah 52:15. Or Ezekiel, when writing of the cleansing that was to come under the ministry of the gospel, says "I will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean," Ezekiel 36:25. Joel writes, "And it shall come to pass afterwards, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh," Joel 2:28. In Isaiah 44:3 there is a very clear parallel between the words Spirit and water; "I will pour water," and "I will pour out my Spirit." Everywhere in Scripture we find references to The Spirit coming down upon the recipient, but not one instance of a person being immersed or dipped into the Spirit. It is evident that the mode of baptism that best represents the Spirit's work in salvation is sprinkling or pouring.

The larger part of this discussion will necessarily be about the meaning of the word baptism itself. In fact, for most immersionists it is the primary, if not the only, argument presented. It is our position that the word baptism in all cases refers to a condition or benefit conferred upon the recipient that is accomplished irrespective of the mode by which it is performed. The word baptism, when used in Scripture, means ceremonial cleansing or purification by water and nothing more. The command to baptize is always general, and never specific, as regards mode. That this is the case is clear from the Great Commission itself as found in Matthew 28:19, 20. There are four parts to this command given in the Commission: to go, disciple, baptize, and teach. Concerning three of these it is evident that the word of instruction is general concerning the mode by which it may be carried out. There is no specific command given directing the mode of our going, making disciples, or teaching. Our going may be by foot, by car, or by air. Our making disciples and teaching may likewise be performed in various ways and still fulfill the requirements of the command. Would it not be only natural to assume that the command to baptize should also be general, and that sprinkling and pouring might be equally legitimate modes of baptism?

This debate centers on the meaning of the Greek word *baptizo*. It has long been argued by immersionists that the word itself mean to immerse, and nothing but immerse. Examples are usually adduced of classic Greek writers such as Homer or Hippocrates in whose writings the word *baptizo* always means to immerse. The question to be decided however, is whether this word, as it is used in the Scriptures, means to immerse, and nothing but immerse. It is noteworthy

that when the Greek Scriptures were translated into Latin the Greek word *baptizo* was not rendered by the Latin *immergo* which would mean immerse. Rather the word was left in its original form. Therefore the only way to determine its meaning is to consider its use in Scripture. This topic is further complicated when it is considered that none of the words in question (*baptizo*, *immergo*, and *bapto*) necessarily involve, nor even imply the use of water. All sorts of substances were used when immersing, dipping, or sprinkling a person. We read of several different materials being employed in connection with the above actions, materials as diverse as blood, dust, oil, honeycomb, and dye. Given the fact that water is fundamental to the very idea of baptism it is certainly strange that none of the words connected with this ordinance contain water. But the fact that Scripture uses the word baptism to signify ceremonial cleansing then all is clear, for ceremonial cleansing in the Bible was always by water. One remarkable proof of this is found in how the translators of the Hebrew Old Testament, in the Greek Testament known as the Septuagint, translated the Hebrew word *tawbal*, which in the Hebrew Old Testament always meant to dip or to plunge. This word is used sixteen times in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is translated by the Greek word *baptizo* but one time. Fourteen times it is translated *bapto*. In these instances there was no religious or ritual cleansing involved. In one verse it is translated by the word *moluno*, which means to defile. This was when Joseph's brothers covered their crime by dipping his coat in the blood of an animal. According to Edmund Fairfield the one case where *tawbal* is translated *baptizo* is when Naaman was washed in order to remove his leprosy. Leprosy was a disease that in the Old Testament portrayed or signified sin. Clearly it is significant that in the one case where there was a ritualistic cleansing that signified purification from sin the Seventy translate *tawbal* not by its usual word *bapto*, but by *baptizo*, to cleanse.

There is another interesting passage in the Septuagint that Fairfield shows is almost conclusive of the controversy. It is Ecclesiasticus 34:25, "He that is purified (*baptizomenos*) from a dead body, and touches it again, what does his cleansing profit him?" As Fairfield observes, the writer of this book would be familiar with the law of Moses regarding ceremonial cleansing. That law is found in Numbers 19:16-19. It provided that the ashes of a burnt heifer be placed in a vessel with running water, and then sprinkled with hyssop upon the unclean person. Fairfield concludes, "The entire process of cleansing from a dead body, to which the son of Sirach refers, was by sprinkling, and yet he calls it baptism." The entire ninth chapter of the book of Hebrews clearly makes this same connection between baptism, sprinkling, and cleansing. In verse ten we read of "divers baptisms," (*baptismois*). That divers immersions doesn't work is evident not only from the history of the practice in the old covenant, but from the immediate context as well. In verses 13 and 14 we read how the "ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctified to the purifying of the flesh," resulting in cleansing the conscience. This one passage ought to determine the whole controversy for the apostle is speaking of a purification by sprinkling, and he calls it *baptism*. The sprinkling of water in baptism is the outward sign of the Spirit's work of sprinkling the blood of Christ on our hearts. This connection between baptism and purifying or cleansing is a theme that is found throughout Scripture beginning with John's baptism in the Jordan. No sooner does he begin baptizing than a discussion arises between the Jews on the question of purifying.

