

# Is Baptism by Immersion only?

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Although select Christians claim that baptism can only be valid by fully immersing a person in water, the bible and our early Church history tell a different story. Catholics and most Protestants follow the baptismal practices of the early church by the various methods of sprinkling, pouring or immersion.

## What does the Bible say?

The word **baptism** comes from the ancient Greek word **baptizo** which specifically means “process” or “effect”. *Baptizo* should not be confused with another Greek word **bapto** which means to “dip or immerse.” In religious use, *baptizo* is a process of transformation or being changed such as being “born again by water and the spirit” (John 3:5). This important difference between the two words is how many Catholics are led astray. They are told that *baptizo* can only mean “immersion” when it means much more. A smooth presentation then injects the word “immersion” into biblical texts where the word *baptism* occurs to persuade the listener that only by immersion is someone actually baptized. Yet this is not true. *Baptizo* means a process of transformation which includes immersion, pouring or sprinkling.

## What is the Biblical evidence for *Baptizo* not meaning only immersion?

*Baptizo* is used in both the Old and New Testaments to describe purification rites. The rites are a process and have differing modes including sprinkling, washing and immersion. Hence, the same word is used for sprinkling, pouring (washing) and immersion because it does not care about the mode of the process. The most important element of the process of purification is its effect; that someone or something be transformed from ritually unclean to clean.

The most frequent use of *baptizo* in the Old Testament describes sprinkling. In Hebrews 9:10 the author writes that various *baptizos* (often translated various washings) were part of the Old Testament religious practice. Three ceremonial baptisms are specifically described in Hebrews 9:13, 19, and 21 using the mode of sprinkling blood in the process of purification. The word *baptizo* is used to describe a process of purification properly translated into English as sprinkling or washing in scripture, illustrating that it is not solely the mode of immersion that the word *baptizo* describes. The process of purification, not the mode, is the focus.

This is definitively shown in the passage from Luke 11:38, when Jesus ate at a Pharisee's house. Jesus was challenged for not purifying (*baptizo*) his hands before eating. "The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash [*baptizo*] before dinner." This text does NOT include the word “to immerse” (*bapto*) because Jews poured water to wash their hands before dinner. Hence, the word used - *baptizo* - does not mean only immersion. This is solidified in

Mark 7:3-4 which explains, the Pharisees "do not eat unless they wash (*nipito*) their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they wash (*baptizo*) themselves." In the same sentence the Greek word *nipito* meaning “wash” is used as a synonym for the word *baptizo*. This is very important. The word *baptizo* that some Christians want you to believe can **only** mean “immerse” is plainly shown to also mean “wash by pouring of water.” Hence, the Bible clearly supports the meaning of the word *baptism* or *baptizo* to describe a process of transformation open to various modes for the process to take place.

This understanding is further evidenced in Jesus teaching, “John baptized you with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1:4-5) Jesus is concerned with a process of transformation by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. This is confirmed because the mode of receiving the Holy Spirit is described as being poured out on people and not by immersing them (see Acts 2:17, 18, 33). To be baptized by the Holy Spirit means to be transformed (process). It does not mean to be immersed.

The Gospel of Luke continues to prove the above. John the Baptist said, “I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Luke 3:16). Also, after Jesus was baptized by John (Luke 3:21), he spoke of another transformation (*baptizo*) that he will endure through his future passion, death and resurrection, “There is a baptism with which I must be baptized” (Luke 12:50). Jesus passion, death and resurrection were processes of transformation. The use of *baptizo* again is clearly shown not to mean immersion.

In summary, the biblical evidence is very clear. Baptism or *baptizo* is a process of transformation which can be pursued by various modes such as pouring, sprinkling or immersion.

### Was baptism by immersion only the practice of the Early Church?

The earliest written description of baptism outside the bible is found in the Didache, a Syrian liturgical manual written between 70 - 90 AD. The Didache instructions for baptism include the pouring water as follows:

*... concerning baptism, baptize in this manner: Having said all these things beforehand, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water [that is, in running water, as in a river]. If there is no living water, baptize in other water; and, if you are not able to use cold water, use warm. If you have neither, pour water three times upon the head in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (Didache, the 7th chapter)*

The earliest nonbiblical Christian document clearly states that baptism can be pursued by pouring water. This should be the end of the story. It is irrefutable evidence, but there is more. In 251 A.D., Pope Cornelius I wrote, "he received baptism in the bed where he lay, by pouring". In 255 A.D., Cyprian advised that no one should be "disturbed because the sick are poured upon or sprinkled when they receive the Lord's grace". Additionally, Hippolytus of Rome (A.D. 215) and Tertullian (A.D. 203) describe the pouring or sprinkling of water in baptism. The evidence that early Christians were not limiting baptism to immersion is overwhelming. Only a blind eye cannot see the practice of baptism by pouring of water was understood by the early Church as valid. Baptism by "immersion only" was not an early Church practice.

### Early Church artwork testifies that pouring was a common method for baptism.

The earliest Christian art depicting baptisms are paintings located in the Roman catacombs from the late 200s and early 300s AD. Each shows baptisms by pouring water over the baptized while standing in a river. The following two pictures are the earliest artwork known of John baptizing Jesus. Each depict Jesus and John standing in the river Jordan but not immersing Jesus. Rather John is pouring water over Jesus' head. This is consistent with the bible which describes Jesus and John being in the river and coming out of the river but does not state that he was immersed, rather Jesus was baptized by the Jewish custom of pouring water.



In early Christian artwork that has survived there are no depictions of baptisms by immersion. This includes all of the catacomb paintings and the earliest surviving mosaic tile artwork of baptism discovered in ancient Churches.

### Summary

The teaching of Baptism by "immersion only" is a fallacy. The bible, early Church writings and artwork teach clearly that baptism is a process of transformation and the mode of sprinkling, pouring or immersion is valid. The Catholic Church is the Church Christ founded and it continues to baptize as both the bible teaches and as practiced by the early Church: by sprinkling, pouring and immersion. Please share this straight forward evidence with those who need to see the full truth that resides in the Catholic Church. I wish I would have had this information on hand years ago.