

# **THE BAPTIST SYSTEM**

**UNSCRIPTURAL AND UNREFORMED**



**HUGH L. WILLIAMS**



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## ❧ 1. ❧

### THE BAPTIST SYSTEM EXPOSED

WITHOUT DOUBT, one of the obvious ecclesiastical and theological developments extant over the last 200 years has been the rise of *immersionism* as a sacramental dogma. It is not only observable amongst those churches that style themselves “Baptist,” but also equally, if not more prevalently, amongst churches that style themselves as “Evangelical,”<sup>1</sup> or by some other title such as “Assemblies of God,” or “Plymouth Brethren.” Indeed, in the British Isles one even finds the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster also practising immersionism, as have many, from time to time, in the Church of England.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, back in the pre-war days of E. J. Poole-Connor, the formation of the “Free Evangelical Churches” in Britain was intended to be tolerant of a wide variety of views over the spectrum of theological topics, only dogmatizing on what issues were “essential” to Evangelical belief. Whilst, overall, the resultant churches have maintained a general tolerance on issues such as Calvinism or Arminianism, etc., yet there is notable among them a distinct insistence on *immersionism*. So much has this developed to be the case, that *non-immersed* Christians leaving apostate mainline denominations in Britain have been refused membership in the “Free Evangelical Churches” unless they first submit to adult immersion. Strangely, many of the mainline “Baptist Union” churches have a much more tolerant attitude and practice on this matter.

<sup>2</sup> The Anglican *Church Order* allows for immersionism if individuals so require it. The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* has a rubric for the baptism of infants that runs thus: “And then naming it after them (if they verily certify him that the child may well endure it) he shall *dip* it in the water discreetly and warily ...” (emphasis mine). Where provision

Notably, this 200-year burgeoning of the baptistic or immersionistic system is paralleled by a few other features in the body-ecclesiastic of the Protestant world—each of them just as obvious and just as indisputable, and, let it be said, each of them just as indisputably interwoven in complex ways with the immersionistic cause.

To begin, we find the last 200 years has witnessed the rise of burgeoning heretical sects: Hyper-Calvinist Baptists, Amyraldian Baptists, General or Arminian Baptists, modernistic Baptists, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, Christadelphians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and more. Add to these the various sects of Plymouth Brethren and the explosion of Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations worldwide, and you have an enormous and rapidly-growing phalanx of churches and cults—virtually all of which insist on the fanatical dogma of *exclusivistic immersionism* for the sacrament of baptism.

Again, we find that the last 200 years marks the rise of romanticism imported into religion, with all its deleterious subjectivistic effects amongst Evangelicals in particular.<sup>3</sup> It marks, too, the rise of higher criticism, which has effectively rubbished the Holy Bible in the sight of the massed congregations, and relegated the Lord Jesus to the ignominy of

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is made in the prayer book for the baptism of “such as are of riper years ...” the rubric similarly states: “Then shall the priest *dip* him in the water, or pour water upon him ...” (emphasis mine). Some Anglican clergy have been quite strict advocates of immersionism—witness, for example, the case of the Evangelical, Rev. Canon M. H. Garner, who, as a missionary in Uganda, practised immersionism in the African rivers, and contracted the deadly disease *schistosomiasis* as a result (cf. *The Churchman’s Magazine*, vol. 137, nos. 1643-1644 [May-June 1983], p. 41).

<sup>3</sup> For a succinct and eye-opening revelation of the effects of “romanticism” on the rise of modern evangelicalism and modernism, see especially David Bebbington’s learned work, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain—1730s to the 1980s* (Unwin Hyman: London, 1989). The effects of romanticism are evident in the works of the Wesleys and of Whitefield—the religion of whom was largely shaped by the new prevailing “winds of fashion” blowing in from continental Europe in those times, i.e., romanticism.



mythology.<sup>4</sup> And there are immersionist theologians, too, as we shall see, who have done their whack aplenty in this wicked work.

Further, the last 200 years have been a period marking the rise of democracy and universal enfranchisement, with all their social and philosophical emphasis on the *individual*. Individual experience, individual rights, individual status—no matter of what country, race or creed—have developed, until today, the “voice of the people,” which has taken the place of the “voice of God.” And so we witness that over this last 200 years we can trace the rise of feminism and homosexuality—not only as a feature of godless society, but, alarmingly, as an ever-expanding element within not only apostate “modernist” churches, but even among “Evangelicals,” to the point that, in 1999, even a top “Calvinist” leader apparently turns out to join the ranks of the “gays.” Significantly, he, too, was an “immersionist” Baptist pastor.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, we may note that over the last 200 years the rise of science and technology, with the burgeoning spread of that technology and varying but manifold degrees of its benefits to most corners of our planet. Very important is this development—never before known on the earth—for the advance of the baptistic cause, as we shall see.

But parallel to all these rises and rises, the last 200 years chart the shocking *falls* of other, more important facets of life in the body-

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<sup>4</sup> Bebbington, *Op cit.* Footnote 3 outlines how evangelicals were deeply affected by the rise of modernistic theology and the rise of “biblical higher criticism”—such that evangelicals became divided into two camps: those who were “progressive” and embraced modernistic criticism, and those who stood firmly against it. The ability of certain Evangelicals to argue critically against the veracity of the Bible, and yet claim to still have a living faith, was based on the whole romanticist notions of “experientialism” as paramount in religion, and as promoted in the great so-called “revivals” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, modernism still claims “religious regenerative experience” to be the heart of religion, and can even lay claim, in Germany, for instance, to the title “Evangelical.”

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *BRF News Alert*, no. 28, p. 3, based on information publicised in the London *Times* of September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999. Rev. Roy Clements was pastor of Eden Baptist Church, in Cambridge, England, and resigned the post, leaving his wife and family to “pursue a relationship with someone of the same sex” and to “set up home with another man.”

ecclesiastic. If the chart of the last 200 years is going to tell us anything, it will be the opposite of what, *prima facie*, one might expect—given the Baptist insistence on the “pure churches” which they theorized would develop consequent to the practice of the ever-expanding exclusivistic adult immersionism.

First, one notes the fall of faith. The chill night of apostasy has gripped Protestantism like the clasp of a maniac, hell-bent on choking his victim. After 200 years of the above “rises and rises,” the Protestant churches have effectively abandoned the Reformation. They have abandoned the Lord Jesus Christ; and, having abandoned the great, it has been of course easy to abandon the *lesser*. They have forgotten the blood of millions of martyrs who died for Christ’s glory; till today, even some salient *Calvinist* leaders are ready to trade-in Luther’s grand old biblical doctrine of justification for a modern Romanist stitch-up.

Then there is the fall of the “antithesis.” Instead of separating themselves from the world, and from worldliness, vast multitudes of Protestants today have so smudged the line between godliness and worldliness as to virtually eradicate it completely—something to do with “common grace,” I believe, which I see propounded enthusiastically by certain Baptist theologians, too.<sup>6</sup>

Then there is the fall of doctrinal teaching and unity in the truth. In the chill blackness of this spiritual night, theologians blunder about, “ever searching, but never able, to come to the knowledge of the truth.” So prevalent is this feature that it has led to an anti-doctrinal sweep of sentiments amongst Evangelicals, on the one hand, and a parallel fissiparity, on the other hand, evident amongst those minorities who delight to study doctrine. Again, the Reformation practice of “catechising”

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<sup>6</sup> The English Baptist, Erroll Hulse, for instance, published a widely disseminated book defending “common grace” some 20 years ago. This is not to say that Mr. Hulse advocated therein an abandonment of the antithesis, but rather that, contrary to his intentions, the whole thesis of “common grace” effectively militates against the maintenance of the antithesis.

is all but fallen into the limbo of forgettery, even amongst huge tracts of those who claim to be “Reformed.”

Crucially, there is the fall of the family. Whatever position one takes *vis-à-vis* divorce and remarriage, one can only stand aghast at the rate at which families are withering before the onslaught of modern sexual mores, like leaves in a forest fire. In Britain, government statisticians recently have appraised us that within the next ten years, the number of *single* people will outnumber the *married* people—for the first time probably in all history! More astonishingly, in the USA, figures indicate a higher divorce rate amongst Evangelical believers than amongst the unchurched ungodly! And, of course, the modern cult of “individualism,” promoted by the democratic pipe-dreams of the godless, receives, within modern Evangelical circles, the added impetus of the flighty individualism of baptistic immersionism, which destroys the organic unity of the family, denying the infant children of believers a place in the covenant community, and emphasises the *individuality* of faith.<sup>7</sup> It is, indeed, a debatable point as to whether the Baptist system has expanded rapidly over the last 200 years because of the rise of democratic individualism making for an environment in which the immersionist hybrid can thrive, *sans pareil*, or whether the rise of democratic individualism over the last 200 years owes its success, if not also its origins, to the impetus of the Baptist philosophy functioning not only among Baptists, but also extending outside their circles as well. Stand before the majestic form of the “Reformation movement” in Geneva, and scan from left to right

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<sup>7</sup> Some important observations concerning the Baptist attitude with regards to families was made in the moderating tome, *The Water that Divides*, by Donald Bridge and David Phypers (Leicester: IVP, 1977), where they say (p. 57), “Indeed many Baptists are dubious about the whole idea of family solidarity in Scripture ...,” emphasising instead how “Jesus warned of the possibly divisive effect that the Christian faith would have on families, rather than promising a cohesive effect ...” Reference is then made to Matthew 10:34-36. Such baptistic assertions are, of course, the logical conclusions that arise inexorably from baptistic premises, and they are effective denials of a vast phalanx of biblical evidence that teaches the contrary (cf. I Cor. 7:10; 11:13; Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18, *et. al*).

across the 100 metres of carved stonework, passing effigies of the Reformation giants like Calvin and Knox, and suddenly your eyes will stop at a figure which will make you baulk, and ask, “How did *he* get on here?” Roger Williams, the American Baptist of the early seventeenth century. There stands his image. How *did* he get on there? Well, to be sure, it was his so-say contribution to democracy via his philosophy of individualism and pluralism that got him on there—*that* made him a hero to the early twentieth century promoters of that great monument—mistakenly we believe, but understandably, seeing as how the twentieth century social, theological, philosophical and political thought had become so suffused with individualism. Roger Williams developed those dogmas logically and naturally from his Baptist theology—the theology of individualism.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, then, the face of Protestantism after the last 200 years. Wallowing under a rolling swell of immersionism, “higher criticism,” modernism, massed cults (all immersionistic in practice), family breakdown, antinomianism, betrayal of the Reformation, downright immorality, and outright apostasy.

Not a pretty sight.

Strange. If Baptist theology is correct, the churches of today, by virtue of being more and more immersionistic, should be *purser* churches than ever before, in that their system “excludes from church membership unregenerate children.” Only such that can profess credibly an adult understanding and subjective experience of conversion can be candidates for immersionistic baptism, and only such can therefore gain access to church membership. And, by comparison, the paedobaptist churches

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<sup>8</sup> “There goes ...” said Cotton Mather, discerningly, concerning the Baptist, Roger Williams, “there goes a young man with a windmill in his head.” On the enormously idiosyncratic course of Roger Williams and its deleterious effects right across the developing America, see especially Henry Martyn Dexter’s scholarly work: *As to Roger Williams and his banishment ... etc.* (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1876). A selection out of Dexter’s work can also be found reprinted in *Christianity and Civilization* (Spring 1982, Geneva Divinity School, Texas), vol. 1, pp. 233-243. Another useful exposure of Roger Williams is to be found in Stephen Perk’s volume, *A Defence of the Christian State* (Taunton, England, The Kuyper Foundation, 1998), pp. 40ff.

must, *de facto*, be filled with hosts of unregenerate, and are, therefore, falling far short of the scriptural demands imposed for the administration and formation of churches—thus runs the immersionistic propaganda.<sup>9</sup>

This is the whole foundation and premise of the Baptist movement. Right from their inception amongst the general ferment of change sparked by the Reformation in Europe, the early “Anabaptists”<sup>10</sup> insisted that the Reformation churches were unscriptural on their doctrine of baptism, which led, they alleged, to churches full of apostates! *Infant baptism*—which they said was a “Romish hangover” that Luther and Calvin, *et al.*, had failed to purge out—was the fundamental cause of all these impure churches. Infant baptism filled them with people who were unregenerate! And the baptistic creed was formulated on the basis that it, and it alone, truly represented the biblical doctrine of the new covenant as propounded by the prophet Jeremiah. “Insist on adult baptism,” they said, “and you will

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<sup>9</sup> “Baptism, for Baptists, is a matter of churchmanship ... [Because] they have a high and holy conception of [church] membership, they feel that baptism should only be administered to those who understand its true significance and personally accept its solemn responsibilities” (Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* [Carey Kingsgate Press, 1947], p. 89, cited in Bridge and Phypers, *Op cit.*, p. 67). Bridge and Phypers go on to say that the Baptist “sees baptism as the door of the church, one that opens to receive believers and closes to exclude unbelievers. He suspects that once a Christian community begins to welcome the unbeliever, the half-believer and the infant incapable of belief within its actual membership, before three generations have passed that community will have lost its spiritual zeal and its evangelical experience, as its distinctive Christian features fade” (*Op cit.*, p. 67).

<sup>10</sup> “Anabaptist” is a theological term which is used to delineate a multi-variety of radical sects and cults that flared up as the Reformation broke the hold of Romanism on the general masses. The name “Anabaptist” means “one who rebaptizes” —i.e. the Anabaptists did not consider the universal infant baptism of Rome or of the Reformation churches to be valid, and insisted on professing believers being baptized as adults, that is, effectively rebaptized in terms of Reformation theology, though not in terms of *Anabaptist* theology. Generally, whilst Anabaptist groups could have radical differences between them on many points of theology and practice—the differences often involving dangerous heresies—one common feature was their radical view of the church and the ordinance of baptism.

purify the churches, because only those who have registered a valid and conscious experience of conversion will be able to enter membership.”<sup>11</sup>

Now it is true that, in the immediate turmoil of the initial Reformation period, great numbers of unregenerate mixed in amongst the ranks of the Lord’s people and caused serious trouble and damage amongst them. But was *infant baptism* the cause underlying this? One only needs to find *one* baptized infant that grows up to become godly to invalidate the baptistic argument here. And the annals of the Reformation can reveal myriads of such cases. Were not such godly leaders as Calvin and Luther baptized as infants? Were not the stalwarts in their churches mainly, if not almost exclusively, people who had been baptized as infants? Such is enough to prove that infant baptism was *not* a cause of corruption in Protestant congregations, and that one must look elsewhere for the causes of such corruptions.

Again, one only needs to find *one case of corruption* in a “pure” Baptist church to falsify the immersionist argument yet again on this point. And it is evident that none would have to search far to find a plethora of such corruption in baptistic churches. And this holds not only for contemporary baptistic circles, but likewise for such circles in past history.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Anabaptists, says Hughes Oliphant Old, “held [that] the key to the whole Reformation of the church was their program of baptismal reform ... At issue in this question of believer’s baptism was an attempt to found a new church for the spiritually elite” (*The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992], p. 77).

<sup>12</sup> Contemporaneously, the modern immersionistic churches worldwide are no examples of “pure” churches at all. One need only refer to footnote 5 above. To this can be added the gross capitulation to modernistic theology evident in many Baptist circles worldwide, and involvement of Baptists in ecumenical movements. Historically, one finds the premier historian of the Baptist movement, Robinson of the eighteenth century, to have been an *Arian* (Robinson, *History of Baptism* [London: 1790]). And one could go on, noting the Baptist leader, Dr. John Clifford, who so stood against Spurgeon, or the Baptist involvement in the 1960s’ “God is Dead” theology, and of course, Karl Barth, who came to deny paedobaptism. Then there is the Evangelical “Calvinist,” the late Paul King Jewett, of Fuller Seminary, who lambasted the rise of

No, the apostles themselves had failed to produce “pure” churches. A superficial glance at the New Testament is all that is necessary to establish that fact.<sup>13</sup> By what exalted farrago of piety the initial Anabaptists thought they could out-apostle the apostles is beyond this writer’s imagination. But the testimony of Reformation history is indubitable. The Anabaptists began on this very premise: that their churches would be *pure*, and would be pure because only *adult baptism on the basis of profession of faith and testimony of the conversion experience* would be valid—thereby excluding all unregenerate. Only on such a foundation, they claimed, could proper ecclesiastical discipline be maintained and practised.