1 Corinthians 10:2 is another text that is difficult to explain by the immersionist theory. Paul tells us that the Israelites were baptized upon dry ground. This passage makes sense only on the supposition that baptism does not refer to mode at all, but instead refers to an effect accomplished, to a change in condition or position resulting from a new identification with the

person being baptized unto.

The baptism of the Spirit is another instance of where the context forbids an immersionist interpretation. We are clearly told that the Spirit was poured out (Acts 2:17); that He was shed forth (verse 33); and that He fell on them (chap. 11:15). There is absolutely no language here that would support immersionism, yet it is called a baptism.

The ceremonial washings of the Jews before eating a meal provide further proof that baptism need not be performed only by immersion. In Luke 11:38 a Pharisee wondered that Jesus had not washed himself (*ebaptisthe*) before eating. In Mark 7:4 we are told that the Jews eat not except they wash (*baptisontai*). These washings were not considered valid unless done by living, that is, running water. Compare these verses with 2 Kings 3:11 where Elisha performed the office of a servant by pouring water on the hands of Elijah.

We conclude that the word baptism does not refer to mode, but to cleansing or purifying.

### **Work Cited**

Fairfield, Edmund B., **Letters on Baptism.**

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## Negative Keith Sharp

The Presbyterian position on the mode of baptism is, “The word baptism, when used in Scripture, means ceremonial cleansing or purification by water and nothing more.” A surface perusal of New Testament uses of the word shows that Presbyterians err in all three parts of their definition. Baptism doesn’t necessarily involve either a ceremony, a cleansing, or water. Jesus and His apostles were baptized with suffering (Matthew 20:22-23; Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50). This was not a ceremony, did not cleanse from sin, and did not involve water. It did however refer figuratively to “calamities and affliction with which one is quite overwhelmed” (Thayer. 94). Yes, these are figurative uses of the term, but the figure is drawn from and consistent with the literal meaning of the term, else it portrays no picture to the mind. If water is inherent in the meaning of the term, why did John specify that he baptized with water? (Matthew 3:11; Mark 10:38; Luke 3:16; cf. Acts 1:4-5)? Presbyterians err in every particular of their definition of the word “baptize.”

Dave boldly asserts, “not one text supports immersion.” Why did he never reference John 3:23; Acts 8:38-39; Romans 6:3-6; or Colossians 2:11-12 in his affirmative?

My friend spends much space answering arguments I didn’t and wouldn’t make for the fact baptism is immersion. His task in his affirmative is to prove his own position, not to disprove mine, especially by fighting a straw man.

Remember this debate is unique among those between Dave and me in that we are discussing the meaning of a biblical word. Dave agrees, for he states, “The larger part of this discussion will necessarily be about the meaning of the word baptism itself.” Again he notes, “This debate centers on the meaning of the Greek word *“baptizo.”* Thus, it seems elementary that my friend would call as witnesses lexicographers who agree with his position that “Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person as well as by dipping of the person into water.” To determine the meaning of an English word, we consult an English dictionary. To determine the meaning of a New Testament Greek word in English, we consult a Greek lexicon. I’m confident my learned friend has access to standard Greek lexicons. Why did he not cite even one that supports his position? The truth is there are none. In my affirmative I cite seven. Every lexicographer agrees with my position, baptism is immersion. And most of these scholars belonged to denominations that agree with the Presbyterian position on baptism! It makes no more sense to speak of baptizing by sprinkling or pouring than it does to speak of flying by running or walking. The action is specified, and it is immersion.

By now I shouldn’t have to remind our readers that, scripturally, there is no such thing as a sacrament. Protestants just swallow and regurgitate Catholic dogma.

Nowhere do the Scriptures state or imply that baptism represents the work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism pictures the work of Christ, specifically, His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-6; Colossians 2:11-12). The Scriptures neither state nor imply that the Spirit is the Person of the Godhead who applies the blood of Christ to our consciences. Christ is our High Priest Who cleanses us with His own blood when we are baptized (Ephesians 5:25-27; Hebrews 3:1; 10:19-22). And Presbyterians deny the real connection between the figurative sprinkling of the blood and the actual baptism in water, that the blood is applied to our hearts when our bodies are washed in water (Romans 6:3; cf. 5:9-10; Hebrews 10:19-22).

Isaiah 52:15 doesn’t refer to the work of the Holy Spirit or to baptism administered by

men but to the work of the Servant of the Lord, Messiah (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12).

