

There are some Christian denominations which have no sacraments, and some who have 2, and some who have as many as 7. That means there is no more clarity on subject of Christian Baptism than that of Holy Communion. Since we have entered into a new church covenant called the GMC – perhaps a word on the sacraments is in order. Yes, we still have 2. The provisional Discipline for the GMC has not changed the understanding on the sacraments as far as I can see. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace as clearly evidenced in the Holy Bible and in the ministry of the Lord Jesus.

With the many denominational perspectives, clarity is lacking on the 2 sacraments which concern us. I offer Rev. Henry Alonzo Dietterich as an example. He grew up in Briar Creek township and entered the ministry around here in 1858 in the Evangelical Association. Without the benefit of formal educational training, he ministered around our area in his early years and in the conference area some 30 yrs.

Early in his ministry Rev. Henry Dietterich had this to say to a Baptist minister who practiced baptism by immersion to the exclusion of any other mode:

I replied, "My parents had me baptized in infancy, and I never felt that I needed any more – and therefore I am satisfied with my baptism." [The Chronicle, Vol. XXIX, Spring 2018, "A Wonder of Grace", Page 71]

He was inclined to be open to all 3 modes of baptism: immersion, affusion, and aspersion. But he then tells of this critical event concerning baptism (1867):

...A cousin to my wife, was at the point of death. We ate breakfast hurriedly. Then I mounted the buggy with him, and we drove to the house. When I entered the house I found quite a number of neighboring women present, kindly doing all they could for the afflicted family. I was conducted into a small room down stairs, and as I entered it, on the left on a bed lay the wife and mother - in the last stages of typhoid fever. To the right in another bed lay their only child, a daughter about fourteen years of age, with the same disease - and it was hard to tell which of the two would die first - while the husband and father was in bed upstairs, slowly recovering from the same disease. Thus the entire family were in bed at one time with the fever. I approached the mother's bedside. In answer to my questions, she informed me that she had neglected the salvation of her soul, as many do, up to the time of her sickness. But she said she had now repented of her sins, and she felt that God had forgiven her - that she had peace with God and was ready to die - only she must yet be baptized. She felt that she must be baptized and all would be well - but that she must be baptized by immersion. I told her she could not well be immersed in her present condition, and asked whether she could not be satisfied to be baptized by sprinkling - as the validity of baptism did not depend upon the quantity of water used, or the mode in which it was performed, but upon her faith in Jesus.

But she said, "No. There is no baptism but by immersion. I can easily ride to the creek and be immersed?" I then told her that the day was cold, and very windy, and that it was quite a distance to the creek - and that she was too weak and short of breath, and would strangle in the water, and it would be impossible for her to ride that distance and be immersed now. But she became quite excited and said, won't hurt me. It is you — you are afraid to go into the water. I can easily ride to the creek, and I must be immersed or I will be lost." And in her excitement she sprang up in bed and reached out for her clothes, which were hanging against the wall at the foot of her bed. I... reasoned with her, and tried to show her that her salvation did not depend upon her being immersed now in her present condition - and that God did not require impossibilities of her in order to grant her salvation....

...But this was her constant plea all day - "Only immerse me, and it will be all right?" Oh, I wished again and again that immersion had never been heard, or thought of, as a mode of baptism or an ordinance of the church. I believe that the church and her ordinances are like the gospel - yea, like salvation itself - suited is all people, to all times, to all places, and to all circumstances. But immersion is not, and I am therefore inclined to doubt its being a scriptural mode of baptism, or an ordinance of the church.

This might have been done in her bed by sprinkling, without inconvenience or doing her any harm. But because of her prejudice or early training, that would not satisfy her - consequently she must die without being baptized at all, immersion being impossible under the circumstances. Oh, what folly. I remained with her until time to go to the church in the evening. Before I left for church, her physician came in. He was a middle aged man. I told him of her desire to be immersed. He said, "Well, if you had a large vessel here in her room you might immerse her - but she would die in your hands, and you would not like that. But it would make no difference, for she will die anyhow." I said I should not attempt it, even if we had a vessel suitable for the purpose. If she must be immersed now, she must get those who taught her that doctrine and believe in it to immerse her, for my faith in immersion is not strong enough to attempt such a thing now. She lamented all day to be immersed, and that night died with the same lament on her lips - though delirious part of the time. I preached her funeral sermon in the Chestnut Grove Evangelical Lutheran Church, and prayed to God that I might never witness another such a scene.

Yet I did see a similar case a few years later, in Cumberland County. This man, however, when he found he could not be immersed, consented to be baptized by sprinkling - and was satisfied. Not that I doubted her salvation simply because she was not baptized - for the dying thief was not baptized, and yet he went from the cross to paradise. And when I think of these cases, I almost wish that all that has ever been said or written in favor of immersion could be blotted out forever. If parents would have their children baptized in their infancy, as they should do, the lament to be baptized would never be heard on the death bed. Her husband and daughter finally recovered and are yet living.

[The Chronicle, Vol. XXIX, Spring 2018, "A Wonder of Grace", Page 73-75]

I have heard of other immersions that weren't what was planned in my time. At a ministerium meeting once, I once heard a clergyman say that he had, as a young pastor, performed a Christian Baptism by immersion for a 78-year-old woman in a stream in November. When the woman was submerged under the water, the water was so cold that the reaction caused her false teeth to pop out. The young pastor was able to make a quick recovery them for her however. Another pastor told the story of a baptism by immersion he performed for a 90-year-old woman. It was in a baptistery and the weather was 100+ degrees outside, but still, she caught pneumonia after her baptism and died as a consequence.