The multi-variant spectrum of Anabaptistic activities in the Reformation period extended from the sublime, through the ridiculous, to the dangerous, and on to the tragic. Many good and sincere people could be found in various Anabaptist quarters. But, contra their “pure gathered church” and “strictly disciplined church” ideas, they found themselves mixed up in a widespread and deleterious cocktail of heretical extremists and wild revolutionaries—such that the “bad” old paedobaptistic churches actually did not experience, whatever other faults they manifested. But the annals of Anabaptist history are well enough documented without us having to trawl through all that data here.<sup>14</sup> What is apposite for our purposes at this juncture is to note that the early Anabaptists of the sixteenth century *did not baptize exclusively by immersion*.

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creationism in science, advocated women in the ministry, and yet was a Baptist in his sacramental theology, and wrote the article, “BAPTISM (Baptist View)” in the *Encyclopaedia of Christianity*, vol. 1 (Delaware: NFCE, 1964). Where is New Testament purity in all this, we ask?

<sup>13</sup> Much of the New Testament epistolary material contains rebukes, exhortations, instructions, corrections, criticisms, all levelled by apostolic authors at churches they themselves founded.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (London: 1962) for a good overview that is, if anything, regarded as the “standard work.” But see also Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) and Benjamin Wirt Farley’s translation of Calvin’s *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982). In his first article therein, Calvin tackles the Anabaptist “Article 1” of their *Schleitheim Confession*, which deals with baptism.

They also utilized the mode of *affusion*, or *aspersion*.<sup>15</sup> What principally distinguished them from the Reformers was not the *mode*, but the *application* of baptism. The Anabaptists *excluded infants*, baptizing only adults or those old enough to make a credible profession of faith (however old that is).

*Exclusive, dogmatic* immersionism was a later development, emerging to a systematic manifestation and attestation in the early seventeenth century. What was it that propelled this theological and ecclesiastical development? Baptists would argue that it was greater consecration to Scripture and a more-thorough purging out of the leaven of apostate Romanist traditions. A closer examination of Baptist claims, at this point, will, however, yield the shocking conclusion that the immersionist system is, in total, not a true scriptural system, but is, rather, a *Roman Catholic error*—Romanist in its first origins, Romanist in its theology, Romanist in its practice, Romanist in its dogmatic foundations, and even *lexicographically erroneous*<sup>16</sup> and Romanist in its understanding of the definitive biblical terms used to denominate and delineate the sacrament of baptism.

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<sup>15</sup> The Anabaptist, Hübmaier, for instance, taught immersionism as he was taught it by the “Bohemian brethren.” His insistence on “immersionism” is cited by Bridge and Phipers (*Op cit.*, p. 104) as being unusual for those times. Generally, both in and out of the Roman church, tolerance as to the mode of baptism was the usual case in the sixteenth century.

<sup>16</sup> Early lexicography of the Reformation period was defective in that it depended too much on *classical* Greek usage of the Greek words used in the New Testament for theological terms. The Greek verbs used in the Greek New Testament to delineate baptism were interpreted as meaning “to dip” or “to immerse by dipping.” Such were the definitions which Calvin and Luther and all other Reformers would have apprehended, as they studied the meaning of baptism, using, in all probability, the then current renowned lexicon, the Byzantine tenth-century work of Suidas. That the Reformers utilised this much-prized lexicon of their day is evident in that it was reprinted at Basel in 1544, and in Geneva in 1619. It defined baptism as “immersion” (cf. Hughes Oliphant Old—*Op cit.* footnote 11 above—in footnote on page 273). Of course, eventually the Anabaptists doubtless got hold of this as well, and eventually immersionism spread to become *de rigueur* amongst the circles of sectarians which evolved through the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to become the Baptists as we know them.



In short, contrary to the oft-stated and passionate assertions of the baptistic movement, it is the *Reformers*, with their practice of aspersion, who are the true heirs of the ancient apostolic churches, and the Baptists who are the heirs of a distinctly and indubitably “Romanist” aberration. Now, without a doubt, this assertion will raise eyebrows and drop jaws, or provoke dismissive guffaws of contempt from hardened Baptists. But to those who are concerned to look in a Christian manner at the truth, and to examine the evidence impartially, the conclusion will be inescapable: *immersionism is a Romanist error*. Worse, if the Roman church held to immersionism through its long period of ascendancy, yet allowed for and tolerated affusion and aspersion, such toleration was evacuated out of Baptist theology; and the Baptists have paradoxically made themselves *more* Romanist than the Romanists on this particular issue.<sup>17</sup>

The fact is, however, that Baptist authorities themselves are quick to point out that immersionism, as a dogma, if not as an exclusivist practice, did not originate with them. They point to statements made in medieval and late patriarchal theological sources to vindicate the antiquity of their

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<sup>17</sup> Several researchers in scholarly circles have recently noted this *Romanist* origin of immersionism—cf. for instance Hughes Oliphant Old of the Center of Theological Enquiry at Princeton, USA, in his seminal tome, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). Also the work of Francis Nigel Lee on baptism. Before them, the Romanist connection had been isolated by Rev. W. A. Mackay in his book, *Immersion and Immersionists*, first published in 1880 or thereabouts by Briggs of Toronto. The original title of Mackay’s book was *Immersion Proved to be Not a Scriptural Mode of Baptism, but a Romish Invention*. Further scholarly and apposite material pertaining to the *archaeology* of baptism, which has an important bearing on these matters, can be found in B. B. Warfield’s *Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, reprint 1988), chapter 12, and in Charles Thomas’s *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London: Batsford Academic, 1981). Even further proofs of the Romish origins of immersionism come from Romanists themselves. For instance, the Baptist, G. R. Beasley-Murray translated the German Catholic work, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul*, by Rudolf Schnackenburg, way back in the 1960s, and therein Schnackenburg shows how amenable to Baptist theology the Romanist dogma is at this point, when he indicates the rise of immersionism in Romanism in the immediate post-Constantinian settlement period, in the time of the rising papacy. The scholarly G. W. H. Lampe gives also the same scenario in his *The Seal of the Spirit* (London: SPCK, 1967).

position. They point to the Eastern Orthodox tradition, in which immersionism is practiced even on infants. They even claim, on tenuous grounds, that John Wycliffe was a “Baptist” and that so also were the ancient Waldensians and Albigensians.<sup>18</sup>

But this is all to admit that “baptistic” doctrine was alive and well within the aegis and practice of the pre-Reformation churches, and that it was deemed orthodox by the ecclesiastical authorities of Rome and of Constantinople. Instead, however, of drawing the logical conclusion demanded by such evidence, that, if anything, “immersionism” must be at least as “Roman” as sprinkling or pouring, the Baptists emphasize the Romanist immersion dogma as being the vestige of the original pristine apostolic dogma, and insist that the introduction of aspersion and affusion belongs to the age of Romanist apostasy. Such a deduction is not warranted by the evidence, *prima facie*—let alone when researched in depth. For, *prima facie*, the question the Baptists should have asked is whether *immersionism* truly represents apostolic doctrine, or whether *non-immersionism* represents it. One or the other is an error; the Baptist has

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. sources cited in footnote 17 above. With respect to John Wycliffe, the immersionist claim for him is made by David Fountain in his book on Wycliffe, published some time about 1982. But whatever his views regarding the mode of baptism, Wycliffe would have baptized infants, and to claim him as a “Baptist before his time,” so to speak, is something of a crass misnomer. It is at least possible, if not likely, that Wycliffe, being a Roman Catholic, actually *did* baptize by immersion—if so, he was merely following the Romanist dogma of his day. Wild notions are entertained by Baptists concerning the old Waldensians and Albigensians. Robinson and Jones—Baptist historians—lay claim to these two branches of the church as being “immersionists.” If such were indeed immersionists, they were, of course, then, only reflecting established Romanist practice. But the Baptist has to prove that these people were *exclusive* immersionists—which of course is highly unlikely, seeing that (1) the prevailing dogma of the day allowed for pouring or sprinkling as well as immersion, and (2) on the Baptist view, it is inexplicable that the “Baptist” Waldensians, having held out for their principles against Rome through the bloodiest persecutions extending over a thousand years, nevertheless “capitulated” without a whimper to the Reformers and their practice of sprinkling and paedobaptism. Strange ...

assumed the error to lie with *non*-immersionism, and he has assumed so under the force of his dogmatic presuppositions.

Scholarly research, independent of immersionist or non-immersionist presuppositions, has unearthed a mass of data concerning the development and history of baptismal practice and dogma. And it is to the findings of this research we have next to turn, as it furnishes us with an unbiased view of how the modal practice of baptism diversified in the post-apostolic age. It also supplies us with the facts concerning the *when*, *where* and *why* baptismal modal practices underwent metamorphosis in the Church of Rome. And it is this evidence which proves *exclusivistic* immersionism to have its origins, not in the Bible or in the apostolic traditions, but in the Roman “*mystery religions*,” which, under the absorption programme of the early post-Constantinian papal church, began to infuse Christianity with the mystic cultus that evolved into the “Whore of Babylon” (Revelation 17). And whilst exclusivistic immersionism never totally took over the “whore church,” strangely, it took over the Baptists completely. And plenty more besides ....



## ❧ 2. ❧

### THE ROMAN CONNECTION

TWENTY CENTURIES AGO, when apostolic Christianity exploded outwards from its Hebrew-Palestinian roots, it cascaded across a world deeply permeated with Satanism—this latter being manifest in those times in multi-various guises. The Roman Empire of the first century AD was host to a plethora of pagan cults; and whilst, by and large, these heathen faiths demonstrated an outwardly “Europeanized” appearance within the bounds of the *Imperium Romanum*, the pedigrees of virtually all such are traceable back to the sinister and mystic paganism of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and even as far afield as Persia and India.

It is needless here to go into extensive detailing of the above facts. Such detailing has been adequately presented in Alexander Hislop’s most informative volume, *The Two Babylons*, in which he ably shows the complete series of connections between the ancient worship of the satanic cults of Egypt and Babylonia with their equivalents found in Rome.<sup>19</sup> He also shows the continuing series of connections by which these cults eventually merged into, and then eclipsed, the nascent Roman Catholic Church. For example, Hislop shows the development from Astarte, through Aphrodite of the Greeks, and Diana of the Ephesians, on to the

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<sup>19</sup> Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons* (London: S. W. Partridge & Co. [Fourth Edit. Reprint of 1975]).

worship of the Blessed Virgin in Romanism.<sup>20</sup> Back of it all, is the pagan worship of the ancient Babylonian satanic sex-goddess, the “Queen of Heaven”—a religious motif which we see emerging in strength, yet again, in the rampant feminism and sexual perversions of our modern age.

Scholars refer to several of these ancient Roman cults as “mystery religions.” Fundamental to this nomenclature is the fact that all varieties of these cults operated in the Roman world like a kind of Free Masonry, masking their internal liturgies and operations with a veil of secrecy, and operating amongst the elite of society. Entrance into such cults was conditional upon passing through certain rituals of initiation, which scholars call “mythopoeic” ritual. In such a ritual, a process would be enacted, which mimicked, in material terms, what was believed to be the actual spiritual process through which the neophyte was passing, resulting in a mystic regeneration of the neophyte as, through the ritual, he came to partake in the nature of the deity worshipped. In this ritual, the actual material elements involved were therefore *sacramental*, and were deemed, by the worshippers, to be inhabited with the actual real presence of the deity, or the deity’s power in some way.<sup>21</sup> Thus the importance of idols in the temples of the pagans. By focussing the worshipper’s consciousness on the physical form of the deity, the *spirit* of the deity was able to manifest itself through the inanimate stonework and infuse the worshippers such that they came into a mystical-spiritual unity with itself.<sup>22</sup> A deep

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<sup>20</sup> Hislop, *Op cit.*, chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> Something similar to the “magic” of the mythopoeic ritual, is that of sticking pins into a wax effigy of one’s enemy. This enactment is supposed, somehow, to become sacramentally active and, via the power of the deity, work pain and disease in the actual body of one’s enemy, in places coincident with where the pins were stuck in on the wax effigy, though the victim may be thousands of miles away. Fundamentally, however, in mythopoeic ritual proper, a “myth” is enacted or dramatized as a liturgy of worship or sacrament. The “myth” is not to be thought of in terms of “fable,” but more in terms of an allegorical representation, in material terms, of certain truths believed to pertain to the spiritual realm.

<sup>22</sup> There are several psychological levels of comprehension involved with respect to idolatry. Such levels are manifest in the Exodus narratives concerning the “golden calf” apostasy. The Scriptures indicate how the people knew full-well that the calf, Aaron was

psychological experience would often ensue, with concomitant emotions, paranormal trances and visions, often with manifestations of glossolalia and prophesying on the part of the cult clergy; and wrapped up in all this was the underlying belief that some kind of “magic” was being worked by the deity.<sup>23</sup>

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to make, was merely a fabrication of gold smelted and shaped from the very ornaments the people themselves donated (Exod. 32:1ff). At this psychological level, the idol is merely inanimate material. However, at the next psychological level, the resultant fabrication is seen as a statue, or likeness, of a real creature. The inanimate material is now seen to be more than material. From this stage, under the influence of the religious instinct, the “statue” is made the focal point representing a certain deity, and, as such, in the worshipper’s mind, comes to partake of sacramental powers which bring the worshipper into the presence of the god thought to be represented therein. Hyped up with manifold liturgies of worship, at such psychological levels such “statues” became the talismans for all manner of demonic influences and manifestations. Thus it is that God’s people are forbidden to make idols. They are not forbidden to make “statues” —for the very laws of Moses prescribe the casting of bronze oxen as pedestals to bear the “bronze sea” used as a reservoir by the priests. Again, the same laws prescribe the fabrication of the “Cherubim” that were to cover the mercy-seat with their wings in the sanctuary—What is forbidden, in Exodus 20:4-6, is that one must not “bow down thyself and worship” such fabrications. To do so would be to drop down to the forbidden “third level” of idolatry. Axiomatically, all “statuesque” or “pictorial” representations purporting to be God in any of His three persons are herewith condemned (contra the opinions of the Romanists and vast phalanxes of modern Evangelicals, who abundantly decorate books and sanctuaries with “pictures of Jesus” etc.). Such representations cannot “represent” the one true God, and therefore reduce His image to the level of idolatry. And such images function effectively as “false Christs,” which, under the appropriate spiritual conditions, act as talismans that propagate demonic manifestations as in paganism.