Ezekiel 36:25 is part of a context prophesying the restoration of national Israel (verse 24) and is a figurative reference to the cleansing of Numbers 19:16-19.

Dave contends all four parts of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) are generic. He concludes the argument by inquiring, "Would it not be only natural to assume that the command to baptize should also be general...?" A natural assumption is hardly scriptural proof. And that assumption is based on incorrect information. Three of the four elements of the Commission have both generic and specific qualities. The only way (specific) to "make disciples" is to "preach the gospel" (Mark 16:15), the only thing we are to teach (specific) those who become disciples is the commands of the Lord (Matthew 28:20), and the only action (specific) that is truly baptism is immersion.

Curiously, Dave references the classical Greek writers and admits they always use "*baptizo*" to mean immerse. I didn't introduce any classical writers, but I appreciate my friend making an argument for me.

Yes, the Latin translators left "*baptizo*" in its untranslated Greek. How does this help the Presbyterian position?

I don't comprehend why Presbyterians receive comfort from the fact that dipping was done in all kinds of materials. Remember, he asserts, "The word baptism, when used in Scripture, means ceremonial cleansing or purification by water and nothing more." If we remember the word is simply used of dipping or immersion, and allow for figurative uses derived from this literal meaning, we have no problem.

My friend argues, of the Septuagint and Latin translations, "none of the words in question (*baptizo*, *immergo*, and *bapto*) necessarily involve, nor even imply the use of water." I agree, but I fail to see how he can harmonize this with his basic position, "The word baptism, when used in Scripture, means ceremonial cleansing or purification **by water** (emphasis mine - KS) and nothing more."

Dave sees great significance in the fact the Septuagint translators render the Hebrew word "*tawbal*," which means "to dip" by "*bapto*" rather than "*baptizo*." "*Bapto*" is the root word from which "*baptizo*" is derived, and thus, as is always the case, the derived term ("*baptizo*") has the same basic meaning as its root ("*bapto*"). "*Baptizo*" is simply the specialized word, used in Scripture to denote immersion for religious reasons, whereas "*bapto*" is used of dipping for various reasons. Naaman's dipping in Jordan (2 Kings 5:14) was in obedience to a command of God, and so the Septuagint translators used "*baptizo*."

It is incredible that Dave uses Naaman as proof of a generic meaning of baptism. Did Naaman not "**dip**" in the Jordan? Can one be dipped by having water sprinkled or poured on him?

Dave employs a quote from an apocryphal book (Ecclesiasticus 3:4), but the underlying action involved is based on the command from Moses in Numbers 19:16-19. Dave asserts, "The entire process of cleansing from a dead body, to which the son of Sirach refers, was by sprinkling, and yet he calls it baptism." My Bible states, "... on the seventh day he shall purify himself, wash his clothes, and bathe in water; and at evening he shall be clean" (Numbers 19:19).

The usage of "baptisms" (Hebrews 6:2; 9:10) in connection with "the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean" is clear when we remember the Old Testament bath that completed their ceremonial cleansing (Numbers 19:19). The Mosaic cleansing of the flesh included sprinkling with "the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer." The New Testament cleansing of the conscience from sin involves sprinkling (figurative)

of the blood of Christ at the time our bodies are washed in water (Hebrews 9:13-14; 10:22). Yes, “*baptizo*” is the verb used (rather than ‘*bapto*’) when cleansing from sin is involved, but this does not negate the basic meaning of the entire word group - dip, plunge, immerse.

First Corinthians 10:2 certainly doesn’t refer to ceremonial cleansing with water. However, Israel was immersed unto Moses, in that the ground was beneath them, the walls of water were on either side of them, and the pillar of cloud was above (Exodus 14:16,22,24).

Baptism with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; Acts 1:4-5; 11:16) involved no ceremony, cleansing, or water, thus, it doesn’t fit the Presbyterian model, but it meant to “imbue richly with” or “overwhelm” (Thayer. 94), a figurative immersion.

The Jewish washings were based on Numbers 19:16-19 and required water from a running source in which they bathed (verses 17,19). Washing their hands before a meal involved dipping them in the water from a running source. Of course it was cleansing or purification, but it was dipping.

My dear friend David Landon has made a valiant effort to find authority for sprinkling or pouring as baptism in the biblical and extra biblical uses of the Greek terms for “baptize” and “baptism,” but he has failed. One might as well speak of seeing by hearing or feeling or refer to singing by playing or humming as to speak of baptism by sprinkling or pouring.

#### **Work Cited**

Thayer, J.H., **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.**

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## Response David Landon

This paper concludes series of discussions on the purpose, subject, and mode of baptism. Thanks to my friend Keith for a lively and courteous exchange.

The definition I gave of baptism was intended to be one that would be in line with my proposition, and therefore stands as written. Certainly I am aware that the word *baptism*, strictly speaking, admits of a broader definition. I also acknowledged in my affirmative that materials other than water are often used in baptism; materials such as oil, blood, and dye.