[1] Jesus' Baptism

Mark 1:9-11 "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

All four gospels record the events of Jesus' baptism at the hand of John the Baptist. This is the baptism of Jesus not baptism by Jesus. The Gospel of John says Jesus didn't baptize anyone, but his disciples did. John 4:1-2

"Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John— ²although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples."

The greater question is not how much water was used to baptize Jesus, but why was Jesus baptized at all? Well, there are a variety of suggested answers as to why.

I tend to think that this is a sign—an announcement—of the Messiah's arrival and ministry.

John the Baptist's ministry by baptism was the method to reveal the Messiah as John 1:33 indicates:

"And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'" John the Baptist's ministry in the process was a baptism of repentance for everyone else to prepare the way.

Acts 19:4

"Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.'"

Baptism for Jesus was not a baptism for repentance for sin for Jesus, at least not any he had committed, for he was the sinless Son of God.

..."It was not a baptism of repentance for HIS sin; it was a baptism of repentance for MY sin, and yours...." Perhaps!

[Johnny Dean, www.eSermons.com]

Maybe Jesus was simply leading by example to show his followers where to walk.

[2] Our Baptism

(a) Baptism once only

Jesus was baptized only once. There is no need to “fulfill all righteousness” by being baptized multiple times as some might try to suggest to us.

Ephesians 4:4-5

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

What God does, and God is the primary actor in any Christian baptism, what God does he does correctly, so it need not be repeated. He claims us as his own. He seals us with his Spirit.

Your Christian Baptism is your personal blessing. Have you indeed been baptized? Have you been blessed with Christian baptism remember it in ways that strengthen and inspire. My baptism is 4-10-1955. Each April 10th is special to me. If you don't know when you were baptized, perhaps you were an infant, then try to find out. I have my certificate from that day. Do what you must, but remember your baptism.

(b) Immersion

Romans 6:3-5

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Only once was I asked to dunk someone face forward 3 times. This was a common form by a certain group in the nineteenth century and Rev. Dietterich mentions it once. It is much more common to immerse once backward in line with Romans 6.

There are denominations who immerse infants but I don't believe that I could do that and was never asked.

(c) Infant baptism

If you think of Christian Baptism as our adoption by God as some do; then let me ask you: Can you be adopted as an infant or do you have to be a certain age?

Infant baptism is not prohibited by the Bible. After all, we have no idea of how much water was used to baptize Jesus. The Jordan being so shallow, he could have stood in ankle deep water and then had water poured over his head—affusion or aspersion. The following verse in Acts indicates that infant baptism could have been practiced.

Acts 16:33

“At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized.”

I would like to think that Jesus will be pleased with our showing of his love to little infants who we know he cared for while on earth.

One last look at Rev. Dietterich's evolving views of baptism during his life. (1875)

During the winter Brother B.F. Anthony held a protracted meeting in a godless community known as Shenandoah." The people were virtually without Sabbath, and almost without civilization. Their Sabbaths were largely spent in fishing, hunting, drinking, fighting, etc. Brother Anthony's labors were blessed of the Lord. A great revival took place, resulting in a number of conversions - and a complete transformation took place in the entire community.

Brother Anthony went to conference and was appointed to a circuit. I took up Shenandoah as a regular appointment and organized quite a large class - making another appointment to Perry Circuit. But few of these people had been baptized, and most of them desired to be immersed. So I appointed a Sabbath afternoon to immerse them in the creek, near the school house. The day was beautiful and the turn out very large, and I baptized quite a number of them. One man was six feet four inches tall. All passed off very pleasantly. I also immersed a number in the creek near Elliottsburg. But now there was a second lot to be immersed at Shenandoah, and it was getting quite late in the fall. But to satisfy them, I appointed another day to meet at the creek, when the ordinance would be administered.

But in the meantime our fall rains came, the streams became very much swollen, and the weather very cold. We met at the creek according to announcement. The turnout was quite large again, and all were dressed in their winter clothing - with overcoats on. All things ready, and quite a number to be baptized, I took off my overcoat and waded into the creek. As I did so, I heard some standing on the shore say, "He better keep his overcoat on" - but I did not mind the cold in the least. Among the subjects to be baptized were a number of women. And as I took them one by one and immersed them, some once backward and others three times forward, in the wild, cold, muddy stream, it appeared cruel and indecent to me - at least. And I resolved that this should be the last I would ever baptize by immersion - and so it was.

Up to this time I had been rather favorable to immersion, and had but little faith in infant baptism - and therefore had none of my children baptized. But now my views underwent an entire change on this subject, both as to the mode and time of baptism. I now believed that the proper time to consecrate our children to God is in their infancy, and that it should be done by baptism - as the Jewish mother consecrated her child to God by circumcision.

I believed that the church and her ordinances, like the gospel and salvation, are suited to all people, places, circumstances and seasons of the year. Immersion is not. I therefore doubt its being a proper ordinance of the church. And as immersion excludes children from church membership, I was ready to conclude with Rev. Cartwright of the M.E. Church "that a church without children in it resembled hell more than it did heaven." [The Chronicle, Vol. XXIX, Spring 2018, "A Wonder of Grace", Page 122-123.]

Rev. Dietterich grew and changed and modified his ideas of baptism during his life. So do we. The Global Methodist Church's stance to permit room in our views of the mode of baptism is well-founded.