<sup>23</sup> The evidence from the Bible, and from many ancient secular and pagan sources, indicates that the “lying miracles” were, indeed, performed by various sinister arts, implying that satanic spiritual powers were at work amongst the clergy of the ancient pagan cults. At the court of Pharaoh, for example, the magicians were able to turn rods into snakes, like Moses did (Exod. 7:11-12). And in Deuteronomy, Moses lay down laws for dealing with false prophets which include the phenomenon of such prophets prophesying *accurately!* (Deut. 13:2). Again, it appears that the “witch of Endor” certainly called up Samuel’s spirit! Again, the New Testament Gospels relate how demons were

In such mythopoeic rituals, it was important to have every sacramental element of the ritual enactment just right. Failure in this respect would rupture the ability of the ritual to convey the “magic” which effected, in the neophyte, the requisite mystical experience of contact with, or co-habitation with, the deity. And where a ritual was intended to mythopoeically enact the *death* of the neophyte, that ritual had to be so extenuating as to virtually almost *kill* him. Indeed, Hislop can tell us that, from time to time, neophytes actually *did* die on their dangerous course through the initiation rituals. It is interesting to consider here exactly what Hislop relates for us, taking Tertullian as his source of information:

“In certain sacred rites of the heathen,” says Tertullian, especially referring to the worship of Isis and Mithra, “the mode of initiation is by baptism.” The term “initiation” clearly shows that it was to the Mysteries of these divinities he referred. This baptism was by immersion, and seems to have been rather a rough and formidable process; for we find that he who passed through the purifying waters, and other necessary penances, “*if he survived*, was then admitted to the knowledge of the Mysteries.” To face this ordeal, required not little courage on the part of those who were initiated. There was this grand inducement, however, to submit, that they who were thus baptised were, as Tertullian assures

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manifestly active in certain people, giving physical evidence of their presence from time to time. And St. Paul was followed, on one occasion, by a slave girl possessed by the spirit of Python (Acts 16:16-17), which the apostle exorcised. Pagan records, too, indicate how pervasive and real were the manifestations of “magic” in their midst—it being the custom for rulers to have access to necromancers and soothsayers; and world-famous were the priestess “oracles” of Delphi in ancient Greece. All such manifestations departed the world with the onset of the apostolic gospel, from which times Satan has evidently been bound throughout this “millennium” period (Rev. 20:1-3).



us, promised (as the consequence)  
“REGENERATION, and the pardon of all their  
perjuries.”<sup>24</sup>

Hislop is here focussing on “baptismal regeneration.” He describes how, in paganism, the actual physical practice of the sacrament conferred the desired “regeneration” on the neophyte. No baptism in water, no “regeneration.” No conformity in the ritual to the *proper mode* of the baptism, and there was, consequently, no baptism and no “regeneration.” In this, we see the underlying belief in a kind of “magic,” which makes the ritual become the *actual instrument* that propagates the desired effect, i.e., “regeneration”; and this heathen “sacramentarianism,” together with various other pagan accretions, such as the anointing with oil and marking with the sign of the cross, Hislop traces as it filters into early Catholicism. He documents how Romanist authorities, themselves, admit to these pagan origins of their sacramentarian rites thus:

Some of the continental advocates of Rome have *admitted* that some of these at least have not been derived from *Scripture*. Thus, Jodocus Tiletanus of Louvaine, defending the doctrine of “Unwritten Tradition,” does not hesitate to say, “We are not satisfied with that which the apostles or the Gospel do declare, but we say that, as well before as after, there are divers matters of importance and weight accepted and received out of a doctrine which is nowhere set forth in writing. For we do blesse the water wherewith we baptize, and the oyle wherewith we annoynt; yea, and, besides that, him that is christened. And (I pray you) out of what Scripture have we learned the same? Have we it not of a *secret and unwritten* ordinance? And further, what

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Hislop, *Op cit.*, p. 132, citing Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, vol. I, p. 1204.

Scripture hath taught us to grease with oyle? Yea, I pray you, whence cometh it, that we do dype the childe three times in the water, Doth it not come out of this hidden and undisclosed doctrine, which our forefathers have received closely without any curiosity, and do observe it still.” This learned divine of Louvaine, of course, maintains that “the hidden and undisclosed doctrine” of which he speaks was the “unwritten word” handed down through the channel of infallibility, from the Apostles of Christ to his own time. But, after what we have already seen, the reader will probably entertain a different opinion of the source from which the hidden and undisclosed doctrine must have come. And, indeed, Father [Cardinal John Henry] Newman himself admits, in regard to “holy water” (that is, water impregnated with “salt,” and consecrated), and many other things that were, as he says, “the very instruments and appendages of demon-worship”—that they were all of “pagan” origin, and “sanctified by adoption into the church.” What plea, then, what palliation can he offer, for so extraordinary an adoption? Why, this: that the Church had “confidence in the power of Christianity to resist the infection of evil,” and to transmute them to “an evangelical use.”<sup>25</sup>

That final phrase, “transmute them to an evangelical use,” is an eye-opener. It reveals the mode by which the Roman church has ever operated, i.e., assimilation of local paganisms into Christianity as a means of forming a quick and easy “bridge” for crossing from paganism to Christianity. Such syncretism does nothing for the “converts,” and merely introduces back-

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p, 138.

door paganism into the very precincts of the church. And thus, as Hislop shows in his valuable tome, the Roman church (after seventeen centuries of this) is awash with paganism on all sides.

One might take care to understand how such syncretism began. As early as the first century AD, we find the apostles sounding out warnings in their epistles concerning the surrounding paganism, which, in various guises, was making inroads into different churches. The letters to the “seven churches” of Asia, in the Apocalypse, catalogue a plethora of sins which encompass “Jezebel which calleth herself a prophetess” and the “synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). Following through into the second century AD, the pervasive influences of the “mystery cults” evolved into what scholars call “Gnosticism,” at which point serious penetration into the churches became endemic.<sup>26</sup> It is understandable that saints began to be weary with the widespread persecutions to which they were subjected, from time to time, and hence, to temptation, arose to accommodate Christianity to the world around them. Such a synthesis was all the more facilitated by reason of the “evil men creeping in unawares” into the churches (cf. Matt. 18:7; II Pet. 2:1-2; Jude 4), whereby, under God’s sovereign dispensation, “there must be heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you” (I Cor. 11:19).

Thus, *inward subversion*, and *outward pressure of persecutions* combined to prise open the ranks of the faithful—their defensive doctrinal dykes were sabotaged, and, over the space of three centuries, a rising tide of “baptised paganism” advanced through the body-ecclesiastic. Careful examination of the writings of the “early church fathers,” over this period, evinces this gradual but persistent syncretisation, with the Egyptian churches being some of the foremost in this development.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> “Gnosticism” is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge,” but with respect to the “mystery cults,” the word carried a specialized usage, referring to a spiritual and *deep experiential* encounter with the deity worshipped in any particular cult.

<sup>27</sup> In Egypt, by the second century, Clement of Alexandria had introduced Gnostic thinking into the exegesis of Scripture, a process that was continued into the third century by Origen. Gnosticism was one form of “mystery religion,” fundamentally based on a form of Platonic doctrine, and the syncretism in this respect was basically

The evidence of a line of development from oriental cults to “mystery cults” to gnostic mysticism, and then on into “Christian” mysticism, is ably presented by Bernard McGinn, in his extensively detailed work, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1992). McGinn, in this, his first of a four-volume exhaustive treatment of the “History of Western Mysticism,” critically traces out a distinct line of connection that runs from the ancient Roman “mystery religions” on through to “Christian” mysticism.

Noting the extensive study of the “mystery religions” that has taken place over the last century (a fact which the rise of the baptistic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would not have anticipated), McGinn tells us that while great puzzles still remain, concerning these pagan cults, it is evident that they were basically the products of Greek religious thought, or “Hellenized” interpretations of oriental myths. McGinn goes on to name such cults, noting those of Eleusis, Dionysius, Orpheus, Isis, and Mithras. He critically tours through the evaluations of various scholarly authorities, concerning such cults, noting that mysticism was at the heart of such.

This mysticism, according to scholarly research, was a means of facilitating a direct “divine-human” encounter (to put it in modern theological terms as used by Emil Brunner), whereby the worshipper attained some kind of union with the god, via the “mystery rituals,” which are isolated as being such practices as a sacred meal, sonship of the deity, regeneration, some form of sexual coitus, and the so-called “heavenly journey.” McGinn can show us that such “mysteries” actually percolated through into Christianity via the Greek neo-platonic philosophy which was entering Christian thought in the second to third centuries AD. It appears that the philosophic appropriation of these “mystery religions” lies at the back of incoming changes in Christian piety, liturgy and theology in that particular era. Fundamental in all this was the second century

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one that affected doctrine firstly, rather than sacrament and liturgy. For a detailed overview of this development, see Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp. 101-130.

development of “Christian Gnosticism,” which was, itself, a direct syncretisation with the old mystery cults.<sup>28</sup>

Thus we see that there is a line of connection which exposes the “mystery religions” as the primary motive focus in the gradual paganisation of the churches—and this line of connection has been demonstrated, by scholars involved in the investigation of these phenomena.

The upshot of this syncretisation was that the church, from the second century onwards, had to fight for its life against forces of subversion within, as well as against the persecution manifest from without. The rising tide of Gnosticism persuaded many within the churches that a super-spiritual and elitist approach was attainable via supra-scriptural experiences. Such experiences were lodged in the performance of liturgy and ritual *à la* the “mystery cults.”

In documenting this development, Hislop notes the issue of sacramentarianism especially. He notes how the Lord’s Supper became the Roman “mass,” in which, via actual mythopoeic magic, the elements are mysteriously transmuted to become the actual material body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation)—the celebrants thereby actually, as they believed, eating the very flesh of Christ. Parallel to this, he notes the mythopoeic sacramentarianism that pervaded the doctrine of baptism. In the Roman church, as in the pagan “mysteries,” the actual water was made holy, and the actual water and mode of proceeding with baptism was the very means of cleansing the neophyte and representing his death and his resurrection alongside the death and resurrection of the god worshipped.<sup>29</sup>

It is precisely at this juncture, at the end of the second century and early third century, that Tertullian wrote concerning his observations on the rite of baptism that he saw penetrating the churches. He noted that paganisation had entered alongside the cult of “trine” (three-fold)

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. McGinn, *Op cit.*, pp, 41-42.

<sup>29</sup> The idea of a “dying-deified-rising god” was prominent in such heathen religions as the Adonis cult. Hislop documents all the connections in detail. Cf. Hislop, *Op cit.*, pp. 55ff.

immersionism. This is the very first mention in Christian literature of “dipping” in baptism. Prior to this time, all references to baptism indicate a process that portrayed affusion or sprinkling. Since the rise of the modern burgeoning Baptist movement, the documentary evidence of the so-called *Didache* (“Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”) has come to light, and scholars date this document within a range from about mid first century to mid second century. This document speaks of baptism thus:

... baptise, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running water: but if thou hast no running water, baptise in other water, and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, pour water three times on the head, in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit ...<sup>30</sup>

One notes from this that baptism by *affusion* was well-established as early as 100 years before Tertullian. Turning our attention to his treatise, *De Corona Militis*, and chapters 3 and 4, Tertullian notes the introduction of “mystery cult” baptism, replete with trine immersion in the nude, anointing with oil, blessing of the water, and belief that the neophyte was actually “born again” via the action of the water immersion—sacramentarianism, in other words. In delivering his verdict on all this, Tertullian says that such “are based on tradition,” and are “destitute of scriptural authority.”

The French scholar, André Benoît, in his monumental study, *Christian Baptism in the Second Century*,<sup>31</sup> has documented how, amongst the church,

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<sup>30</sup> *The Didache*, section VII, par. 1-3, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press & William Heinemann, 1975), translated from the Greek by Kirsopp Lake, and pages 319-321.

<sup>31</sup> André Benoît, *Le baptême Chrétien au Second Siècle* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1953), cited in Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the 16th Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 273, fn. 69. Old notes that the idea of exegetically connecting immersionism with Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 “seems

during the first two centuries AD, no trace is to be found of any idea of baptism being a dramatization—i.e., a mythopoeic ritual of the burial and resurrection of Christ.<sup>32</sup> The idea that Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 specify a definite “baptism by immersion” in which the neophyte is mythopoeically enacting, in ritual form, the death and resurrection of Christ is a *late phenomenon* on the Christian theological scene. According to Hughes Oliphant Old, it seems to have first appeared in the fourth century—the very century wherein, after the Constantinian *Edict of Milan* (313 AD), the Roman authorities finally effected, during the time of the Emperor Theodosius, the “establishment” of Christianity, with all the pagan syncretism traced out by Hislop. Pertinently, Old points out that it was in this fourth century era that baptisms were more and more celebrated at the old pagan festival time of “Easter”. As such, a dramatization of the death and burial of Christ Jesus began to figure in theological and liturgical thinking. The linking of pagan immersionism with Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 appears on the exegetical scene *for the first time* in precisely that era!<sup>33</sup>

The prevalence of nude immersionism, from thereon, indicates the pagan origins of the rite. The nudity was required, mythopoeically, in order to allow uninhibited access of the “regenerative” water to the neophyte’s body. This in itself is a “give-away” indicating the *pagan origins* of

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to have first appeared as an interpretation” by Christians acquainted “with the mystery religions.” Old rates Benoît’s study as being of “enormous” importance.

<sup>32</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old cites Benoît with reference to the “dramatization” element that entered the sacrament of baptism. It is most notable (and eye-opening) that without realizing it, some modern Baptist apologists for immersionism use the same term, and justify immersion on the grounds of it being “a dramatization of a spiritual process.” See, for instance, how the Arminian Baptist, Oscar Brooks, can speak explicitly of baptism in terms of it being “to dramatize their faith response.” This is to use the very same pagan approach to the sacrament, as found in the “mystery cults” of Rome. And of course, modern Baptist churches are inclined to do just this, namely, make of the sacrament something of a *spectacle, demonstration, or show* (cf. Angus Stewart’s fine article, *The Meaning of Baptism—with Special Reference to the Baptist View*, found at <http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/meaningofbaptism.htm> [esp. footnote 137]).

<sup>33</sup> Old, *Op cit.*, p. 272.

immersionism. Significantly, modern Baptists pass this one by. Their neophytes have to be *well-robed* for immersion!

Baptistic exegesis of Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 actually follows Roman Catholic hermeneutical principles. It is doubtlessly reinforced by the modern European mode of burial, which entails letting a coffin-encased body down into a six-foot hole in a parish churchyard or municipal cemetery. However, *such imagery would not have been present to the minds of the apostolic Christians*. Their modes of burial were entirely different, as a perusal of the historical sources soon indicates. More especially, the texts—Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12—speak of the neophyte being “buried with Christ,” and Christ’s *burial* was, of course, *nothing like a modern European burial*. This point must be borne in mind. If baptism should be a *dramatization* of “burial with Christ,” then such a burial cannot portray so much as a whisker of “going down into” or “dipping” or “immersion.” The Lord was buried by being *carried in, laterally, to a niche in a cave hollowed out of the side of a hill*. Literally, the root verb, *thapto*, used for the term “buried with” (*sunetaphēmen*), in Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12, means to “entomb.” The derivative noun, *taphos* means “tomb,” and such “tombs” were often even *above ground level*. Indeed, examination of many English parish churches and cathedrals would show that large numbers of English gentry were “buried” in ornate tombs that are above ground level within the precincts of the church building itself.<sup>34</sup>

This biblical usage of the verb, *thapto*, and its derivatives, is noticeable in the *Septuagint*, where, in the narrative of Genesis 33, Abraham “buries” Sarah in “the Cave of Machpelah” which he bought from Ephron the son of Zohar. *Taphos* is the word used in Genesis 23:20, where it tells us that Abraham purchased the field and the cave to make a “tomb” for Sarah.

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<sup>34</sup> In biblical times, the dead were “interred” in tombs cut in hillsides, or in caves, or in ornate tombs built like monuments. Even the poor generally just heaped up stones over the body. In the pagan world, the dead were burned and their ashes put in an urn which was later buried. One might note, too, the modern compounded Greek noun for “cenotaph” means “an empty tomb.” Cenotaphs are all found *above ground level*, such as memorials to the First World War. For details regarding ancient disposal of the dead, see Schaff-Herzog and the *New Bible Dictionary*, in loc.



Now the sheer “topography” of this cave precludes any motion like “going down into” or “dipping.” Abraham would’ve had to have Sarah’s body *carried in* laterally, and *laid* laterally in the innermost part of the cave *on a niche*.<sup>35</sup>

We may summarize our findings so far thus:

1. Early Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy, under the pressures of persecution without, and sabotage within, gradually syncretised the Christian faith with the socially prestigious dogmas and practices of the Roman “mystery cults.”

2. Consequently, Christian dogma, liturgy and sacraments underwent gradual modification, in order to accommodate the developing syncretism.

3. By the fourth century AD, Christianity was promoted to the status of being the “established religion” of the Roman Empire. It was able, by then, to step into this role relatively easily, due to the syncretism already taken on board, as per paragraphs 1 and 2 above.

4. At this time, the simple and spartan New Testament sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper underwent serious modification under the impact of the burgeoning influence of the pagan input coming into the

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<sup>35</sup> Now a Muslim holy place, this cave at Hebron is guarded with fierce jealousy by the adepts of Islam. No “infidels” are allowed to penetrate its gloomy depths. However, back in the 1960s, a team of archaeological researchers, linked to the American *National Geographic* magazine, somehow managed to obtain permission to enter the cave. The result was a long and informative article in one of the *National Geographic*’s for that era, in which a superb artistic rendering depicted how Sarah’s body was carried, laterally, into and along the cave. Suffice it to say that the American team was not allowed to enter the jealously-guarded tombs at the innermost end of the cave. Thus God, in His providence, has used Islam to protect the mortal remains of his saints of old from inquisitive modern archaeologists!