I did not admit that classical Greek writers always used "*baptizo*" to mean immerse. What I did say is that some immersionists argue that way. There are literally hundreds of examples in classic Greek literature where "*baptizo*" cannot mean immerse, as Dr. Dale, in his massive work entitled Classic Baptism has made abundantly clear.

It seem elementary to Keith that we should call in our lexicographers as witnesses in this debate. But our debate is not about the meaning of a Greek word primarily. Rather, it is about how that Greek word is used in the New Testament. The constant witness of Scripture is that "*baptizo*" and its cognates refer not at all to mode, but to an effect accomplished by religious cleansing and purification. That explains, to answer Keith's question, the significance of the Latin translators leaving "*baptizo*" in its Greek form. If in fact the word meant immerse, and only immerse, they would have used the word "*immergo*".

Keith accuses Protestants of regurgitating Catholic dogma and yet, at the same time, upbraids us for denying the *real connection* between the sprinkling of the blood and baptism; a distinctive Roman Catholic dogma. By the way, we don't deny the connection, only its absolute necessity. We believe that the Holy Spirit is able to work "when, and where, and how He pleaseth," (WCF 10:3). It is the Spirit who, together with Christ, applies the blood of sprinkling to our consciences, 1 Peter 1:2.

Keith admits that there is a generic quality to three of the commands of the Great Commission, Why doesn't he confess the same for the command to baptize? Could it be because what is common in the commands *go*, *teach*, and *make disciples* is that the generic in the command has, in each case, to do with the *mode of action*? We don't deny the specific dimension in the command to baptize; whatever mode we employ the specific result is the sacramental cleansing of the subject. Keith points out that my "assumption" about this text "is hardly scriptural proof," yet how is it any different from his **Circumstantial Evidence**, where he admits we must infer (assume) certain conclusions.

Concerning Naaman, it is not certain that he *dipped* himself. That the English translation used the word *dipped* proves nothing when it is noted that all forty-seven translators of our Bible have been immersionists. (See Mackay, pg.31.) As Mackay points out (quoting several lexicographers) neither the Hebrew word *taval* nor the Greek *ebaptisato* "necessarily mean dip." Elisha's command to Naaman would certainly have been according to the law of God, and that law required that the one who was to be cleansed should be *sprinkled* seven times, Lev. 14:7. Mackay makes the point that Naaman, not being a Jew, would not be required to submit to the subsequent washing, shaving, and sacrifice.

It is remarkable that Keith attempts to find an immersion in the account of the baptism of the Israelites unto Moses as recorded in Exodus 14. As one old writer put it, the Egyptians were immersed but not baptized, and the Israelites were baptized but not immersed. It does not help

Keith's cause to say that the cloud was *above* the Israelites at the time of their crossing, for the record clearly states that it was *behind* them, vs. 19.

Keith admits that the example I used from an apocryphal book (Ecclesiasticus 34) is based on the law of Moses in Numbers 19. He rejects, however, the idea that the two sprinklings (third and seventh days) alone constituted baptism, and points us to the nineteenth verse where the command to "bathe in water" is given. This supposedly proves immersion. The difficulty is with the pronoun *he* found in the second half of this verse, the one who is the subject of this command to bathe. This word *he* does not refer back to the one who was originally defiled by touching a dead body. That person was cleansed (baptized) by sprinkling alone. Rather, the word *he* refers to the **clean person** described in the first half of this verse who, as Fairfield says, "has now become somewhat unclean from his contact with the unclean." Matthew Henry's comments on this text are much the same; indeed the best commentaries all show that this interpretation of verse nineteen is the most natural.

Matthew Henry goes on to show in his commentary the mistake of the Jews in not seeing Christ in the ritual of cleansing. The ashes of the heifer, the running water, the bunch of hyssop, and all the other elements of this ritual pointed to Christ. The Jews placed their faith in their obedience to every detail of the ceremony. They lost sight of the bigger picture. Keith commits this same "Jewish error." The Old Testament parallel to baptism is circumcision. The Jews took this rite, which, admittedly, was necessary to the **well-being** of an Israelite, and made it necessary for his very **being**. Paul, citing the story of Abraham's conversion *before* circumcision, forever established this distinction between the being and the well-being of a child of God. All Christians agree that faith and repentance are necessary to our very **being** a Christian. Some would make baptism equally necessary. But only a very few would make the **mode** of baptism necessary for salvation, and hang such a doctrine upon such scant evidence as Keith has provided.

We conclude that pouring and sprinkling are valid modes of baptism.

#### Works Cited

Mackay, W.A., **Immersion and Immersionists.**  
Fairfield, Edmund, **Letters On Baptism**  
Henry, Matthew, **Commentary on Numbers**