

# Immersed into What?

by Mitch Cervinka

It is often said that baptize means "immerse", and that water baptism therefore entails immersion into water.

However, when we go to the scriptures to see what God's Word says that we are baptized "into", we find that water is never the object of "into" in any of the baptism passages. Over and over again, the Bible uses the preposition "into" (*eis*) with baptism to teach that we are immersed by baptism, not into water, but into Christ, and into all the blessings and privileges that follow from being united with Christ by faith.

In the following verses, I have put the English word "into" wherever the Greek has "*eis*".

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| <b>Matthew 3:11</b> - <i>I baptize you with water <b>into</b> repentance,</i>   | <b>Romans 6:3</b> - <i>Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized <b>into Christ Jesus</b> were baptized <b>into his death</b>?</i>  |
| <b>Matthew 28:19</b> - <i>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them <b>into</b> the <b>name</b> of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,</i>   | <b>Romans 6:4</b> - <i>We were buried therefore with him by baptism <b>into death</b>, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.</i> |
| <b>Mark 1:4</b> - <i>John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance <b>into</b> the <b>forgiveness</b> of sins.</i>   | <b>1 Corinthians 1:13</b> - <i>Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized <b>into</b> the <b>name</b> of Paul?</i>   |
| <b>Luke 3:3</b> - <i>And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance <b>into</b> the <b>forgiveness</b> of sins.</i>   | <b>1 Corinthians 1:15</b> - <i>so that no one may say that you were baptized <b>into</b> my <b>name</b>.</i>  |
| <b>Acts 2:38</b> - <i>And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ <b>into</b> the <b>forgiveness</b> of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.</i> | <b>1 Corinthians 10:2</b> - <i>and all were baptized <b>into Moses</b> in the cloud and in the sea,</i>   |
| <b>Acts 8:16</b> - <i>for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized <b>into</b> the <b>name</b> of the Lord Jesus.</i>  | <b>1 Corinthians 12:13</b> - <i>For by one Spirit we were all baptized <b>into</b> one <b>body</b>...</i>   |
| <b>Acts 19:5</b> - <i>On hearing this, they were baptized <b>into</b> the <b>name</b> of the Lord Jesus.</i>  | <b>Galatians 3:27</b> - <i>For as many of you as were baptized <b>into Christ</b> have put on Christ.</i>   |

Baptism, then, immerses us into Christ, and into forgiveness, into repentance, into Christ's name, into His death and into His body (the church). The problem with the claim that water baptism means "immersion into water" is that it misses the point of who and what we are baptized into. In the Greek, the prepositions are very clearly and carefully used to tell us that the "immersion" in view is an immersion into salvation blessings, and not into water.

## Baptized by means of water

The relation of water to baptism is stated in the Greek by a different preposition – namely, "*en*". The preposition "*en*" signifies *instrumentality*. Just as you use a hammer to drive a nail into a piece of wood, so also, you use water to baptize a person into Christ. We don't confuse the role of the hammer and the wood, as if to say that we drive the nail into the hammer. So also, we should not confuse the roles of water and Christ, as if to say that we baptize a person into water. The Greek is clear in its use of prepositions, and we need to be equally clear in our understanding of how these prepositions are used.

Matthew 3:11 makes this distinction abundantly clear, for it brings both prepositions together in one sentence, by which we can observe how water and repentance relate to baptism.

**Matthew 3:11** - *I baptize you **with** water **into** repentance ...*

Water is the object of the preposition "with" (Greek: "*en*"). Repentance is the object of the preposition "into" (Greek: *eis*). Literally, the passage teaches us that: **John baptized (immersed) people into repentance, and he used water to do it.**

This passage also makes it plain that "*eis*" and "*en*" are not used interchangeably. They are not synonyms for one another, but represent distinct relationships with respect to baptism. In fact, this pattern is followed consistently in the New Testament. Water is never the object of the preposition "*eis*" (unto). Repentance, forgiveness, Christ, Christ's name, etc. are never the object of the preposition "*en*" (by, with) in any of the baptism passages.

## Water Baptism is a symbol of Spirit Baptism

The question naturally arises, "How can water immerse a person into repentance?" The answer, of course, is that it cannot – not literally, not actually. What it does do, however, is to depict, symbolize and represent a divine work that can and does immerse a person into repentance – namely, the Holy Spirit's work of regenerating our hearts and joining us to Christ by faith.

