

CALVIN'S MODE OF BAPTISM



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Most Baptists seem oblivious of Calvin's 20th April 1556 *Sermon on Deuteronomy 30:6*. There, he clearly declared:¹ "In **Baptism**...the water is **poured** upon the **head** of a **little child**.... **We** indeed do baptize **with** water.... The Minister lays the water on the **child's head**."

Baptists often quote from Calvin's *Commentary on John's Gospel*, where it says: "John and Christ administered baptism by total immersion."² Yet they neglect to add that such 'im-mersion' is not the same as **sub**-mersion. For all Presbyterian Ministers 'put in' or 'im-merse' their fingers, (but **never** totally **sub**-merse) them under the baptismal water before **sprinkling** babies therewith.

Such Baptists also neglect to complete Calvin's above sentence. For he then soon went on to say "we must not worry overmuch about the outward rite, so long as it accords with the spiritual truth and the Lord's institution." John 3:25f and 1:25-33 cf. **First Kings 18:33f** (q.v.).

Interestingly, Calvin clarified that such baptismal purifyings were always accomplished by **sprinkling**. Thus, commenting on Hebrews 9:10-20, he explained:³ "When there was a sprinkling..., there is no doubt that this represented the mystical sprinkling that comes by the Spirit.... Christ uses His Spirit in place of sprinkling, to wash us with His blood."

Even in John chapters 1 to 4, we see the same teaching in respect of water baptism. Thus, in his comment on the words of John the baptizer in John 1:31f -- 'I came baptizing with water' and 'I have beheld the Spirit **de-scending** as a dove, and [the Spirit] remained up-on Him [Jesus Christ]' -- Calvin said⁴ Christ was here "consecrated with a solemn ceremony.... He began with **baptism**.... And the Spirit **de-scended**."

Again, commenting on John 3:5, Calvin added:⁵ "We sometimes hear of Christ baptizing with the Holy Spirit.... This water is the Spirit Who cleanses us anew and Who, by His power **poured** upon us, imparts to us the energy of the heavenly life."

Calvin's comment also on John 3:34, is relevant. There he declared "that God, the inexhaustible Fount of all good, does not at all exhaust Himself when He bountifully and plentifully **pours** out His gifts on men."⁶

Also on John 4:2, Calvin commented:⁷ "Not only does Christ baptize inwardly by His Spirit. But the very [baptismal] symbol that we receive from a mortal man -- should be regarded in the same light as if Christ Himself had put forth His **hand** and stretched it out **to** us.... This suffices to refute the Anabaptists."

Cf. too John Calvin's comments on Acts 1:5 and 2:17,33,38f. "Christ...will...**baptize** us.... 'I will **pour forth** of My Spirit'.... This is signified by the words '**poured out**'.... The promise was made first to the Jews, and then to their **children**, and finally...to the Gentiles.... This **passage...refutes the Anabaptists** who deny baptism to the children of the faithful while they are still infants, as though they were not members of the Church."

Some Baptists like to cite Calvin's *Institutes*. There, they say he wrote:⁸ "It is evident that the term baptize means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the ancient Church."

Such Baptists here neglect to quote Calvin's original French words! They run: "*C'est une chose de nulle importance, si on baptise en plongeant du tout dans l'eau celui qui est baptisé, ou en repandant...de l'eau sur lui.*" Namely "it is a matter of **no importance** whether one baptizes by immersing into the water, or by...**sprinkling** the water **onto** him."

Now here, Calvin's word 'immerse' (French *plonger*) is not the same as the word 'submerge' (French *submerger*). For Presbyterian Ministers indeed 'immerse' their fingers into the baptismal water -- without 'submerging' either them or the **candidate under** that water.

Furthermore, Baptists are here quoting (in English translation) only the last part Calvin's sentence. In its entirety, it states: "Whether the person baptized is to be 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 adopt either. Although it is evident that the term baptize means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the ancient Church." Yes, 'immerse' -- but **not submerge**!

Moreover, here the word 'ancient' is neither the word 'apostolic' nor the word 'original.' Indeed, Baptists omit to add that (in the original French) -- Calvin here actually wrote "that the custom of thus entirely immersing [**not submersing!**], was anciently observed in the Church."

Undeniably, Calvin here used the French word for "ancient" (*anciennement*) -- not the word for "originally" (*originairement*). So we have used the appropriate English word 'anciently' to translate Calvin's own French word *anciennement*.⁹ That latter word here hardly means 'during apostolic times' -- but refers particularly to the mid-patristic period, especially after the rise of the later heresy of submersionistic baptismal regenerationism!

