

The History of Sprinkling for Baptism

Question: When did the practice of sprinkling begin to be used for baptism?

When I began to research answers to this question I found a very thorough answer written by Carl Mitchell many years ago. Mitchell was a faithful gospel preacher and taught at Abilene Christian College for many years. The title of the article is “The History of How Sprinkling Replaced Immersion as a Baptismal Form.”

In the article Mitchell quotes several church historians. Several times in this article reference is made to “clinical baptism.” That term came to be used when people were too ill to be immersed in water, thus, sprinkling was substituted for immersion. It was called “clinical” because of the health situation. One reason this developed is that a few centuries after the New Testament time, people put off being baptized until they were near death because they wanted all their sins to be forgiven at one time. By this time in their life, often they were too sick to be immersed. This helped promote the idea of sprinkling instead of immersion.

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Quotes from Mitchell’s Article:

“It is impossible to mark the precise period when sprinkling was introduced. It is probable, however, that it was invented in Africa, in the second century, in favor of clinics. But it was so far from being approved by the church in general, that the Africans themselves did not account it valid.....It was not till 1311, that the legislature, in a council held at Ravenna, declared immersion or sprinkling to be indifferent.” (*Edinburgh Cyclopaedia*, Vol. 33, pp. 245, 246).

“Sprinkling as a form of baptism took the place of immersion after a few centuries in the early Church, not from any established rule, but by common consent, and it has since been very generally practiced in all but the Greek and Baptist churches, which insist upon immer-sion.” (*McClintock and Strong’s Cyclopaedia*, Art. Sprinkling, Vol. IX, p. 968).

“Sprinkling was still (in the period of 323 - 692) confined to Baptismus Clinicorum (clinical baptism) and was first generally used in the West in infant baptism in the 12th century, while the East still retained the custom of immersion.” (Kurts, a German Lutheran Historian, in *Church History*, Vol. I, p. 367).

Mitchell says, “A second reason was the beginning of baptizing infants, something neither commanded nor illustrated in the New Testament. There probably began to be occasional baptisms of infants in the late 2nd century, but it did not gain wide acceptance until the time of Augustine (AD 354-430). Augustine took the position that infants inherit the sin of Adam and Eve, and therefore are born sinners and should be baptized soon after their birth. The opposing view, championed by Pelagius (415), claimed infants are born without sin, and become sinners when they are able to understand right and wrong and choose wrong. At that point, they should be baptized. Unfortunately, Augustine convinced the bulk of the church to accept his view.”

”For several centuries after the establishment of Christianity, Baptism was usually conferred by immersion, but since the twelfth century, the practice of baptizing by infusion has prevailed in

the Catholic Church, as this manner is attended with less inconvenience than Baptism by immersion.” (Cardinal Gibbons, *Faith of Our Fathers*, p. 318).

“The Scripture makes it clear enough that water is to be used, but it is not so plain at first sight that the sprinkling or pouring of water will suffice. In Apostolic times the body of the baptized person was immersed, for St. Paul looks on this immersion as typifying burial with Christ, and speaks of baptism as a bath (Rom. 6:4, Eph. 5:26)....even St. Thomas, in the 13th century speaks of baptism by immersion as the common practice of his time. Still, the rubric of the Roman Ritual, which states that baptism can be validly given by immersion, infusion, or aspersion, is fully justified by tradition.” (*Catholic Dictionary*, Art. Bapt., p. 60).