The relationship between water baptism and Spirit baptism is brought out in this same passage

**Matthew 3:11** - *"I baptize you with water into repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

John saw a parallel between his ministry of water baptism and our Lord's ministry of Spirit baptism. What John did with water, our Lord would someday do with the Holy Spirit. John's baptism was "into repentance", but his baptism was merely a symbol or shadow of the *actual* work that produces repentance – namely, our Lord's ministry of baptizing with the Holy Spirit.

We often gloss over this parallel between water baptism and Spirit baptism, but it is clear that scripture intends for us to take careful notice of it. This idea is taught in all four gospels, and twice in the book of Acts (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5 & Acts 11:16).

**Mark 1:8** - *I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

**Luke 3:16** - *John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

**John 1:33** - *I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'*

**Acts 1:5** - *for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."*

Acts 11:16 underscores the importance of this parallel by telling us that our Lord taught this truth repeatedly during His earthly ministry...

**Acts 11:16** - *And I remembered the word of the Lord, as he used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'*

(NET Bible, "*The imperfect verb elegen (elegen) is taken as a customary imperfect.*")

This is all the more significant when we consider that Spirit baptism is consistently described in scripture as the **outpouring** of the Spirit...

**Acts 2:17** - *'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will **pour out** my Spirit on all flesh ...*

**Acts 2:18** - *even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will **pour out** my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.*

**Acts 2:33** - *Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has **poured out** this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.*

**Acts 10:45** - *And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was **poured out** even on the Gentiles.*

**Romans 5:5** - *and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been **poured into** our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

**Titus 3:5-6** - *he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he **poured out** on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,*

To make sure we do not miss the point, let me emphasize this Biblical fact: **In scripture, John's baptism with water is repeatedly compared to Jesus' baptism with the Spirit, which in turn is repeatedly described as a pouring.**

To understand how water baptism was performed, we simply need to consider how Spirit baptism was performed. If Spirit baptism had been done by briefly immersing people into the Holy Spirit, then it would agree with the immersionist form of water baptism. But scripture consistently describes the baptism with the Spirit as the *outpouring* of the Spirit upon God's people.

This demonstrates that baptism *with* the Spirit does not mean baptism *into* the Spirit, and so, likewise, baptism *with* water is not the same thing as baptism *into* water. In the baptism passages, "water" and "Spirit" are always, without exception, the object of the preposition "*en*" ("with" or "by means of") – never the object of the preposition "*eis*" ("into"). This means that Scripture treats water as being fully parallel with Spirit in the baptism passages – being the *instrument* of baptism, and not the *substance* into which the person is immersed.

If John baptized people by immersing them into water, it would not illustrate what our Lord did when He poured out the Spirit upon His people. If, on the other hand, John poured or sprinkled water upon the people, then this would be a beautifully expressive way of showing what Christ would do when He poured out the Spirit.

### **What about Romans 6 and Colossians 2?**

This is much different from the symbolism that immersionists ascribe to water baptism. They tell us that the proper mode is immersion, because going down into the water represents our being buried with Christ, and rising from the water represents our being raised with Him from the dead.

This view is based on Romans 6:3-5 and Colossians 2:12, which relate our baptism to having been buried and raised with Christ. However, if we read these passages carefully, we see that they cannot be speaking of water baptism, but rather of the Spirit baptism that joins us to Christ and to His death and resurrection. Rightly understood, neither of these passages says anything about water baptism, nor of its being a picture of our Lord's death and resurrection.

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### **Romans 6:3-5**

*Or do you not know  
that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus  
have been baptized into His death?*

*Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death,  
so that  
as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father,  
so we too might walk in newness of life.*

*For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death,  
certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection,*

First, we note again what we observed earlier – that the immersion here is not into water (water is never even mentioned in this passage), but "into Christ Jesus" and "into his death". This is not baptism "with Jesus", but baptism "into Jesus". This is not merely baptism into His death, but baptism into Jesus Himself. It is because we have been baptized into Jesus that we are baptized into His death. In other words, we have been immersed into Jesus and so thoroughly united with Him that His death on the cross is credited to us and becomes ours. We were buried with Him – not in a "watery grave", but in the very same stone tomb that He was buried in 2000 years ago. This is the necessary result of our having been "immersed into Christ" and thereby united to Him.