It ought to be pointed out here that the English word “bury” does not require a “dipping,” “plunging,” or “going down into” the earth. Baptist exegesis seems hooked up inexorably on the *Western* mode of funereal interment in a parish churchyard. But plenty of people have been buried without any “going down into” or plunging. Consider the alpine climbers who have been buried under avalanches, for instance. Such cases indicate total burial, but not a whisker of “plunging” or “going down into.” Such burials are effected via “affusion”—the cascading of the snow *over* the victim.

church. The Lord's Supper evolved into the pagan "mass," in which Christ was mythopoeically put to death again; and baptism was, for the first time in the records, identified as to its mode with Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12, similarly becoming a mythopoeic ritual in which the actual *water* was the conveyor of regeneration. Like with the "mass," the simple sacrament of baptism became elaborated into a virtual "clone" of similar sacramental immersions practiced in the Roman "mystery cults," with which the church was now syncretised. Such influences demanded that the sacrament be performed in as dramatic a way as possible, in order that the mythopoeic element could have the necessarily full freedom to function. Linked with this, is the insistence on the neophytes presenting themselves totally naked for the baptismal rite. This feature, in itself, as we have noted, is a salient "give-away" that the whole immersionistic set-up had been thoroughly infused with the pagan ethos of the "mystery cults" from where such rituals had been culled. That Christians (who, according the apostolic records, were admonished most thoroughly and persistently to mortify the flesh and to exercise modesty of dress and deportment) should now be presenting themselves for baptism *totally nude*, indicates the degree to which the paganisation of the churches went ahead apace in the centuries immediately before and after the Roman establishment.

At this juncture, in the fourth century AD, a new architectural feature became manifest in church buildings: the construction of "baptisteries" deep enough to facilitate immersion. It is notable that archaeologists have uncovered the trail of this architectural development. The testimony of this science indicates that, prior to the fourth century, baptisteries were evidently *too shallow to facilitate dipping*, and that such receive and drain away the outpoured or sprinkled water cascading off the neophyte. Parallel with this feature, isolated by the archaeologists, comes something else which *linguistic* scholars have discovered, namely, a serious metamorphosis in the language used to describe baptism—this latter feature testifying to the impact of immersionistic dogma. In the following chapters we will explore these two issues: archaeology and language.

For now, we feel warranted, therefore, in drawing from the evidence thus far uncovered, the conclusion that *until the fourth century AD*, Christian baptism was a simple, spartan sacrament that was regarded as symbolic of the inner cleansing by the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit was “poured out” on the day of Pentecost, so the baptismal waters were poured out, or sprinkled, over the neophyte—and this, as summarised in Rev. Angus Stewart’s article, *The Meaning of Baptism—With Special Reference to the Baptist View* (see footnote 32, above), which fully satisfies the biblical usage of the verbs *bapto* and *baptizo*. Alongside this, some immersion might well have been practiced—for that method, too, is a mode of “cleansing”—but until the fourth century AD, baptism was never connected as to *mode* with Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12. But even then, as the evolving medieval Roman church “paganized” the baptismal ritual, *exclusive* immersionism was the never the rule.

We find, therefore, that the medieval Roman Catholic Church held in its bosom the old apostolic tradition of pouring or sprinkling, alongside the newer and paganized mythopoeicism of *immersionism*. It is the immersionism, which, according to historical, linguistic, and archaeological research, is the *later* accretion—not the pouring or sprinkling—and this contrary to what the Baptists would have us believe.



### ❧ 3. ❧

## THE HISTORICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL TESTIMONY

WE HAVE SEEN, so far,<sup>36</sup> how the implementation of immersionism took place in the early papal church, as a result of the assimilation of pagan “mystery” rites and dogmas into the stream of Christianity, during the second to fifth centuries. During this period, the Lord’s Supper became corrupted into the form of the Roman “mass,” and a plethora of innovations became a central dogma with the neophytes being required to present themselves *in the nude* for the sacrament, as was required in the Roman “mystery religions.”

We discovered, also, that it was not until the *fourth century*, that the first exegetical connections were made between Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12 and the practice of *immersion*.<sup>37</sup> Such sacramentarianism took place around the time of “Easter,” which was, of course, not only the calendar date of the Lord’s death and resurrection, but also of yet another pagan festival which celebrated the resurrection of natural life after the winter. The pagan notion of “dying and rising again” was thus easily blended into the mainstream of Christian liturgy, and, at this time of Spring festivals, the practice of immersionistic baptism connected with “dying and rising” was,

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<sup>36</sup> Chapters 1 and 2 of this pamphlet.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, USA: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 272-273.

of course, conveniently apposite.<sup>38</sup> Adult baptism in the churches became a sacrament performed primarily and almost exclusively at “Easter.”<sup>39</sup> And immersion in a “plunge bath” naturally encapsulated the whole meaning and philosophy of this festival, originally pagan, but now itself absorbed into Christianity via the papistic policy of conquering pagan faiths by means of assimilation.

In tracking the history of this development, three salient features stand out.

**First**, there is the fact that, in classical, Judaic, Johannine, Christic and Patristic usage, “baptism” did not mean “immersion,” but signified the application of water in order to *effect* (classical) or *symbolize* (Johannine, Christic and Patristic) inner purification. Thus, in Christian baptism, the application of the water of baptism symbolized the inner baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire—and, via this inward spiritual baptism, *incorporation into Christ*.<sup>40</sup> As such, the application of water was *not expressive of mode*—

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<sup>38</sup> The noun “Easter” is, of course, derived from a pagan-religious source. The details of how “Eostre” or “easter” became grafted on to the early commemorations of Christ’s death and resurrection can be found in Alexander Hislop’s work, *The Two Babylons* (London: Partridge & Co., 1975, [4<sup>th</sup> edition]), pp. 103-113.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London: Batsford Academic, 1981), pp. 212-213. Thomas notes that, “the use of seasons other than Easter or Pentecost for baptism were progressively condemned by Church Councils in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries as inappropriate and out of step ...” This salient feature indicates the impact of the pagan “mystery religions” affecting baptism in an ever-increasing manner as the centuries rolled by.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the *magnum opus* of James Wilkinson Dale—four volumes, numbering some 1852 pages, containing *the most exhaustive* analysis of the usage of the Greek verbs *bapto* and *baptizo* ever undertaken. It was produced in response to the Baptist work, *Baptizein*, by Thomas Conant, and one can only say that Dale’s work *wipes the floor* with Conant! First published in about 1867-1874, these four volumes have been reprinted in the last 10 or 12 years of the twentieth century by a publishing combine including the American “Presbyterian and Reformed” company. The titles of the four volumes are, respectively, *Classic Baptism* (in which Dale examines the usage of the baptismal verbs in the Greek of the *classical* period), *Judaic Baptism* (in which he examines their usage in *Jewish* circles), *Johannine Baptism* (concerning the baptism of John the Baptist), and finally *Christic*

hence, the Scriptures can speak of “sprinklings” as “baptisms,” and of the “outpouring” of the Holy Spirit as a “baptism.” Whilst “plunge immersionism” is not ruled out as a valid means of applying water sacramentally to the individual, it is certainly not mandated by the meaning of the biblical terms used to delineate “baptism,” nor is it mandated by the scriptural descriptions of such activities—witness the “diverse washings” (literally, *baptisms*) of Hebrews 9:10, which refer to the Mosaic “sprinklings” of Leviticus 14:6-7 (cf. Num. 8:7; 19:11-13; Ps. 51:7; Ezek. 36:25-27), and the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” of Acts chapter 2. If mode is at all expressed, it is “sprinkling” or “affusion” As a matter of fact, *no* case can be made anywhere out from Scripture that would mandate “immersion.”<sup>41</sup>

Further ramifying this linguistic evidence is the fact—missed completely by immersionists—that *other words* existed in the vocabulary of Koine (aka, biblical) Greek which could have been used by the inspired writers of the Scriptures, if they had wanted to specify “immersion” most definitely. The puritan, John Owen, had isolated this feature over 300 years ago.<sup>42</sup> He noted that two Greek verbs were used in the New Testament to signify “baptism.” They are *bapto* (βάπτω) and *baptizo* (βαπτίζω). Manifestly, the linguistic evidence shouts they cannot be used to unambiguously mandate “immersion.” So, as Owen says, if the apostles had definitely wished to mandate immersionism, why did they not use the two *compound modified forms* of those verbs that are to be found in the Greek language? Owen is referring here to the verbs *em-bapto* (ἐμβάπτω) and *em-baptizo*

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*Baptism and Patristic Baptism* (in which he analyses the usage of the baptismal verbs as found in the *New Testament* and in the *early church fathers*).

<sup>41</sup> A most useful and easily readable little book that examines all the New Testament evidence is *Baptism: Meaning, Mode & Subject*, by Michael Kimmitt (K & M Books, 1997), available at <http://www.cprf.co.uk/bookstore/baptismmeaning.htm>. In this work, the author judiciously examines all New Testament baptism references as to mode, and finds himself (very rationally, we are convinced) drawn to the conclusion that nowhere in the New Testament can one make out a *certain* case for immersionism, but all instances indicate *most probably* affusion or sprinkling.

<sup>42</sup> John Owen, *Works* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), vol. 16, pp. 266-268.

(ἐμβαπτίζω). The reader will note that a prefix, *em* (ἐμ) is found in front of these latter two verbs. This *em* is, in fact, the Greek preposition *en* (ἐν), which can mean “in” as well as “with.” The *en* is mutated to *em* because when a nasal sound (‘n’) falls before a labial sound (like ‘b’) it changes to another labial—in this case, “m” (the reader should try pronouncing “eNbapto” and then try pronouncing “eMbapto.” He will find the latter easier—his lip-formation flowing from the ‘m’ into the ‘b’ more smoothly than from an ‘n’ to a ‘b’). Now, these two verbs are the *modified* or *compounded* form of the original *bapto*, etc., and signify, without doubt, *immersion by an act of dipping*. It is that proposition *en* or “in” that enforces this conclusion, and indeed the actual *usage* of these modified forms in classical and Koine Greek bears that out. Indeed, only *em-bapto*, of the two, is found at all in the Greek New Testament—used on three occasions, once in each of three parallel passages in the Synoptic gospels to indicate Judas’ “dipping” his hand in the bowl, or to the Lord “dipping” the morsel of bread in the bowl before handing it to Judas (John 13:26). In classical Greek, the same usage pertained, as is recorded in Liddell-Scott’s lexicon. *Yet the sacred pen-men of Scripture avoided using these compounded forms of the verbs in all references to baptism!*

The conclusion is inescapable. If the apostles had absolutely and definitely wanted to mandate “immersion,” leaving no doubts at all, then *they used the wrong verbs!*

Even further evidence gives further ramification of this feature. Two more verbs exist in *Koine* Greek that unambiguously yield a meaning and usage specifying “immersion.” First, there is *buthizo* (βυθίζω). It is used just twice in the Greek New Testament. In Luke 5:7 it means “to sink,” referring to boats overloaded with people. In I Timothy 6:9 it is used in the sense “to drown.” This verb is related to the Greek noun *buthos* (βυθός), which means “the deep” (referring to the sea). Secondly, and most interestingly, is the compound verb *katapontizo* (καταποντιζω). This verb is used only twice in the Greek New Testament. In Matthew 14:30 it is used to describe Peter suddenly beginning to “sink down” in the waters after walking upon the sea, and in Matthew 18:6 it is used when the Lord



describes how it is better for those who offend His little ones to have a millstone hung around their necks, and for them to be cast into the sea. Now this usage of *katapontizo* is interesting because it indicates a *complete immersion*—such as the modern Baptist is desirous to predicate of *bapto* and *baptizo*. Significantly, another salient usage of *katapontizo* is to be found in the *Septuagint* (LXX) translation of Exodus 15:4, where it is used to describe what happened to Pharaoh and his armies in the Red Sea! *Now significantly again*, the apostle Paul in the New Testament takes up this whole business of the deliverance of the Israelites at the Red Sea, and calls it a “baptism.” He writes: “all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (I Cor. 10:1-2).

The verb used here for “baptized” is *baptizo*. It is thus brought into close juxtaposition with the usage of the verb *katapontizo*, in that the two verbs are, apparently, referring to the same event. If “immersion” is what the apostle wanted to specify, he had a golden opportunity here to use a verb (*katapontizo*) which was indubitably, and unambiguously, connected in the LXX account of the Red Sea crossing with the immersion of Pharaoh and his host. *Yet the apostle carefully avoided using “katapontizo” at this juncture.* Why? For the following reasons:

(i) The *katapontizo* of LXX Exodus 15:4 refers to Pharaoh and his host—not to the Israelites.

(ii) The *baptizo* of I Corinthians 10:1-2 refers to Israel or God’s elect people.

(iii) From (i) and (ii) above, one is forced to conclude that the *baptizo* of the Israelites *did not involve their immersion*, but that the *katapontizo* of the Egyptians most certainly *did* involve them in immersion. Hence, there is a clear scriptural difference between *baptizo* and “immersion.”

The Scottish theologian, Neil MacMichael—of about 200 years ago—had an acidulous way of summing up this one. He put it like this:

1. The Israelites were baptised, both adults and infants; for the apostle declares it.

2. They were not *immersed*—a fact which Moses and other inspired writers testify.

3. The Egyptians, who pursued them, *were* immersed.

4. The Israelites had *baptism without immersion*, and the Egyptians had *immersion without baptism*.

5. The baptism of the Israelites was *salvation*, and the immersion of the Egyptians *drowning*.<sup>43</sup>

Linguistically, therefore, one is forced to conclude that “immersion” is a concept saliently—indeed, one might say, *carefully*—bypassed in the scriptural delineations of “baptism.” The sacred pen-men, inspired immediately by the guiding impulses of the heavenly Paraclete, carefully avoided using words that indubitably would have signified “dipping” or “immersion,” and used, instead, words that were universally used to delineate “sprinkling” and “pouring.” Such connection the verbs *bapto* and *baptizo* might have originally had with “dipping” and “immersion” they had manifestly *lost*, diachronically, via the natural linguistic processes of metonymy and specialised usage. They had come to signify “ceremonial purification” or “ceremonial washing” as a mode of initiation “into” something or somebody; and, as such, if mode was expressed at all, in the scriptural context of Christian baptisms and Old Testament baptisms, that mode was clearly “sprinkling” or “pouring.”<sup>44</sup>

**Secondly**, there is archaeological evidence that indicates that, in the early centuries of the church, immersion was not *initially* the practice. It is apposite for us to investigate this evidence, as archaeology can track out for us the gradual introduction of *immersion-capable* baptisteries in the later

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<sup>43</sup> Cited by John MacLeod in *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), pp. 253-254.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. the vast evidence accumulated in the 2000+ pages of J. W. Dale, *Op cit*. The booklet by Michael Kimmitt, *Baptism: Meaning, Mode & Subject* (<http://www.cprf.co.uk/bookstore/baptismmeaning.htm>), is also a useful *vade mecum* in respect of these facts.

centuries—plus, **thirdly**, certain other powerful evidence in the form of Christian artwork, both monumental and as paintings.

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Since the rise of the modern immersionistic movements, from the early seventeenth century onwards, archaeology has emerged and evolved into a sophisticated science. This is not to say that it is an *infallible* science. Nevertheless, it is a highly useful tool. At the time of the early Baptists—e.g. Haweis, Knollys, Keach, and on into the times of Gill and Robinson in the eighteenth century—our knowledge of the archaeology of ancient Christianity was next to nothing. Archaeology was barely emerging in the eighteenth century, and, on through the nineteenth century, such great Baptists as Spurgeon predated the expansions and development of the science.

