

The History of Baptism (Robinson)

WHETHER John baptized by pouring on water, or by bathing in water, is to be determined chiefly, though not wholly, by ascertaining the precise meaning of the word baptize. A linguist determines himself by his own knowledge of the Greek language, and an illiterate man by the best evidence he can obtain from the testimony of others, whom by his condition he is obliged to trust. To the latter it is sufficient to observe, that the word is confessedly Greek, that native Greeks must understand their own language better than foreigners, and that they have always understood the word baptism to signify dipping; and therefore from their first embracing of Christianity to this day they have always baptized, and do yet baptize, by immersion. This is an authority for the meaning of the word baptize infinitely preferable to that of European lexicographers; so that a man, who is obliged to trust human testimony, and who baptizes by immersion, because the Greeks do, understands a Greek word exactly as the Greeks themselves understand it; and in this case the Greeks are unexceptionable guides, and their practice is, in this instance, safe ground of action.

The English translators did not translate the word baptize, and they acted wisely, for there is no one word in the English language, which is an exact counterpart of the Greek word, as the New Testament uses it, containing the precise ideas of the evangelists, neither less nor more. The difficulty, or rather the excellence of the word is, that it contains two ideas inclusive of the whole doctrine of baptism. Baptize is a dyer's word, and signifies to dip, so as to colour. Such as render the word dip, give one true idea, but the word stood for two, and one is wanting in this rendering. This defect is in the German Testament, Matt. ii. 1. In those days came John der tauffer, John the dipper; and the Dutch, in those days came John een dooper, John the Dipper. This is the truth, but it is not the whole truth. The Saxon Testament adds another idea, by naming the administer John *Se Fulluhtere*, John the fuller. The Islandic language translates baptism skirn (1), scouring. These convey two ideas, cleansing by washing; but neither do these accurately express the two ideas of the Greek baptize; for though repentance in some cases accompanies baptism, as it does prayer, yet not in every case...

The word then conveys two ideas, the one literal, dipping, the other figurative, colouring, a figure however expressive of a real fact; meaning that John by bathing persons in the river Jordan conferred a character, a moral hue, as dyers by dipping in a dying vat set a tinct or colour; John by baptism discriminating the disciples of Christ from other men, as dyers by colouring distinguish stuffs. Hence John is called, by early Latins, John tinctor, the exact Latin of Joannes baptistes, John the Baptist.

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