Secondly, we notice that the apostle makes an unqualified "if-then" statement:

- "...if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death,
- certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection."

The "likeness of His resurrection" is obviously not speaking of coming up out of the waters of baptism, for it is stated here as a future consequence of being "united with Him in the likeness of His death." Rather, this is speaking of the new life we enjoy in Christ. Verse 4 describes it as "walking in newness of life".

If we suppose that to be "united with Him in the likeness of His death" refers to water baptism, then the passage teaches that everyone who is water baptized will assuredly ("certainly") be saved. But that is clearly not the case, for we all know that many who received water baptism were never saved. The "likeness of His death" cannot be speaking of water baptism.

So what is Paul really saying in these verses? He is telling us that everyone who has been spiritually immersed into Christ is joined to Christ. When He died, I died with Him. When He rose, I rose with Him. There is evidence of this in my life, for a great change has occurred – I have died to my former way of life, and this "death" in my life is the likeness of His death at Calvary. If I have died with Christ in this way, then I will certainly also begin walking in

newness of life, which is the likeness of His resurrection. This all occurs through regeneration, when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon me and I am eternally united to my Savior.

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**Colossians 2:11-12**

*In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands,  
by putting off the body of the flesh,  
by the circumcision of Christ,*

*having been buried with him in baptism,  
in which you were also raised with him  
through faith in the powerful working of God,  
who raised him from the dead.*

Colossians 2:12 is often cited as a proof of immersionist baptism: "... buried with him in baptism ...". However, if we keep the passage in its context, we see several reasons why this is not likely the intended meaning of the passage.

First of all, verse 11 speaks of "... a circumcision made without hands ...". The apostle is not speaking of literal, ritual circumcision, but of a spiritual work – of "... putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ..." Likewise, then, the baptism under consideration here is not a literal, ritual baptism with water, but the thing symbolized by baptism – namely, baptism with the Spirit, that unites us with Christ and with His death.

Secondly, we notice again that those who are baptized in this passage are necessarily saved, for those who have been "... buried with him in baptism ..." are also "... raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God ...". Surely, "... the powerful working of God ..." means somewhat more than merely rising out of the water of baptism. It is instead speaking of justification and regeneration. We died with Christ positionally and have been raised positionally. We died to sin through (Spirit) baptism, and we have been raised to newness of life through the power of God. This cannot be speaking of mere water baptism unless we are willing to adopt the unbiblical doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

On the other hand, the passage makes beautiful sense if we understand baptism here to refer to baptism with the Spirit, which joins us to Christ and regenerates our soul. Having been immersed into Christ, we have been buried with Him in the same tomb in which He was buried, and have been raised with Him through the power of God, just as He was. Our old man was crucified with Christ and buried with Him, and a new man has been resurrected with Christ. This is speaking of regeneration, not water baptism.

## Other evidence that sprinkling or pouring is the intended mode

When Ezekiel prophesied of the new heart and new Spirit that God would someday give His people, he also prophesied that God would sprinkle them with clean water...

**Ezekiel 36:25-27** - *I will **sprinkle** clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And **I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.** And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And **I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.***

Just like Matthew 3:11 and the many other passages that connect water baptism with Spirit baptism, Ezekiel connects watery cleansing with spiritual renewal. In this passage, sprinkling with clean water is symbolic of our spiritual cleansing, which occurs when God gives us a new heart and puts His Spirit within us.

If John performed his baptism by sprinkling or pouring, it would have fulfilled this prophecy made centuries earlier by Ezekiel. Does it make sense that God would promise to sprinkle Israel with clean water, and then send John to immerse them instead? Why didn't God promise to immerse them in water if that's what He was going to send John to do?

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The book of Hebrews describes the Mosaic Law in these terms...