Not to digress too far, it should yet be noted here that all these Baptist scholars predated, too, the rise of linguistics as a scientific discipline. The development of this science has, in fact, vitiated much of the dictionary and lexicographical work that went in to producing the scholarly study aids for Scripture that were produced particularly in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Such volumes include even prestigious lexicons like Winer, Cremer, Bengel, Grimm-Thayer, and even the grand phalanx of Kittel. Much of such lexicographical work tended to support the “immersionist” view of baptism, but the application of proper linguistic principles of interpretation has, in recent decades, turned things upside down in important respects. The modern scientific view, in fact, supports the grammatico-historical-spiritual position of the Reformers and their usage of the “*analogia fidei*” as being master keys of interpretation. The older lexicographical work is vitiated by its insistence on “etymology” being the principal determiner of the meaning of any word.<sup>45</sup> It was on

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford University Press, 1961). One does not have to agree with Barr’s virulent anti-Fundamentalist attitudes in order to appreciate his work as a linguistic expert, though it has to be said that perhaps he

“etymology” that the early Baptist scholars staked their all with respect to the meaning of the verbs *bapto* and *baptizo*—and, as modern linguistic science points out, those early Baptists missed other equally important factors in the development of word-meanings, such as “metonymy,” “colloquial usage,” “specialized usage,” and the interactions of such factors with words, culture, and religion, as those words tumble through the centuries of time.

In other words, the “immersionists” base their position, philologically, on out-of-date, nay, erroneous concepts. The Reformers, and their subsequent heirs, though having to work with idiosyncratic study aids for some centuries,<sup>46</sup> were, by contrast, more cautious, and their mode of interpreting words used in Scripture was, as it happens, more in line with the discoveries of modern linguistics than their immersionist protagonists.

But now we come to the archaeology.

Over the twentieth century, extensive exploration of ancient remains over Europe and the British Isles proceeded apace. Builders, developers, farmers, prospectors, engineers, and, in fact, *anyone* inadvertently unearthing ancient remains, have now to report such to the authorities; and development work is halted until full archaeological investigations are undertaken. New techniques of discovering buried ancient remains via aerial, radar, and geo-magnetic surveys have all added to the encyclopaedic build-up of knowledge. Saliently, the remains of ancient Christian churches—some from nearly 1900 years ago—have been brought to light. And in many of these church remains, the experts have isolated the remnants of baptisteries. And these remains are telling in their import against the immersionists.

It would take a volume of encyclopaedic dimensions to fully catalogue such discoveries. We content ourselves here, therefore, with a summary,

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pushes things too far. There is still a lot of good mileage in those older lexicons, but it is necessary to bear in mind Barr’s warnings when using them.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, (*Op cit.*) for instance, notes, in footnote 70 on page 273, that the tenth century Byzantine lexicon used by the Reformers was seriously affected by the immersionistic predilections of the Greek churches from the fourth century on.

giving full references to the relevant scholarly works, noting, as we go, the conclusions of the historical and archaeological experts who have minutely examined the evidence.

By the later decades of the twentieth century, extensive cataloguing and examination of ancient church sites in Britain, across Europe, and the Near East, had been drafted by a plethora of experts. It was in 1981 that Batsford Academic published, in their series “Studies in Archaeology,” the sterling work of Charles Thomas, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Leicester from 1967-1972, under the title, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*. In this scholarly tome, the author is principally concerned with the archaeology of Christian sites in Roman Britain, but he necessarily views the subject by setting it in the context of the whole vista of discoveries dating from this time as extant from Europe and the Near East. Thomas sets aside a whole chapter of his work under the title, “Baptism and Baptisteries,” and therein provides a succinct and useful summary of the evidence.

Thomas states:

In the mundane world of archaeological interpretation, we are obliged at any given site to try to decide which particular form of baptism may have been used, and, if possible, eventually to argue for the predominance of particular forms within given regions and provinces.<sup>47</sup>

In undertaking this task, he notes that “submersion” can only be performed apart from natural settings—such as in a river in a receptacle of adequate dimensions. Analysing and summarizing the vast catalogues of evidence, Thomas notes the numerous clues that point to “affusion” as being the standard mode—not “immersion”—and this, despite the fact that literary evidence from ancient documents alludes to the sacrament as an act of “submersion.” Thomas notes that, as far back as 1903, the

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas, *Op cit.*, p. 205.

scholar, C. F. Rogers, had noted this peculiar phenomenon, yet the extant archaeological evidence forced him to conclude that immersion “had in fact been rare, and hardly ever followed.”<sup>48</sup>

Thomas also cites the French scholar, Khatchatrian, who, in his scholarly tome of 1962, produced a fulsome catalogue of the archaeological remains apposite to baptism.<sup>49</sup> He notes that another scholar, J. G. Davies, on examining Khatchatrian’s evidence,<sup>50</sup> draws the conclusion that in “early churches in Greece, to name only one area,” there “does not exist a single baptistery of which the font was deep enough to allow the submersion of the candidate.” Moreover, this feature proves to be true, says Thomas, of sites excavated in “Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa, and of the very few sites in France now supportable as being really early.”<sup>51</sup>

Thomas concludes: “... total submersion was *not* the common practice. Affusion seems to have been by far the most likely mode of baptism, in Britain, as in Gaul.”<sup>52</sup>

Arising from this, we note the following salient features:

1. Archaeological evidence from the first five centuries of Christianity, from all across Europe, the Near East, and North America, universally points away from immersionism to affusion—this latter of which can also be interpreted as “sprinkling.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208, citing C. F. Rogers, *Baptism and Christian Archaeology*, in *STUDIA BIBLICA ET PATRISTICA* 5 (Oxford), pp. 239-362.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206, citing A. Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens: Plans, Notices et Bibliographie* (Paris, 1962).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206, citing J. G. Davies, *The Archaeological Setting of Baptism* (London, 1962), pp. 23-26.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206, ref. to work of Davies, Mâle, *La Fin du Paganisme en Gaule* (Paris, 1950), chap. 8; and Porcher and Volbach, *Europe in the Dark Ages* (Engl. transl. of French 1967 orig.), pp. 294-307.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213; emphasis mine.

<sup>53</sup> From the archaeological evidence in terms of ancient baptisteries, one cannot tell whether sprinkling or affusion was the mode. What one can tell is that it was *not* immersion. Also, in biblical terms, ceremonial baptisms or washings were often “sprinklings” (cf. Heb. 9:10ff). Hence, affusion and sprinkling, as ecclesiastical modes

2. The fact that ancient British church evidence points again to “affusion” is specifically significant. The ancient Celtic churches of Britain came into being very early on, perhaps as early as mid to late second century and remained free and aloof from the later development of the papacy.<sup>54</sup> It was not, in fact, until as late as 597 AD that the papal church first set its foot in Britain, assimilating the invading Saxons in the west and far north. Wholesale terror was let loose on the Celtic Christians, as their churches were, of course, connected in a kind of “apostolic succession” all the way back to the apostles, without any papal intermediary connection. At those times, then, Rome would’ve had to assimilate the Celtic churches, or surrender the right to “sole apostolic succession.” The result of their pogroms was the gradual wearing down of the Celts, until the ancient Celtic churches were assimilated into Romanism at the Synod of Whitby, in 664 AD.

Thus Romanist-style practices were at minimal levels in the British churches, prior to 664 AD. We should expect to find amongst them, therefore, a *purser* doctrine of baptism, and a more pristine mode of its application. This the archaeological evidence supplies. Now this is important, because it runs counter to what the “immersionist” lobby lead us to expect. If *immersion* is the most ancient practice, then we should expect to find evidence of it amongst the ancient Celtic churches, whereas the *non-immersion-capable* fonts would be wholly found in those areas first affected by the papacy in Europe. What is extant, however, is that the evidence from early fonts indicates that immersionism was *not* extant as the common mode of baptism—not only in Celtic Britain, but also right across the rest of the Christian world.<sup>55</sup> But this leaves us with the enigma that *documentary* evidence from these ancient times speaks of

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of baptism, are fundamentally as one—the only difference being possibly the quantity of water applied.

<sup>54</sup> On these ancient Celtic churches and their origins, see Arthur Wade-Evans, *Welsh Christian Origins* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1934).

<sup>55</sup> Thomas, *Op cit.*, pp. 213-227, gives the examples of ancient Celtic baptism fonts found in Britain. They are exclusively *non-immersionistic*.

“immersionism” as the mode of baptism. Why does the *literary* evidence contradict the *archaeological*? It is necessary now to examine this carefully, and what we find is surprising.

**Thirdly**, linguistic evidence *versus* archaeology.

In a learned essay first published in 1896, the Presbyterian scholar, B. B. Warfield<sup>56</sup> expatiated somewhat on the contradiction evident between the ancient *documentary* references to baptism as being immersion, and the actual *archaeological* data that was already, by then, beginning to have a notable impact. Warfield noted that whilst the archaeological remains shouted that affusion was the universal mode of practice in the early church and, in most areas, for most of the first millennium, yet, in the theological and literary references extant from many of the early church fathers and the later medieval theologians, baptism is repeatedly described as a “trine (three-fold) *immersion*.” Warfield enquires thence at length as to (i) whether these references to “trine immersion” reflect apostolic practice, or an ecclesiastical development, and (ii) whether immersion was insisted on as the *only valid* mode of baptism.

Beginning with (ii) above, Warfield adumbrates a concatenation of evidences that illustrate how *at no time* from the apostolic period to the medieval period, was there ever a time when aspersion or sprinkling was considered to be *invalid* as to mode. He cites evidences from the *Didache* (of the late first/early second century), through Cyprian (third century), Augustine, on through the witnesses of the Egyptian Coptic churches, the Syrian churches, including the seventh century James of Edessa and Mar Basilius, the Council of Toledo in 633, the Council of Worms in 868, on through to the medieval giants like St. Thomas and Bonaventura. Universally, aspersion was regarded as an acceptable mode of baptism, and this feature is trackable right back to the *Didache*.

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<sup>56</sup> Warfield, *The Archaeology of the Mode of Baptism*, published in the BIBLIOTHECA SACRA, vol. 53, 1896, pp. 601-644. This essay can also be accessed in the collection of Warfield’s lesser known works printed under the title, *Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth).



With respect to (i) above, Warfield discovered that “with whatever stringency “trine immersion” may have been held the right and only regular mode of baptism, it is perfectly obvious that other modes were not considered invalid and no baptism.”<sup>57</sup>

We see two traditions, therefore, running parallel in the ancient churches: trine immersion, and aspersion or sprinkling. In theological circles, the trine immersion was held as the normal mode—this we adduce as being under the effect of the incoming paganism of the Roman “mystery religions.” But now Warfield can refer us to a strange phenomenon: Why, he asks, if, theologically, so much emphasis began to be put on trine immersion—increasingly as one tracks onward through the Middle Ages—why do all *monumental and artistic representations* of baptism in the early centuries universally illustrate “affusion”? We can add, today, the question: *Why are all extant fonts or baptisteries from those ancient times not deep enough to effect immersion?*

“It is most noteworthy,” says Warfield, “that from the second to the ninth century there is found scarcely one pictorial representation of baptism by immersion; but the suggestion is almost uniformly either sprinkling or pouring.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, it seems that one has to come as late as the *ninth* century before one finds pictorial representations that suggest immersion, and, even there, such evidence is sparse.<sup>59</sup> From the Christian art of the catacombs of ancient Rome, through to the medieval period, archaeology has revealed that pictorial representations of baptism as aspersion or sprinkling are universal in the earlier centuries, and only in the later (mainly ninth century) are immersionistic pictorial evidences emergent.

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<sup>57</sup> Warfield, *Op cit.*, p. 358.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361. In footnote 43, Warfield cites Bennett’s *Christian Archaeology* of 1890 noting that the Christian art data from the early Roman catacombs is exclusively in favour of affusion.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361 and footnote 44, where Warfield cites an example of immersion found in a “pontifical” of the ninth century recorded in Smith and Cheetham’s *A Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*.

So how, asks Warfield, do we explain the theological and literary emphasis on “trine immersion”?

In answering this, Warfield draws attention to the patristic usage of “immersion,” and to the representations of Christian baptism in the artwork recovered from ancient Christian archaeological sites.<sup>60</sup>

With respect to the Christian art, Hughes Oliphant Old notes that, in classical art, any human ritual or act was always portrayed by means of “freezing” in the picture what one might call the “definitive point of the action.” Such stylistic “freezing” proved to be enduringly conservative, and not given to changes—even if, in society and culture, changes *did* evolve with respect to what the art-form was depicting.<sup>61</sup> Warfield notes this feature, though not so explicitly as Old, and does not really see its full significance. In order to appreciate this feature of “definitive moment freezing” we might allude, even today, to a modern artist or photographer. Such a professional will, in seeking to portray definitively in one picture the very essence of his subject, seek to “freeze” the definitive moment of, say, the crown being placed on the young Elizabeth’s head in 1953 as depicting the Coronation. Likewise, ancient artists depicting baptism, picked out the “definitive moment”—universally, they depicted a presbyter pouring or sprinkling water over a neophyte, the latter standing in a shallow baptistery, or font.

Everywhere, baptism was represented as aspersion or sprinkling. Warfield writes: “When Jerome and Leo and Pelagius and Gregory were speaking of trine immersion as of the order in Rome, the artists were still laying stress on affusion [or sprinkling].”<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, so entrenched was the artistic fixation with affusion/sprinkling, that one classical archaeological example from 450 AD provides a startling view of what was actually going on. By 450 AD,

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 361-370.

<sup>61</sup> Old, *Op cit.*, p. 271, where he says: “Once a tradition [had] been established as to how a particular subject should be represented, it never changed.” (Cf. also Warfield, *Op cit.*, p. 368).

<sup>62</sup> Warfield, *Op cit.*, p. 369.

the immersionism imported from the “mystery cults” was, of course, gaining ground steadily, and in the baptistery of the Orthodox at Ravenna there is a ceiling mosaic of a picture of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus. Underneath this picture is the baptistery. Saliently, it is a baptistery that deep that it shouts at us that it was used for immersion, and is one of the earliest of such on record—a rare example indeed from that era. But amazingly, the picture above it shows John baptizing Jesus by *affusion/sprinkling*.<sup>63</sup> Thus, as each neophyte was laid back into the water of the baptistery below, each would have looked straight up at a picture of Christ being baptized by affusion/sprinkling!

In trying to make sense of such conflicting evidence, Warfield suggests that the patristic usage of the term “immersion” was such that they interpreted baptism as “immersion” even when undertaken by “pouring” or aspersion. Pouring does mean, indeed, that an “immersion” of a kind does take place.<sup>64</sup> However, Warfield’s solution here does not do justice to the fact that some of the fathers speak of “plunging” in baptism, and we have seen that from the late fourth century on, for the first time, baptism was associated as to mode with Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12.

The answer lies in the fact that the impact of assimilated paganism from the “mystery religions” was having a greater and greater bearing on Christian theology. The very design of many of the earliest fonts betrays the impact of pagan mystery religion, with the *octagonal* shape reflecting the octagonal plunge baths through which pagan initiates were baptized in the heathen cults.<sup>65</sup> Only of course, the *Christian* font was not so deep—initially, that is. As time went on, the influence of the pagan input began to evolve the simple font into a full-blown immersionist’s baptistery, and the example from Ravenna is one of the earliest. This incoming pagan “immersionism” had to meet, however, the conservative traditions of the

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<sup>63</sup> Old, *Op cit.*, pp. 271-272.

<sup>64</sup> Warfield, *Op cit.*, pp. 369ff.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374. Warfield notes that various scholars of his time detected this copying of pagan baptisteries, and says: “Having obtained their models of the baptistery from the surrounding heathendom, it may possibly be that the early Christians the more readily leaned toward completing their symbolical bath by pouring ...”

churches extant from the apostolic times. The history of the rise of the papacy shows indubitably that the paganisation process was a gradual evolution that did not reach its zenith until the time of the Reformation, when God broke down the bastions of Antichrist. We should expect to find, therefore, that the archaeological evidence in terms of *baptisteries* and *monumental art* would reflect this process—as such evidences do in all cultural environments. And this is indubitably what we find. All early literary references to baptism describe affusion/sprinkling as a valid mode, and even those later references which specify “plunge” baptisms still allow that “affusion/sprinkling” is yet a valid mode; and the archaeological data from baptisteries and from ancient Christian art indicates for us that affusion/sprinkling was the entrenched orthodoxy right from early times. The influx of immersionism was later, and initially struggled against the entrenched old orthodox mode of administering the sacrament. *Immersion-capable* baptisteries are “Johnny-come-latelies” on the scene.

