



This devotion is an excerpt from Bishop J.C. Ryle's work entitled, **Knots Untied**. It is the second in a series of commentary on Baptism.

**II. Let us now consider the mode of Baptism. In what way ought it to be administered?**

This is a point on which a wide difference of opinion prevails. Some Christians maintain strongly that complete immersion in water is absolutely necessary and essential to make a valid baptism. They hold that no person is really baptized unless he is entirely "dipped," and covered over with water. Others, on the contrary, maintain with equal decision that immersion is not necessary at all, and that sprinkling, or pouring a small quantity of water on the person baptized, fulfils all the requirements of Christ.

My own opinion is distinct and decided, that Scripture leaves the point an open question. I can find nothing in the Bible to warrant the assertion that either dipping, or pouring, or sprinkling, is *essential* to baptism. I believe it would be impossible to prove that either way of baptizing is exclusively right, or that either is downright wrong. So long as water is used in the name of the Trinity, the precise mode of administering the ordinance is left an open question.

This is the view adopted by the Church of England. The Baptismal Service expressly sanctions "dipping" in the most plain terms.<sup>3</sup> To say, as many Baptists do, that the Church of England is *opposed* to baptism by immersion, is a melancholy proof of the ignorance in which many Dissenters live. Thousands, I am afraid, find fault with the Prayer-book without having ever examined its contents! If any one wishes to be baptized by "dipping" in the Church of England, let him understand that the parish clergyman is just as ready to dip him as the Baptist minister, and that he may be baptized by "immersion" in church as well as in chapel.

There is a large body of Christians, however, who are not satisfied with this moderate view of the question. They will have it that baptism by dipping or immersion is the *only* Scriptural baptism. They say that all the persons whose baptism we read of in the Bible were “dipped.” They hold, in short, that where there is no immersion there is no baptism.

I fear it is almost waste of time to attempt to say anything on this much-disputed question. So much has been written on both sides without effect, during the last two hundred years, that I cannot hope to throw any new light on the subject. The utmost that I shall try to do is to suggest a few considerations to any whose minds are in doubt. I only ask them to remember that I do not say that baptism by “dipping” is positively wrong. All I say is, that it is not absolutely necessary, and is not absolutely commanded in Scripture.

I ask, then, any doubting mind to consider whether it is in the least probable that all the cases of baptism described in Scripture were cases of complete immersion? The three thousand baptized in one day at the feast of Pentecost (Acts ii. 41),—the jailor at Philippi suddenly baptized at midnight in prison (Acts xvi. 33)—is it at all likely or probable that they were all “dipped”? To my own mind, trying to take an impartial view, it seems in the highest degree improbable. Let those believe it who can.

I ask any one to consider, furthermore, whether it is at all probable that a mode of baptism would have been enjoined as necessary, which in some climates is impracticable? At the North and South Poles, for example, the temperature, for many months, is many degrees below freezing point. In tropical countries, on the other hand, water is often so extremely scarce that it is almost impossible to find enough for common drinking purposes. Now will any maintain that in such climates there can be no baptism without “immersion”? Will any one tell us that in such climates it is really necessary that every candidate for baptism should be completely dipped”? Let those believe it who can.

I ask any one to consider, further, whether it is at all probable that a mode of baptism would have been enjoined which, in some conditions of health, is simply impossible. There are thousands of persons whose lungs and general constitution are in so delicate a state that total immersion in water, and especially in cold water, would be certain death to them. Now will any maintain that such persons ought to be debarred from baptism unless they are “dipped”? Let those believe it who can.

I ask any one to consider, further, whether it is probable that a mode of baptizing would be enjoined, which in many countries would practically exclude women from baptism. The sensitiveness and strictness of Eastern nations about the treatment of their wives and daughters are notorious facts. There are many parts of the world in which women are so completely separated and secluded from the other sex, that there is the greatest difficulty in even speaking to them about religion. To talk of such an ordinance as baptizing them by “immersion” would, in hundreds of cases, be perfectly absurd. The feelings of fathers, husbands, and brothers, however personally disposed to Christian teaching, would be revolted by the mention of it. And will any one maintain that such women are to be left unbaptized altogether because they cannot be “dipped”? Let those believe it who can.