**Hebrews 9:10** - *since they deal only with food, drink, and **various washings**, which are required for the body until the time when things would be set right.*

In the Greek, the word translated "washings" is literally "baptisms" (Gk: *baptismois*). Thus, Hebrews claims that there were many baptisms in the Mosaic Law. However, the Law does not describe any immersion or dipping ceremonies, but it is full of various *sprinkling* ordinances. The writer of Hebrews is speaking of something that was *characteristic* of the Law, and calls it by the name "baptisms". It appears from this that the word "baptism" was properly and commonly used of sprinkling ordinances.

Moreover, Hebrews tells us that the Mosaic Law had *various* baptisms – a variety of baptisms. It is difficult to identify even a single immersion commanded in the Mosaic Law, and it is difficult to conceive how there could be a variety of such baptisms. On the other hand, there are many different sprinkling ceremonies recorded in the Law – sprinklings of water, blood, oil, water mixed with ashes, and water mixed with blood...

- clean water (Numbers 8:7)
- blood (Numbers 19:4)
- oil (Exodus 29:21; Leviticus 8:30; 14:16; 14:27)

- water mixed with ashes (Numbers 19:9-13, 17-18)
- water mixed with blood (Leviticus 14:51)

We see then that the "various baptisms" of the Mosaic Law argue that "baptism" in Scripture refers to an ordinance that was performed by sprinkling.

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Another passage in Hebrews suggests that water baptism was performed by sprinkling...

**Hebrews 10:22** - *let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

Here again, we see a parallel drawn between water baptism and Spirit baptism.

- our hearts **sprinkled clean** from an evil conscience
- our bodies **washed** with pure water

The washing of our bodies is compared to the cleansing of our hearts by sprinkling. Surely, if water baptism ("our bodies washed with pure water") answers to the cleansing of our hearts by sprinkling, then the assumed mode of baptism is by sprinkling rather than immersion.

### "To Immerse" or "To Dip"?

Finally, we need to understand that immersionist baptism is more than mere immersion. The word "immerse" entails only a single action – to cover with water. However, in immersionist theology, water baptism involves two important elements: 1) going down into the water, and 2) coming up out of the water. Both are essential elements to immersionist baptism, since the first represents our dying with Christ and the second represents our rising with Him.

But is this twofold act consistent with the meaning "to immerse"? The first action – going down into the water – is properly called "immersion", but the second action – coming up out of the water – is an undoing of immersion. Immersionist baptism, therefore, is more properly immersion followed by un-immersion.

What is the condition of the person after completing such a baptism – is he immersed or un-immersed? Clearly, he is un-immersed, for he is no longer covered with water. If the word "baptize" truly means "to immerse", then the person becomes unbaptized by coming out of the water, and is left in an unbaptized state at the end.

This may seem like a pedantic argument, but there is an important theological point to be made: Namely, when scripture says that we have been baptized into Christ, it does not mean that we



have been momentarily united with Christ, but that we have been eternally planted into Christ and permanently united with Him. This is the true significance of the word "baptize" or "immerse" – it puts us in Christ and leaves us there. This is a huge contrast with the immersionist concept of baptism, which is but a momentary immersion.

In every single case where scripture says that we have been "baptized into" something, it refers to a profound and permanent change of our spiritual condition. We have been baptized into Christ. We have been baptized into repentance. We have been baptized into the forgiveness of our sins. We have been baptized into the name of the Trinity, and into the name of Christ. We have been baptized into Christ's death. We have been baptized into "one body" – the church.

If the word "baptize" could have the meaning "to put in, and then take back out", it would mean that our baptism into Christ puts us momentarily into Christ and then takes us out. It would mean that our condition of repentance is momentary. It would mean that our forgiveness is momentary. In other words, a baptism that is of momentary duration is one that leaves us outside of Christ, outside of forgiveness, outside of repentance. All of this is contrary to God's word, which promises eternal salvation to all who come to Christ in genuine faith.

Also, if scripture meant to say that baptism is a momentary immersion – a mere dipping into water – then there is another word in the Greek language that the Holy Spirit could have used to signify this very thing, namely "*bapto*". This word occurs six times in the New Testament, but never in the context of water baptism. In each case it has the sense of a momentary dipping, except for Revelation 19:13 which may have more the sense of "dyed", which is another common meaning of the word ...