If the Baptist-immersionistic cause was the correct one, we should see, archaeologically and historically, the exact opposite to the evidence presented above, with *deep* baptisteries in the early period, with universal artwork depicting neophytes being “plunged” under the water as the “definitive moment” of baptism; then, as the centuries pass, we should expect to see the gradual introduction of *shallow* baptisteries or fonts being introduced as a “Romanist” aberration, and a gradual evolution of the artistic representations of baptism moving away from plunge-baths and very slowly and reluctantly turning over to illustrate affusion/sprinkling. Indeed, if the Baptist argument was right, the baptistery at Ravenna ought to have been one of the first baptisteries to be too shallow for immersion, and the mosaic on the ceiling ought to have depicted John *plunging* the Lord Christ under the Jordan waters—and this, because, if immersionism *was* apostolic, then immersionism *would have* affected the design of the earliest baptisteries, and immersion would have been the “definitive moment” frozen into the tradition of the early Christian art.

If all this says anything, it shouts this: That early baptisms were universally by affusion or sprinkling, and immersionism was a later and

pagan interloper infused into Christianity from perhaps the late second century onwards. This was truly the Romanist aberration gathering apace to become established as the prime (but not exclusive) mode of baptism by the early medieval period. The exegetical connection first made between baptism and Romans 6:4/Colossians 2:12, in the late fourth century, provided an extra impetus to this evolution from thereon, subsequent to the “establishment” of Christianity as the state-religion of the *pagan* Roman Empire. Indeed, it was a deeply paganized travesty of the biblical faith once delivered to the saints.

Scripture, linguistics, and archaeological/historical studies. A three-fold cord is not quickly broken (Eccles. 4:12).



## ❧ 4. ❧

### THE ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT & CONSEQUENCES OF THE MODERN BAPTIST MOVEMENT

JOHN CALVIN, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, wrote these salient words:

... it is evident that the term *baptise* means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the primitive church.<sup>66</sup>

Such a statement is, of course, a golden gift for a Baptist polemicist, and is only one of a number of statements made by the Reformers that add grist to the immersionist mills.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, many Baptists assert that the Reformation was initially “immersionistic” in principle, and that, later, political exigencies drove the Reformers off course, leaving the Anabaptists isolated and persecuted by the establishmentarian “police state” Protestantism of the early Reformers.<sup>68</sup> And whilst modern Baptist

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<sup>66</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4:15:19.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. the references in Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 273ff., where he cites Luther’s *Taufbüchlein*, Leo Jud’s editions of the baptismal rite of Zurich, and Zwingli as early advocates of immersionism.

<sup>68</sup> On the oppressive horrors of this “police state,” note should be taken of Leonard Verduin’s tome of the 1960s, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*. Verduin casts the Reformers in a very bad light and eulogises the Anabaptists as heroes in a somewhat

writers evince variant attitudes *vis-à-vis* the sixteenth century Anabaptists, they all unite in their condemnation of the Reformed and Lutheran attitudes to those sects, and in their appreciation of Anabaptist aims and objectives, with respect to both the sacrament of baptism, and the “gathered church” ideal, as opposed to the Reformers’ “establishment-territorial church” schemes.<sup>69</sup>

It is difficult to isolate the development of the baptismal controversy, through the Reformation period, from the surrounding political considerations that weighed heavily on the early Reformers. The medieval Roman church was not just a “church”—it was a *political empire*, the tentacles of which extended into all western Christendom. In every Western nation, the Roman church was the only religion granted legitimacy, and all citizens were required to belong to that church and attend upon its requisite cultus and rituals. Failure to do so brought the pressures of inquisition and the imposition of intolerable sanctions. Hence, the churches encompassed not only a minute number of devout believers in their membership, but also extensive multitudes of

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biased manner, in our view. But, nevertheless, his research on ancient seventeenth century records cannot be dismissed overall—the Reformers, in particular, those of the Lutheran and Zwinglian Reformed stream, practiced cruelty towards dissidents. Verduin does not have so much to say against Calvin as against the other Reformers, though he notes several instances with the words, “one could have wished Calvin had not said that ...” With respect to the Genevan reformation, the recent translation and publication of volume 1 of the *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* [vol. 1—1852-1544] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) delivers the consistory minutes for the Genevan Reformed Church for those years, and is somewhat revelatory. The minutes record what amounts to “police state repression” of all dissidents, as the state government of Geneva was involved with ecclesiastical discipline. Offenders in spiritual matters were sent off by the consistory to the civil government for punishment, which often consisted of a term in prison on a diet of bread and water. Where, one asks, can one find justification for such practice anywhere in the pages or the spirit of the New Testament? This all said, one must recognise that Calvin, *et al.*, fought their battles on difficult ground—we go astray, I believe, when we regard their position and polity as being a permanent mandate for the church, and a justification of their practice *per se*.

<sup>69</sup> Cf., for instance, the article “BAPTISM (Baptist View)” given in Schaff-Herzog, *Op cit.*



superstitious and frightened infidels, baptized as babies into the all-embracing state-system.

As the Reformation sprang up, the total Roman stranglehold was broken in many of the German mini-states, in Britain, the Netherlands, Hungary, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and, to a certain extent, in France. To consolidate their position, the Reformers worked closely with the political powers in those states, and the Reformation meant precisely that, instead of the *Roman* church being the established territorial-state church in those countries, the *Protestant* church took its place. Hence, instead of all citizens being baptized as babes into Romanism, they were now baptized into Protestantism.<sup>70</sup>

This soon meant, of course, that the vast number of hitherto superstitious quasi-pagans, who had previously populated the Roman churches in those areas, were forcibly made into Protestants. Pagan behaviour and indiscipline characterized these new Protestant “converts,” and, in reaction to this serious idiosyncrasy, new sects of fervent believers arose within the Protestant nations who pointed to *indiscriminate infant baptism* as the fly in the Protestant ointment. These sects wanted new churches to consist only of “professing true believers,” or that their churches would be, as they called them, “gathered churches.” Baptism, they asserted, should only be administered to those who give credible profession of their faith, and not to the unholy phalanx of offspring from every Tom, Dick and Harry under the state banner—and for these people, a “credible profession of faith” was necessarily coupled with a holy walk in life. Reacting against the travesty of indiscriminate infant baptism as practiced by establishment-state churches, they quite naturally reacted

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<sup>70</sup> This is exemplified, for example, in the notion, entertained strongly by Knox and his associates in Scotland, that Scotland as a *nation* was chosen of God to be His people. Rutherford, also, in his *Lex Rex* (1644) betrays the tendency, strongly, in that he tends in his exposition to slide from Israel to Scotland and back to Israel again, blurring the actual distinctions betwixt the two. As such, all Scots would have to be considered as God’s people, and indiscriminate paedobaptism would be the instrument of initiation. Similar principles ruled the day in England.

against infant baptism *per se*,<sup>71</sup> as for them, they saw such baptism as bringing into the church young tribes of unbelievers.<sup>72</sup>

These sects were denominated as “Anabaptists”—the title depicting the insistence, of such sects, that: (i) infant baptism was invalid and unscriptural, and (ii) in order to receive a *valid* baptism, those who had already been baptized as infants ought now to be *rebaptized* as adults (hence the title, *Anabaptists*, which means “those who have been baptized again”).

Whilst the *theology* of these sects varied across an enormous spectrum that stretched from the sublime to the ridiculous and on to the downright dangerous,<sup>73</sup> it has to be admitted that amongst them were many sincere and godly people, deeply concerned that, under the establishmentarian scheme, the Protestant Reformation was all too often little better than the Romanism it was replacing.<sup>74</sup> The fact is that an emphasis on *personal holiness*, found amongst many Anabaptists, was all too often lacking in the state-establishment churches. The policy of indiscriminate infant baptism virtually ensured this state of affairs, and was a constant down-drag on the work of the Reformers.

However, the rise of such Anabaptist sects was effectively putting banana peel under the feet of the Reformers.<sup>75</sup> If you tolerated the

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<sup>71</sup> It is important to make this distinction. Paedobaptism is a biblical doctrine which *stands apart* from establishmentarian principles. Whilst establishmentarianism effectively *demand*s infant baptism in order to function, infant baptism *in and of itself* does not require establishmentarianism in order to justify its existence or to function successfully. A plethora of examples of well-functioning paedobaptistic churches that are *not* “establishment-territorial churches” is evident worldwide.

<sup>72</sup> That this was the major platform in the Anabaptist case against establishmentarianism, is documented by Old, *Op cit.*, pp. 77ff. Cf. also Bridge and Phipers, *The Water that Divides*, especially the chapter, “Reformation Tragedy,” pp. 95ff.

<sup>73</sup> We have already noted in chapter 1 (see footnote 14) how it is difficult to theologially categorise the various Anabaptist sects.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Bridge and Phipers, *Op cit.*, p. 94: “... adult baptism came to represent salvation by faith, protest against corrupt Christendom, and suffering for the sake of purified religion.”

<sup>75</sup> The close alliance of church and state, involved in establishmentarianism, meant that any dissidence against the doctrine and practice of the church was, *de facto*, a

Anabaptists, who were a deviation from the state-churches, it also allowed the large Romanist rumps in those states to lodge claim for the same tolerance, under the aegis of which they would work surreptitiously for a re-takeover of the nation—and before you knew where you were, church and nation would be crumbling into anarchy before your very eyes. Indeed, anarchy was the outcome in several places, not least at the tragedy at Munster; and mass reversion to Romanism was another possibility, which in fact soon became reality in Austria and Belgium, and then, later, in France and Poland.

Luther and his followers, together with Zwingli and the Swiss Reformed, responded to the Anabaptist challenge with an inquisition—a *Protestant* inquisition. At all costs, the Protestant state had to be preserved politically in order for Protestant churches to be preserved ecclesiastically. Anabaptists were taken, jailed, subjected to horrific, blood-curdling tortures, then burned alive or drowned by the thousands<sup>76</sup>—*by Protestants*. All in the name of establishment-territorial church religion.<sup>77</sup> All in the Name of Jesus!

Persecuted, too, by the Romanists, these Anabaptistic groups filtered all across Europe, and across the ocean into North America. Far from being blitzed into total oblivion, they amazingly survived to blossom forth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the modern Baptist,

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dissidence against the state and the ruler—refusal to submit to the ecclesiastical authorities was therefore incipient, if not outright, rebellion against *the state*. This fact probably explains the cruel treatment that all dissidents have suffered over the ages at the hands of the ecclesiastical powers.

<sup>76</sup> Speaking of those who wished to practice immersionism, Zwingli, formerly himself convinced of immersionism, could utter these terrible words: “Let him who talks about going under the water, GO UNDER ...” (cited in Bridge and Phipers, *Op cit.*, p. 95). This statement accompanied the mass destruction of Anabaptists in Zurich by means of drowning.

<sup>77</sup> In dealing with the Anabaptist leader, Felix Manz, in Zurich, the Clerk of Courts recorded these words: “They (the Anabaptists) do not allow infant baptism. In this way they will put an end to secular authority” (cf. Bridge and Phipers, *Ibid.*, p. 95). The message is clear: dissidence to the doctrine of the state church was viewed as political insurrection.

Mennonite, and Moravian sects—the first of which now dominates the prevailing outlook in Protestant evangelicalism, as to the doctrine of baptism and the principle of the “gathered church.” Withersoever their influences have had a salient bearing on the nations in which they live, religious tolerance has been the outcome.

In all these events, the Reformers were, of course, in an invidious position. They, too, wanted discipline and holy living to characterise the churches—every bit as much as the Anabaptists did—but the total situation embroiled them so much in the *politics* of the individual nations, that there seemed no other option. To avoid anarchy on the one hand, and to avoid a recrudescence of Romanism on the other, the sword of the state had to be invoked. It seems, in retrospect, indeed, that whenever religionists make a heavy investment in state politics, inevitably, before long, the Bible in their one hand has to be supplemented by a gun in the other—all, of course, in the Name of Jesus.

It has to be said that the Anabaptists, in their emphasis on the “gathered church” principle, were closer to Scripture than the Magisterial Reformers;<sup>78</sup> and as if, in testimony to this, it is a plain and indisputable fact of history that in all Protestant countries, by the late sixteenth century, the Protestant state churches were seething morasses of indiscipline, unholy living, and political intrigue.<sup>79</sup> Hence the cause of the rise of Puritanism in Britain, the seventeenth century “*Nadere Reformatie*” in

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<sup>78</sup> Claims are made today, by various ardent pro-establishmentarian groups, that the Gospel accounts mandate the enforcement of Christianity by the state, on the basis of texts such as Matthew 28:19—“teach all nations, baptizing them (that is, the *nations*) in the Name ... etc.” Such an interpretation is a forcing of the language of the text to make it yield a logically unnecessary conclusion, and one which is disparate with the rest of the New Testament.

<sup>79</sup> Only someone totally ignorant of the history of Protestantism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would question this assertion.

Holland,<sup>80</sup> and the rise of “pietism” in Lutheran Germany<sup>81</sup> and the Nordic lands. This is not to endorse all the theology of such movements, but it is a note that one should understand the circumstances surrounding their development, namely, the apostasy in the Reformed state-territorial churches—and such apostasy was the *result*, as the Anabaptists rightly stated, of *indiscriminate* infant baptism as the principle of those ecclesiastical systems.

However, such consideration should not blind us to the fact that the Anabaptists themselves nurtured a host of idiosyncratic ideas—in particular here, we think with respect to the doctrine of baptism. They had, however, in all this, a theological pretext, as well as a practical and ecclesiastical one. Various Reformers, like Calvin (cf. the statement at the head of this chapter), were asserting the idea that “immersion” was the original apostolic mode of baptism; and whilst the vast majority of Anabaptists *did not* practice immersionism in the sixteenth century, by the

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<sup>80</sup> On the Dutch “*Nadere Reformatie*” (“Second Reformation”), see the excellent account given by Joel R. Beeke, in volume 1 of *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, pages lxxxv onwards—this being part of the introductory articles to the English translation of the Dutchman, Wilhelmus à Brakel’s *Redelijke Godsdienst* (first published in Dutch in 1700). Note should be taken especially of Beeke’s quote on page xciii from P. B. Van der Watt, which states, “The Second Reformation revolted against the *unspiritual* state of the nation, ministers, and congregations ...” (emphasis added). Need one say any more?

<sup>81</sup> On the rise of pietism, see Mosheim’s *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, Book IV, Century XVII, Sect. II, part II, chapter I, and sections 26ff. Note should be taken of the later evolution of pietism in the eighteenth century in the form of the Moravian movement. On this latter, cf. W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). It has to be said that the Protestant state-churches seemed impervious to all attempts to improve their internal spirituality, and the seventeenth century pietists came on the business end of what Mosheim calls “severe laws.” As early as the seventeenth century, there was what W. R. Ward has described as “poor Protestant morale” (*Op cit.*, p. 15), and Ward goes on to reveal how the Moravian heirs of the pietists were still persecuted by “rigid Lutheranism.” In the eighteenth century, parallel to all this, was the discrimination and persecution imposed on all non-Anglicans in England, Wales, and Ireland. As late as the twentieth century, such oppression has been noted.

first quarter of the *seventeenth* century immersionism was evidently on the front end of their ecclesiastical polity.

It is appropriate here to overview the development of this immersionist dogma.

We have seen that in the centuries after the *Edict of Milan* (313 AD), the establishment of Christianity as the “state religion” of the Roman Empire consolidated and furthered the influx of “mystery religion” pagan practices into the church. Immersionism, as a baptismal ritual, henceforth became more and more the standard theological principle, if not the standard practice, throughout the Roman communion. This development reached its zenith probably in the early part of the second millennium, and thenceforth it seemed to wane—partly due to the material difficulties attendant upon its administration. Immersing the sick, and the aged, and indeed, immersing *anybody* in the cold winter climates of Europe was not only inconvenient, but hazardous as well—and if aspersion/affusion sufficed for such exigencies, why should it not suffice for anyone at *any* time? If aspersion is a valid baptism for a *cripple*, is it not also, *de facto*, a valid baptism for someone *not* theologically convinced of immersionism? Or for a *babe*? Hence, by the late medieval period, we find a general relaxing of the immersionist requirement within the churches of the Roman communion.<sup>82</sup>

Upon the arrival of the Renaissance in the fifteenth century, and the flood of Greek Orthodox manuscripts into the west, and we find the encyclopaedic tenth-century-AD Byzantine Greek lexicon of Suidas carrying great favour amongst scholars—and later on, the Reformers.<sup>83</sup> Reflecting the Eastern Greek Orthodox theological stable from which it emanated, this lexicon was based on *classical* Greek, rather than *New Testament* or *Koine* Greek, and listed the verb “*baptizo*” as meaning “to immerse.” Naturally enough, the scholarly Reformed orthodox relayed the lexicon’s verdict to their own auditors and readers. This explains the statement of Calvin used at the head of this chapter. In addition, it was the

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Op cit.*, pp. 265ff.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote 70, p. 273.

case that the early Reformers, such as Luther, Jud, and Zwingli—obviously influenced by such lexicographical data—began to advocate a revival of immersionism as an attempt to restore apostolic purity of sacramental practice to the church.<sup>84</sup> Study of the “early church fathers” from the fourth century AD onwards impelled their zeal in this respect, as, from such sources, they picked up the first exegetical association between Romans 6 and the mode of baptism—an exegesis which, as we have seen, though *new* in the fourth century AD, became traditional in the centuries that followed. Accordingly, they saw in baptism an enactment of Christ’s own burial and resurrection—pure immersionist doctrine.