I believe I might well leave the subject of the mode of baptism at this point. But there are two favourite arguments which the advocates of immersion are constantly bringing forward, about which I think it right to say something.

(a) One of these favourite arguments is based on the meaning of the Greek word in the New Testament, which we translate “to baptize.” It is constantly asserted that this word can mean nothing else but dipping, or complete “immersion.” The reply to this argument is short and simple. The assertion is utterly destitute of foundation. Those who are best acquainted with New Testament Greek are decidedly of opinion that to baptize means “to wash or cleanse with water,” but whether by immersion or not must be entirely decided by the context

We read in St. Luke (xi. 38) that when our Lord dined with a certain Pharisee, "the Pharisee marvelled that He had not first washed before dinner." It may surprise some readers, perhaps, to hear that these words would have been rendered more literally, "that He had not first been *baptized* before dinner."—Yet it is evident to common sense that the Pharisee could not have expected our Lord to immerse or dip Himself over head in water before dining! It simply means that he expected Him to perform some ablution, or to pour water over His hands, before the meal. But if this is so, what becomes of the argument that to baptize *always* means complete "immersion"? It is cut from under the feet of the advocate of "dipping," and to reason further about it is mere waste of time.

(b) Another favourite argument in favour of baptism by immersion is drawn from the expression "buried with Christ in baptism," which St. Paul uses on two occasions. (Rom. vi. 4; Col. ii. 12.) It is asserted that going down into the water of baptism, and being completely "dipped" under it, is an exact figure of Christ's burial and coming up out of the grave, and represents our union with Christ and participation in all the benefits of His death and resurrection. But unfortunately for this argument there is no proof whatever that Christ's burial was a going down into a hole dug in the ground. On the contrary, it is far more probable that His grave was a cave cut out of the side of a rock, like that of Lazarus, and on a level with the surrounding ground. Such, at least, was the common mode of burying round Jerusalem. At this rate there is no resemblance whatever between going down into a bath, or baptistry, and the burial of our Lord. The actions are not like one another. That by profession of a lively faith in Christ at baptism a believer declares his union with Christ, both in His death and resurrection, is undoubtedly true. But to say that in "going down into the water" he is burying his body just as His Master's body was buried in the grave, is to say what cannot be proved.

In saying all this I should be very sorry to be mistaken. God forbid that I should wound the feelings of any brother who has conscientious scruples on this subject, and prefers baptism by dipping to baptism by sprinkling. I condemn him not. To his own Master he stands or falls. He that conscientiously prefers dipping may be dipped in the Church of England, and have all his children dipped if he pleases. What I contend for is *liberty*. I find no certain law laid down as to the mode in which baptism is to be administered, so long as water is used in the name of the Trinity. Let every man be persuaded in his own mind. He that sprinkles or simply pours water in baptism has no right to excommunicate him that dips;—and he that dips has no right to excommunicate him that sprinkles or pours water. Neither of them can possibly prove that the other is entirely wrong.

I leave this part of my subject here. Whatever some may think, I am content to regard the precise mode of baptizing as a thing indifferent, as a thing on which every one may use his liberty. I firmly believe that this liberty was intended of God. It is in keeping with many other things in the Christian dispensation. I find nothing precise laid down in the New Testament about ceremonies, or vestments, or liturgies, or church music, or the shape of churches, or the hours of service, or the quantity of bread and wine to be used at the Lord's Supper, or the position and attitude of communicants. On all these points I see a liberal discretion allowed to the Church of Christ. So long as things are "done to edifying," the principle of the New Testament is to allow a wide liberty.

I hold firmly, myself, that the validity and benefit of baptism do not depend on the *quantity of water* employed, but on the state of heart in which the sacrament is used. Those who insist on every grown-up person being plunged over head in a baptistry, and those who insist on splashing an immense handful of water in the face of every tender infant they receive into the Church at the font, are both alike, in my judgment, greatly mistaken. Both are attaching far more importance to the quantity of water used than I can find warranted in Scripture. It has been well said by a great divine,—“A little drop of water may serve to seal the fulness of

divine grace in baptizing as well as a small piece of bread and the least tasting of wine in the Holy Supper." (Witsius, *Econ. Fed.* 1. 4, ch. xvi. 30.) To that opinion I entirely subscribe.