**Matthew 26:23** - *And He answered, "He who **dipped** his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me.*

**Mark 14:20** - *And He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who **dips** with Me in the bowl.*

**Luke 16:24** - *"And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may **dip** the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.'*

**John 13:26** - *Jesus then answered, "That is the one for whom I shall **dip** the morsel and give it to him." So when He had **dipped** the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.*

**Revelation 19:13** - *He is clothed with a robe **dipped** in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.*

### **An Instructive Lesson from Greek Literature**

The word *baptizo* ("baptize") is used often in classical Greek literature. Many of these references have to do with immersion into water, such as ships sinking, or men drowning. However, there

are some interesting exceptions. People are sometimes said to be baptized by grief, or evils, or by excessive taxes.

On other occasions, a person is said to be baptized by wine into sleep or intoxication. In these instances, wine is not the substance into which the person is immersed, but the instrument by which the person is immersed into something else – namely, into sleep or into intoxication. This is very similar to what the New Testament says about water baptism, for John baptized his hearers into repentance, which is a condition, not a substance – just as sleep or intoxication is a condition rather than a substance.

Nor is the person immersed into sleep by first being immersed into wine. Rather, the person is immersed into sleep by *drinking* wine. The act of drinking much wine causes a person to become immersed into a condition of intoxication or sleep.

Notice how this is parallel to the New Testament teaching about the Spirit's work in our hearts...

**Ephesians 5:18** - *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,*

**1 Corinthians 12:13** - *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

Ephesians 5:18 compares being "filled with the Spirit" with being "drunk with wine". Both wine and the Spirit of God cause a change in one's character and behavior. It is because of the changed heart produced by the Holy Spirit that we begin to acquire Christ's character and seek to meet with His people for corporate worship. Thus, through receiving the Holy Spirit, we are immersed into Christ and into His church.

Likewise, Paul says that all true Christians have been baptized with the Spirit into one body, and then he rephrases this by saying "...we were all made to drink of one Spirit." It is by "drinking" of the one Spirit that we are all baptized into one body. Notice also how the outpouring of the Spirit upon God's people is similar to the drinking of a beverage. When we take a drink, we do not bathe in the beverage. Rather, we pour it into our mouth. This is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:13 that we "all were made to drink of one Spirit" – God poured out His Spirit upon us to change us, much as pouring wine into our mouth would change us.

## Summary

In conclusion, it is not enough to say that "baptize" means "to immerse". We must ask "Immerse – into what?" When we go to the scriptures for the answer to this question, we find that water is never the object of "into" in the baptism passages. Instead, water is the instrument of baptism, immersing us into Christ, into His name and His death, into repentance and into the forgiveness of our sins.

Water baptism, of course, cannot actually immerse us into repentance or the forgiveness of our sins. Instead, it is a divinely-appointed symbol or picture of Christ pouring out the Holy Spirit upon us to seal us for Himself and immerse us into all the blessings of salvation.

Biblical baptism comes in two kinds: baptism with water, such as that performed by John the Baptist, and baptism with the Spirit, which is performed by the Lord Jesus. Scripture repeatedly compares John's baptism with water to Christ's baptism with the Spirit to teach us that water baptism is symbolic of Spirit baptism. Scripture also repeatedly describes Spirit baptism as the outpouring of the Spirit by Christ upon the people of God. Thus, the water baptism presented in scripture is properly performed by pouring water upon an individual to depict the outpouring of God's Spirit upon him.

This agrees with other passages of scripture, such as Ezekiel's prophecy that God would someday sprinkle clean water upon His people, at the time when He gives them a new heart and a new Spirit. It likewise agrees with Hebrews 9:10, which says that there were "many baptisms" in the Mosaic Law – all of which were sprinkling ordinances.

Biblical immersion is not a temporary dipping, but a permanent immersion into Christ and into all the salvation blessings He procured for us at Calvary. If baptism meant "to put in, and take out", then our baptism into Christ would briefly put us into Christ, and then immediately take us back out again, so that in the end we are left un-baptized, and outside of Christ.

Properly understood, the Biblical teaching on water baptism is clear and consistent, and points to sprinkling or pouring as the proper mode. Water baptism displays, in a visible ordinance, Christ's pouring of the Spirit upon us to change our hearts and immerse us into Himself, His death, and all the blessings that flow from Calvary. May He be forever praised!

<http://www.planetkc.com/puritan/Articles/ImmersedIntoWhat.htm>