Their attempt to restore immersionism soon waned and fizzled out. As Hughes Oliphant Old says, if the Reformers were initially misled by the wrong-headed primacy of etymology in the lexicons of Suidas and others of their day, they were “not the first nor the last to have made this mistake.” He continues: “The Reformers were good biblical philologists, and, in time, they realized that the *biblical* use of the word [*baptizō*] was not the same” as that found in the *classical* Greek lexicons of their day.<sup>85</sup> Thus, if in their earlier liturgical works, some Reformers had advocated immersionism, they soon came to appreciate, from biblical considerations, that the central symbolism in baptism was *not* the death and resurrection of Christ, but of a *washing from sins*. As a consequence, considerations of mode became secondary, with sprinkling and affusion accepted as being biblical practice as well as immersion. This feature is amply set forth if we go back again to the quotation from Calvin at the head of this chapter; only here, we quote the *whole* paragraph—not just the isolated part of it which the modern Baptist zealously clutches at:

... Whether the person baptized is to be wholly immersed, and that whether once or thrice, or whether he is only to be sprinkled with water, *is not of the least consequence*: churches should be at liberty to

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 273ff.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273, emphasis added.

adopt either, according to the diversity of climates, although it is evident that the term *baptise* means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the early church (emphasis added).

The full quotation is interesting. The last sentence indicates that, at this juncture, Calvin was still, to some degree, under the influence of the lexicography of his day, but the overall statement indicates that he has thought matters through somewhat further, and that matters of mode are of secondary importance. Looked at in the full context of chapter 15 of his *Institutes*, the statement evidently reflects, too, the fact that Calvin had come to see baptism as a ceremonial *purification* rite, which outwardly depicted the inward *cleansing from sin*, resultant from the work of the Holy Spirit. We read, for instance, in paragraph 2 of that same chapter:

Nay, the only purification *which baptism promises* is by means of the sprinkling of the blood of Christ, who is *figured by water from the resemblance to cleansing and washing* (emphasis added).

With regards to Romans 6:3-4, Calvin has this to say about the words “buried with him by baptism unto death”:

By these words, he not only exhorts us to imitation of Christ, as if he had said that we are admonished by baptism, in like manner as Christ died, to die to our lusts, and, as he rose, to rise to righteousness; but he traces the matter much higher: that Christ, by baptism, has made us partakers of his death, ingrafting us into it. And as the twig derives substance and nourishment from the root to which it is attached, so those who receive baptism with true faith truly feel the efficacy of Christ’s death in



the mortification of their flesh, and the efficacy of his resurrection in the quickening of the Spirit (*Institutes*, 4:15:5).

If anything is evident from this, Calvin failed here to give Romans 6:3-4 the *explicit* immersionistic “spin.” The text presented him with a golden opportunity to do so, had he deemed it exegetically right. And given that the quotation from paragraph 19, at the head of this chapter, indicates that he was still partly under the influence of the faulty lexicography of his day, it is strange that he did not take the opportunity to present an outright unambivalent *immersionist* stance on the text, if he had been possessed of any proclivities so to do. Granted, his language here *can* be used by immersionists; it can also equally and comfortably be used, though, by *non-immersionists*. And what comes through most prominently in Calvin’s doctrine of baptism, is the notion of *cleansing, washing, mortification of sin, purification*, rather than an emphasis on “burial and resurrection” as necessitating immersion as the sole mode of administering the sacrament. This feature is emphasised when one consults yet another place in his *Institutes*:

... [It] is himself who washes and purifies us, and effaces the remembrance of our faults; that it is himself who makes us the partakers of his death ... These things, I say, we ought to feel as truly and certainly in our mind *as we see our body washed, immersed, and surrounded with water* (4:15:14, emphasis added).

The same emphasis on *washing* emerges in the works of the other Reformers. In fact, whereas the initial work of Luther (*Taufbüchlein*) and Leo Jud (*Baptismal Rite of Zurich*) specified *immersion*, from 1525 onwards, in Zwingli’s own editions of the Zurich baptismal liturgy, such specifications had disappeared—there being no rubric on the mode of

baptism included. A further shift was indicated by the advent of Bullinger's first service-book at Zurich, which actually went so far as to specify pouring or affusion.<sup>86</sup>

Against this theological background, the early Anabaptists developed; and it would have been understandable if, initially, their doctrine of baptism reflected the view current amongst the Reformers as to *mode*. In general, however, this did not, amazingly, happen. Something else riveted their attention. Their primary aim was to shun *paedobaptism*, in order to facilitate “pure,” “gathered” churches. Accordingly, a clarion call went out advocating the radical reformation of the Reformed doctrine of baptism. And in all this, the *mode* of baptism seemed to take a back seat—the vast majority of Anabaptists acquiescing in the practice of affusion.<sup>87</sup>

By 1523, there was a group of ardent Anabaptists at Zurich working with Zwingli, and his refusal to take up their call for a radical reformation meant that, in their eyes, he had compromised with the world.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, on January 21<sup>st</sup> of that year, the first Anabaptist “rebaptism” had been performed, and the city council took steps to disband the “conventicles” of “separatists” who were, by then, taking to themselves the name “Brethren in Christ.”<sup>89</sup>

By 1525, at Waldshut, Balthasar Hübmaier, disappointed at the lack of progress under Zwingli's ministry, began preaching against paedobaptism, and advocated infant “dedication” instead. At the Easter-time of that year, 300 were rebaptized in the public fountain, with Hübmaier using a bucket to pour water over them.<sup>90</sup> The revolution had begun—a revolution which was to evince evolution in the case of Hübmaier. He might have started off with a bucket, but he graduated to a bath. This was, indeed, a salient

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>87</sup> Only Hübmaier appears to have kicked the trend here eventually. Cf. Bridge and Phypers, *Op cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>88</sup> By this time, the city council of Zurich was “leaning on” Zwingli, and warning him not to take his teachings to the extent that the church-state alliance would be broken. Cf. Bridge and Phypers, p. 105.

<sup>89</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *Op cit.*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

distinction for those times, as documentary evidence bears out the fact that *affusion* was the general mode of baptism amongst the Anabaptist sects.<sup>91</sup> But Hübmaier's development was a precursor of what was about to come, about one hundred years on from then. That intervening 100 years was an era when multitudes of Anabaptists spilt their blood in testimony of their faith, yet it was an era through which they not only survived, but went, ultimately, from strength to strength.

The long era of persecution leads us to September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1633, in England. On this date, says W. A. Mackay, we have the earliest record of the inauguration of an *exclusively immersionist* congregation, when one John Spilesberry set up the first known modern "Baptist" church.

"Baptist" churches indeed; there had been a plenty in the 100 years previously, but this is the first *known* EXCLUSIVE IMMERSIONIST Baptist church.<sup>92</sup> It is likely that others predated this one, but it is at this time that the modern Baptist movement emerges to our eyes on the pages of history. By 1644, seven of their London congregations issued a *Confession of Faith*—a revised edition of which, in 1646, consisted of 51 articles, in which these modern Baptists distanced themselves from any Anabaptist connections. The articles indicate a Calvinistic orthodoxy similar to Reformed churches, save that they teach *exclusive immersionism* as their baptismal theology, and independency of church government as ecclesiastical polity. By 1656, sixteen Baptist churches in Somerset issued a 46-article confession, and the culmination of all this is found in the 1677 confession, reprinted in 1689 with the approval and recommendation of the ministers of above 100 congregations. But prior to these Calvinistic confessional statements, the "General" or "Arminian" Baptists first published a confession in Holland in 1611, under the direction of Smyth and Helwys, but whilst this confession, in 26 articles, confines baptism to adults, nothing is said about *immersion*. It looks, therefore, as if *exclusive immersion* first emerged into the world somewhere between the work of

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<sup>91</sup> Bridge and Phipers, *Op cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Dr. W. A. Mackay, *Immersion and Immersionists* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1880), p. 50.

Smyth and Helwys, and the rise of John Spilesberry's congregation—that is, between the years 1611 and 1633.<sup>93</sup>

Thus we may deduce that modern *exclusive* immersionism is a dogma less than 400 years old, and that, prior to 1611-1633, it was unheard of anywhere in the whole history of the Christian church.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> On all the foregoing data concerning the Baptist creeds, see Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 1, pp. 852ff.

<sup>94</sup> As to Hübmaier in the 1500s, it seems evident that he did not practice immersion to the extent that he totally refused fellowship to those baptised by affusion.

## 5.

### THE LATER HISTORY OF EXCLUSIVE IMMERSIONISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

BAPTISTS, of the Calvinistic and Arminian types, struggled against the enormous odds of establishmentarianism in Europe and Britain, throughout the period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was probably in England in the late eighteenth century that they began to expand and blossom, a feature which was to be transferred to the emerging United States of America. Several factors are intrinsic to this phenomenon of expansion. First of all, the hide-bound apostasy of state Reformed churches left a spiritual vacuum, which began to be occupied by the pietists and Moravians in Europe, and the non-conformists in Britain. Amongst such dissenting groups, the Baptists were nimble and quick off the mark to evangelize. So alert were they in the emergent American colonies that they literally “stole” thousands of Scottish-Irish immigrants of Presbyterian origin. Baptist ministers went out to the frontiers, where, it seemed, either Presbyterian ministers feared to tread, or the Presbyterian churches were too hide-bound to send out ministers to do the treading. A large number of modern America’s Baptists in their “Bible belt” are, in fact, of Scottish-Irish Presbyterian origin.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> A BBC television series, “The Scottish-Irish in America” on Ulster Television documented this phenomenon about 10 years ago, and published a handsome book to accompany the series.

Similar phenomena could be noted in such places as eighteenth and nineteenth century Wales and England. But another new factor was emerging on the scene now—one that was destined to put the poison into the very heart of Protestant belief: the fact of *subjectivism*, allied to the influx of mysticism, running rampant in the churches in the aftermath of the evangelical “revivals.” Subjectivism played into the immersionist’s hands on the matter of baptism, for as a modern American theologian has observed,

What distinguished [the Anabaptists] as Anabaptists and distinguishes them today as Baptists, was and is that in their view of baptism and the Lord’s Supper they regarded these sacraments not so much as signs and seals of God’s covenant towards us, but rather as actions of our testifying to our faith. The Church for them was not coextensive with God’s covenant, but rather a society of experiential believers. This distinguishing emphasis on the individual and his experience is subjectivistic.<sup>96</sup>

In short, the new “spirit of the age” favoured the immersionist ethos. Subjectivism began to ruin Reformed theology, and the very rise of modernist higher criticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is a salient example of how subjectivism emerged to eclipse practically every major Protestant denomination. Schleiermacher, the “father” of modernist theology, was born and bred in the pietist evangelical circles of the German Reformed Churches, and, founding his thought on the subjectivistic “feeling of total dependence,” he centred his theology on inward mystical experience, moving away from the veracity of Scripture, and even introducing and allowing critical and sceptical

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<sup>96</sup> See Peter Y. De Jong’s article, “The Reformed Faith and the Danger of Subjectivism,” in the old *Torch and Trumpet*—the journal of the Reformed Fellowship Inc.—for April 1966. This journal is now known under the name *The Outlook*.

attitudes to it. As Peter De Jong well said, this subjectivism was the ideal booster to Baptist doctrine, seeing that it fitted well with the already subjectivistic theology of “personal testimony” to one’s own mystic “burial and resurrection,” embodied in Baptist sacramental theology. Subjectivism has run rampant in Protestantism now for some 200 years, and is clearly in the ascendancy in the modern Evangelical movements, with their “experience-centred” proclivities. “Feelings of love,” “leadings of the Spirit,” and “sweet breathings”<sup>97</sup> characterise their worship, and the Bible and its doctrines get set aside, becoming little more than some sort of subjectivistic “talisman” to propagate spiritual “kicks.”

It also has to be said that “subjectivism,” swamping the theological world of the nineteenth century, generated in that century a mass of schismatic sects and cults that have inhabited Christendom ever since: Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, various Charismatic and revivalistic sects, Christadelphians, numerous “Brethren” and Baptist factions—*all of which movements practice baptism by immersion* (salient testimony to the effect of the *subjectivist* theological method coming right through to control their theology of the sacraments).

Another factor that has given the immersionist cause a major boost was the rise of so-called “biblical theology” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With this movement, lexicography and word-studies began to take the place of systematic and dogmatic theology. The problem was that the lexicography was dominated by the philosophical principle known to scholars today as “etymologism.”<sup>98</sup> This was in fact a

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<sup>97</sup> “Sweet breathings ...” indeed! But that is the language of the subjectivists themselves. See D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730’s to the 1980’s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 171.

<sup>98</sup> For a thorough exposure of “etymologism,” and its effects on biblical exegesis and lexicography, cf. especially James Barr’s *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford University Press, 1961). Barr became Regius Professor of Hebrew in the University of Oxford, and one does not have to take on board his trenchant anti-fundamentalism to be able to appreciate his contribution to philology and lexicography in this work, which was the first and salient stand made against etymologism. Since that time, the science of linguistics has made further advances into lexicography—such advances actually

continuation of the idiosyncrasies of Suidas' tenth-century Greek lexicon. In such works, the history of a word (etymology) would be traced back in history to its earliest known origins, and its meaning, at that original point, would be established as the words *true* meaning. Thenceforth, the usage of that word would be always related to that *original* meaning. The upshot of this was that the verbs *bapto* and *baptizo* were heralded as meaning "to immerse" and only to "immerse." The fallacy in the whole method was, of course, spotted by such Reformed scholars as James W. Dale in his multi-volume encyclopaedic work on those same verbs.<sup>99</sup> Dale, like the Reformers, was a precursor of the modern schools of linguistics, and, like them, he insisted that such features as metonymy and culture-transference were equally of importance as etymology. Indeed, to ignore these latter two factors is to import nonsense into the whole science of lexicography. Thus the vast phalanx of lexicographical works, from 1800 up to the 1950s, is, to some critical extent, spoiled, if not (in some specific examples) entirely vitiated, by this lack of appreciation of the *full* dimensions of linguistic exigencies.<sup>100</sup>

But this all helped the Baptists. "Look!" they would say, "Look at the Greek lexicons and concordances. Look at the word-studies. They all say that we are right ...!" Today, we know different.

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ramifying the philological work of the Reformers, who, as we have seen above in the case of Calvin, did not allow the lexicography of his day to over-rule entirely his acute philological sense. Some 60 pages of Barr's work cited herewith are given over to a critical analysis of the methodology underling no less than Kittel's multi-volume *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Nuen Testament*—this having the enormous status of being virtually standard reference in the world of lexicography.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Dale's *BAPTIZO*—a four-volume study on the usages of the Greek verbs used in baptism; originally published in the mid-nineteenth century, and now reprinted in the USA by a publishing combine including Presbyterian and Reformed.

<sup>100</sup> An example of the modern and able lexicographical works on the Greek New Testament, one which embodies the principles set out by the modern linguistic schools, is the two-volume *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, compiled by Louw and Nida and published in 1988 (1<sup>st</sup> edit.) by the United Bible Societies.