Regarding baptism during the earlier apostolic period, Calvin commented at Acts 8:37f on Philip's baptism of the eunuch. There the Swiss Reformer explained: "Fanatics stupidly and wrongly attack infant baptism.... The children of the godly are born sons of the Church, and are numbered among the members of Christ from birth.... Christ initiates infants to Himself.... The practice...is for the Minister -- only to sprinkle...the head."¹⁰

Calvin's remarks on First Peter are most instructive, specifically as regards the apostolic baptizing of infants by sprinkling. "The Spirit of God," explained Calvin against the Anabaptists,¹¹ "sprinkles our souls with the blood of Christ. First Peter 1:2.... I do not, however, concede to them that **Paedobaptism** had its origin in the tradition of the Church. It certainly appears to be founded on the institution of God, and to have derived its origin from circumcision." Genesis 17:3-14 cf. Deuteronomy 30:6 and Colossians 2:11-12.

Commenting on the above-mentioned apostolic verse First Peter 1:2, Calvin added¹² that "we are sprinkled by the blood of Christ.... There seems to be [here] an implied allusion to the **ancient rite of sprinkling**.... The **sprinkling** of blood was done by the **hand**.... The Holy Spirit **sprinkles** our souls with the blood of Christ."

Peter soon went on to describe regenerated **babies** and then the 'baptizing' of the whole **household** of Noah. There it was suggested this latter occurred by the **downpour** of the **rainwater** during the Great Flood. First Peter 1:2,23f; 2:1-2f; 3:15-21.

Commented Calvin:¹³ "The dead [now], who in the time of Noah were [then still alive yet] unbelieving..., were drowned by the deluge.... Peter ascribes **salvation** only to the [undrowned!] **family** of Noah...within the ark.... In the common ruin of mankind, the **family** of Noah alone escaped.... Our **baptism** is an antitype of the 'baptism' of **Noah**.... He was preserved, together with his small **family**. So today...baptism is to **us** an entrance into life."

The Anabaptists, explained Calvin,¹⁴ "contend that nothing is left for Paedobaptism." Yet "delusion misleads them!... Nothing more of present effect is to be required in Paedobaptism, than to confirm and sanction the covenant which the Lord has made with them."

In Calvin's *Geneva Catechism*, the catechizer asked about the meaning of baptism. There, Calvin gave the answer as regards new members of the Church Visible: "**Baptism** is a kind of entrance into the Church...when the water is poured upon the head."¹⁵

Calvin also wrote: "We maintain...that in baptism...the forehead is sprinkled."¹⁶ Indeed, in his *Geneva Catechism*, he also declared:¹⁷ "The meaning of baptism...is set before us, when the water is poured upon the head.... We receive the fruit of this cleansing, when the Holy Spirit sprinkles our consciences with that sacred blood.... The Minister of baptism pours water on the infant."

Further, explained Calvin,¹⁸ "Augustine...wisely teaches that the elements become sacraments only when the Word is added.... Our Saviour pronounces the Apostles clean...because of the Word which they had heard from Him -- not because of the baptism.... What can a mortal and earthly man do, by pouring water on the heads of those whom he baptizes -- if Christ does not pronounce from above that He...washes their souls by His blood and renews them by His Spirit?"

So then – what was Calvin's mode of baptism? Submersionism of the candidate? Hardly! For he consistently advocated immersing the fingers into the baptismal water, and sprinkling it onto the head. So too should all Calvinists today.

- 1) Calvin, J.: *Sermons on Deuteronomy* 30:6, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1987, 20th April 1556.
- 2) Calvin, J.: *John's Gospel*, I, p. 78.
- 3) Calvin, J.: *Commentary on Hebrews*, p. 126.
- 4) Calvin, J.: *The Gospel of John*, I, p. 35.
- 5) *Ib.* p. 65.
- 6) *Ib.* p. 84.
- 7) *Ib.* p. 88.
- 8) *Inst.* IV:15:19.
- 9) *Ib.*, Beveridge trans., Clarke, London, 1957, II, p. 524 n. 2: "*Combien que le mot mesme de baptiser signifie du tout plonger et qu'il soit certain que la coustume d'ainsi totalement plonger, ait été anciennement observé en l'Eglise.*" Here, note Calvin uses the word *anciennement* -- not the word *originairement*!
- 10) Calvin, J.: *The Acts of the Apostles 1-13*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1965, I, pp. 253f.
- 11) Calvin, J.: *Refutation of the 'Adultero-German' Interim*, in his *Tracts & Treatises*, 1958, III pp. 253,269,275.
- 12) *Comm. on First Peter*, in his *Epistle of Paul to Hebrews & First & Second Epistles of St. Peter*, p. 231.
- 13) *Ib.* pp. 293f.
- 14) Calvin, J.: *Inst.* IV:16:21.
- 15) Calvin, J.: *Tracts & Treat.*, II:33 & 86f, too, Wall's *History of Infant Baptism*, Oxford U.P., 1862, II:400.
- 16) Calvin, J.: *Institutes* IV:19:11.
- 17) Calvin, J.: *Catechism of the Church of Geneva: Of the Sacraments* (1545), in his *Tracts & Treat.* II pp. 86f.
- 18) Calvin, J.: *Tracts & Treat.*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1958, II pp. 227f.