One further factor also boosted the Baptist cause: technology. It is noticeable how the modern Baptist movement has increased enormously during the last 200 years since the Industrial Revolution. To effectuate baptism by immersion, one needs water deep enough to facilitate the action. Of course, six to eight inches will be enough to immerse most people, if you lie them down and roll them into it, but this hardly expressed the “going down into” and “rising up from,” which the Baptist wants to portray. A dignified and, indeed, safe performance of immersion requires about three feet depth of water. In such a depth, the minister can lower the candidate backwards quickly, such that the candidate’s back hits the water hard enough for the natural resistance of the liquid to “bounce” the person back up before they go down too far, and risk drowning. A practised minister can produce a most dignified performance of this rite, provided he can have enough depth of water. In the old days, they used to baptize in rivers—not an easy accomplishment for immersers, because they had to wade out far enough to get the required depth. There, currents could be dangerous,<sup>101</sup> and, of course, you may live in a mountainous area where there are only little streams. Again, any time outside of June to September, that river water is usually going to be mighty cold. *Nil desperandum!* The Industrial Revolution gives us modern plumbing, and we can have a baptistery deep enough in churches which we can fill easily from a tap, and drain easily via the sewers, and, in the meantime, we can even *heat* the baptismal waters with a radiator or some such device.<sup>102</sup> How much more convenient it is now to baptize by immersion than it used to

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<sup>101</sup> We have at least one example of baptismal candidates being drowned in a river. The London *Times* for Saturday, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1992, reported how a pastor and two baptismal candidates were drowned when they were washed away during a baptism in the Vaal river, between Vanderbijlpark and Sasolburg, south of the city of Johannesburg in South Africa.

<sup>102</sup> The “mod cons” are not always reliable. In an issue for May 1979, the *Baptist Times* reported the death of a 16-year-old boy whilst he was being immersed in a baptistery at the Church of God Assembly at Galson, Ayrshire, Scotland. It seems the electric heater for warming the baptismal water malfunctioned and electrocuted the boy. The minister was only saved by virtue of the fact that he was wearing rubber waders.

be in the old days of John Spilesberry, or Balthasar Hübmaier! Doubtless, this increased convenience has facilitated a faster spread of immersionism than hitherto acceptable or possible in the centuries prior to modern plumbing. This is the more so appreciated if we consider the climatic conditions of vast tracts of North America, Northern Europe, and Russia. River-baptisms, in such climates, can be hazardous even in summertime, and in winter the rivers freeze from the perma-frost bottoms and banks upwards and inwards. Strong men soon die in water of such low temperatures, and immersionist baptisms in such conditions put people at grave risk.

The same can be said, too, of tropical climes, where the rivers do not freeze, but are hosts to such creatures as crocodiles, piranhas, anacondas, leeches, and even micro-organisms extremely hostile to human health.<sup>103</sup> Modern plumbing in Africa is a god-send for immersionists, though it must be said that great care must be taken even so, as drains etc., in tropical countries, tend to host numerous undesirable and dangerous creatures.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> We refer to the Anglican-Evangelical missionary, Rev. Canon M. H. Garner, M. A. Whilst a missionary in the West Nile district of Uganda, it fell to him to baptize some 600 people. His convictions on baptism were immersionist, and he set to immersing all his catechumens. As a result, he contracted the disease bilharzia, or schistosomiasis, directly from contact with the river water. This today, though a serious disease, is not necessarily fatal, as it responds to modern medicines. However, in any age prior to antibiotics (which means up until the 1940s) contraction of bilharzia was a death sentence. For the information on Rev. Canon Garner, cf. *The Churchman's Magazine* for May-June 1983 and the first page, "Portrait Gallery." He required hospitalization in Kampala and London, having contracted the disease, after which it was "considered unwise for him to return to Africa."

<sup>104</sup> I once witnessed a movie film taken by a Pentecostal missionary of the *Congo Evangelistic Mission* in the Katanga district of the old Belgian Congo (nowadays Zaire). It showed immersionistic practice in the jungle. They actually had to dig a hole in the ground and fill it by carrying pots of water from a well or somewhere. This worked alright for one baptismal session, but some months later, an attempt to use the stagnant pool for another baptismal session was held up while first the snakes were all dealt with. Then, as the ritual proceeded, they discovered that there were leeches in the water.

In short, immersionism is at least a difficult, and often a hazardous ritual to implement, unless you have the benefits of modern plumbing. How such a ritual was to have been adopted by the churches of 2000 years ago, without the benefit of “mod cons,” would be a study all by itself.

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It is now necessary to look at the implications of exclusivist immersionism as they impinge on the modern ecclesiastical scene.

If baptism may be validly performed using a mode other than full immersion, then, immediately, the foundation for the modern Baptist’s ecclesiastical justification is broken. The whole point of having “Baptist” (i.e. “immersionist”) churches as *separate from* non-immersionist churches, is in order to establish “proper” churches, as per the alleged New Testament principles. By Baptist standards, a *non-immersionist* church is not a true church, seeing that its “members” have not been correctly initiated into the fellowship of Christ, and are living in some kind of serious disobedience to the heavenly commands. Any position *less* than this destroys the fundamental *raison d’etre* for having immersionistic churches. For the Baptist to adopt a more *embracive* view of *non-immersed* Christians would be for him to say, *de facto*, that “immersionism” doesn’t really matter. This would have a knock-on effect—as, *de facto*, it would imply that “Baptist” churches, as such, shouldn’t exist, but that they, like other churches, should tolerate aspersion/affusion with immersionism.

In order, therefore, to protect their own position, Baptists are *logically impelled* into *exclusivistic* immersionism. Many modern Baptists do not go this far. In fact, probably a large number, if not the *majority* of “Baptist Union” churches in the British Isles, have liberalized their position on this, under ecumenical pressures. But the force of the logic means that such liberalisation will ultimately mean the destruction of their churches as a separate and distinctive witness to the very sacramental issue for which such churches were originally incepted.

The immersionist logic, therefore, impels one to *exclusivism*. Those Baptists who “dig their heels in” and refuse to budge on this issue cannot avoid falling into the exclusivist abyss. To practice this, one is forced to argue that *non*-immersed professors of faith are not, as yet, fully obedient to the Lord, and are not, as yet, Christians in good standing. This means their exclusion from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which is, effectively, *excommunication*. No escape exists from the inexorability of the logic here: once you accept a *non*-immersed believer to the Lord’s Supper, you are declaring that person as being in good standing of membership in the body of Christ, and, thereby, eligible, and acceptable, as a member of your Baptist church, if they should so apply for it.

On this factor, some modern Baptists find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. One faction will practice *strict exclusivism* of such a kind that would have excluded such non-immersionist stalwarts of the faith as Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones from both the Lord’s Supper and membership in their churches. Others, a little more catholic in their proclivities, would accept a Lloyd-Jones to the Lord’s Supper, *but not church membership*. This latter group involve themselves, then, in the gross inconsistency of saying that this brother *is* of good enough standing to partake of Holy Communion—and thereby *is* good enough in standing to partake of membership in the universal body of Christ—but, he is *not* good enough to be accepted into membership of *their* congregation until he submits to immersion. *De facto*, this means that membership of *their* congregation requires a higher level of righteousness than membership of the universal body of Christ. The New Testament has a name for this kind of nonsense: *Pharisaism*.

Indeed, it is the “strict” kind of Baptist church that is the type that honestly follows Baptist logic to its full implications. However, this impels them into the following practical difficulties:

(i) They may not invite into their pulpit a visiting minister who is *not* an exclusive immersionist—for if they do, they accept such a non-immersionist in the role of a *teaching elder*, and it would be utterly incongruous to deny such a one the Lord’s Supper afterwards, and then church membership. Hosts of immersionistic churches break these

principles left, right and centre, when they invite into their midst Scots-Presbyterian ministers, or such as Martyn Lloyd-Jones, to minister from their pulpits, yet at the same time, *deny* to non-immersionist believers membership in their own congregations. The New Testament has a name for this kind of practice, too: *hypocrisy*.

(ii) “Strict Baptists” who regularly consult the commentaries and theological works of *non*-immersionists are effectively allowing such allegedly “disobedient-to-Christ” practitioners to have the role of a teaching elder in their lives and in their ministry.

It amazes one to see how, on the study shelves of Baptist ministers, one will find rank upon rank of Presbyterian and Reformed works. This always seems very peculiar, that those who are allegedly “disobedient to Christ” on an issue great enough to justify separate denominations, are nevertheless, regularly consulted as to the interpretation of Scripture. I noted, too, that if the Presbyterian and Reformed works were removed from such libraries, there would be at most only about one third, or more likely, *less than a quarter*, of the books left.

It ever seems peculiar that such allegedly “disobedient-to-Christ” theologians were so necessary in an immersionist’s library—and this anomaly is one that extended to the library of no less than one Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Now there was a logically inconsistent Baptist, if ever there was one. But his godly catholicism prevented him from going the whole hog of the Baptist logic in his practice, whatever else he might have said from the pulpit or in his written works. Thus we find that he even preached the inaugural sermons at the opening of Dr. John Kennedy’s new Presbyterian church at Dingwall in Scotland,<sup>105</sup> an action in and of itself a *total denial* of the Baptist position. For in so doing, Spurgeon was, *de facto*, announcing to the world that he believed and accepted Kennedy’s

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<sup>105</sup> On the 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1870. In addition to this, Spurgeon had, in 1866, addressed the General Assemblies of both the Free Kirk and the United Presbyterian Church. Cf. *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, pp. 455-456 and 790. *De facto*, this was, in principle, unavoidably, a tacit recognition and admission, by this Baptist leader, that such paedobaptist churches were true churches in good standing.

paedobaptistic and non-immersionist church to be a true church. He eulogised Kennedy, too, and was a long-time friend of the man.<sup>106</sup> One can see, however, how Spurgeon's catholicism here would have nevertheless involved him in hypocrisy, back home at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. For there, *non-immersed believers would be denied membership*. Even the great Dr. Kennedy would have suffered exclusion from there!

In short, it is astounding how many allegedly (in Baptist terms) "disobedient-to-Christ" Christians proved to be such stalwart saints of God. I mean ... Augustine, Goteschalk, Bradwardine, Luther, Knox, Calvin, Turretin, Witsius, Brainerd ... one could go on and on and on.

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<sup>106</sup> After Kennedy's death in 1884, Spurgeon wrote eulogistically of him to the widow, using these very words concerning Kennedy: "I *venerated* him (Kennedy) AS EVERY INCH A MAN OF GOD ... he was TRUE AS STEEL AND FIRM AS A ROCK ..." (emphasis mine). The full text of the letter can be read in Auld's biography of Kennedy, where it appears photo-facsimile in Spurgeon's own handwriting. Yet Kennedy was a paedobaptist, ineligible for membership at Spurgeon's Tabernacle!

## 6.

### SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

IN THIS STUDY, we have traced the rise of immersionism from some time in the late second century AD. Being, at first, a pagan rite performed in an octagonal pool as an initiation into the “mysteries” of ancient Roman religions, the immersionistic method of baptism infiltrated the ranks of Christian professors. By the fourth century AD, after the post-Constantinople establishment of Christianity as the state-territorial religion, the influx of pagan mysteries into the churches was consolidated and given additional impetus. Popery, the mass, and mariolatry invaded the institutional body-ecclesiastic—pagan feasts were “Christianized” and imposed on the church calendar, and the initiation rite of baptism became officially paganized in the immersionistic form that was brought in from the “mystery cults.” In that fourth century, we find the first exegetical connection made between water baptism and Romans 6:4/Colossians 2:12, and the “dying-rising” motif became the paramount focus of Christian baptism, rather than a ceremonial and symbolic “washing” or “cleansing” from sin. In accordance with the mystery cults, the “immersionism” of “dying-rising” was thenceforth only undertaken at the pagan spring festival, which had been imported into the church and denominated “Eostre,” or “Easter.”

Whilst immersionism thenceforward was the regnant theology in the Roman church, *exclusive* immersion was never countenanced at that time, since an accommodating provision was made for the sick and the aged, and those in cold climes, to receive baptism by aspersion or sprinkling.

Throughout the Dark Ages (post 530 AD, approx.) baptismal fonts deep enough to *immerse* gradually became more widespread, despite artistic and architectural iconography, which, “frozen” from classical times, depicted baptism as traditionally being affusion or sprinkling. In this period, the pagan octagonal form of the “mystery cult” baptisteries became a popular design, and is evinced still today in the thousands of octagonal fonts still in British parish churches, which, though not designed for immersion, nevertheless still reflect the old pagan 8-sided design.

By the late medieval times, the Roman church had given up on trying to superimpose immersionism as standard practice. Inconvenience, climate, and public health matters played a big part in the retention of aspersion.

At the Reformation, the Reformers, first trying to re-establish pure churches, aimed at instituting immersionism. Philological studies of the Bible language and vocabularies, plus inconvenience, climate, and health matters, however, meant that they took *aspersion* as the normative mode, with its key focus on symbolic cleansing from sin.

The Anabaptists arose prominently in the sixteenth century, and took an anti-paedobaptistic stance, but did not (except in one instance) practice immersionism. Instead, their mode of practice was *affusion*.

By the early seventeenth century, *exclusive immersionism* emerged into history for the first time.

Exclusive immersionism suddenly exploded into a world-dominating position amongst evangelical churches, as from the early nineteenth century. Aiding this explosion was:

(i) The deadness and apostasy of the Reformed state-territorial churches.

(ii) The rise of *subjectivism* in theology and philosophy, favouring the immersionist interpretation of the sacraments.

(iii) The fallacy of “etymologism” in lexicographical studies.

(iv) The rise and development of the Industrial Revolution: modern plumbing techniques securing, for the first time, a convenient and relatively safe provision for performing the immersionist rite



Hence, we conclude that modern exclusive immersionist sacramental theology is:

- (a) A “Johnny-come-lately” on the ecclesiastical scene.
- (b) Has no exegetical connection to Scripture prior to the fourth century AD.
- (c) Is unnecessarily divisive of Christians and their churches.

All this, however, is not to condemn Baptists as “non-Christians.” A Presbyterian can accept that an immersed person has had a valid form of baptism—the problem is, though, that the Baptist won’t allow the same privilege to the Presbyterian. Also, it must be acknowledged that many godly “Calvinistic” Baptists have done sterling service to the furtherance of God’s Kingdom and His glory. They are to be commended for their diligent evangelism, their emphasis on “gathered churches,” and their efforts to uphold the principle of discipline in the body-ecclesiastic.

Presbyterian and paedobaptistic churches need to learn these desirable features, but without ditching their proper Reformed and scriptural doctrines of the covenant and the sacraments. Paedobaptism does not need establishment-territorialism in order to function, and, indeed, only functions correctly and scripturally under the “gathered church” principle, which latter also facilitates godly scriptural discipline.

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<http://www.britishreformed.org/>

“... the immersionist system is, in total, not a true scriptural system, but is, rather, a *Roman Catholic error*—Romanist in its first origins, Romanist in its theology, Romanist in its practice, Romanist in its dogmatic foundations, and even *lexicographically erroneous* and Romanist in its understanding of the definitive biblical terms used to denominate and delineate the sacrament of baptism ...

... In short, contrary to the oft-stated and passionate assertions of the baptistic movement, it is the *Reformers*, with their practice of aspersion, who are the true heirs of the ancient apostolic churches, and the Baptists who are the heirs of a distinctly and indubitably ‘Romanist’ aberration. Now, without a doubt, this assertion will raise eyebrows and drop jaws, or provoke dismissive guffaws of contempt from hardened Baptists. But to those who are concerned to look in a Christian manner at the truth, and to examine the evidence impartially, the conclusion will be inescapable: *immersionism is a Romanist error.*” (Hugh L. Williams, *The Baptist System: Unscriptural & Unreformed*, pp. 10-11)



“Immersion involves essential error. Pressed by the exigency of their theory, immersionists have really subverted the ordinance of baptism. From its scriptural significance as a symbol of the Spirit’s work in purifying the soul by applying “the blood of sprinkling,” they, by seizing upon a mere figurative expression of the apostle Paul, have made it a symbol of the “death, burial and resurrection” of Christ. They have therefore, *two ordinances* setting forth the *work of Christ*, and none to set forth distinctively *the work of the Spirit*. This leads to a belittling and disparaging of the Spirit’s work.” (W. A. Mackay, *Immersion and Immersionists*, pp. 4-5.)