

TRIUNE IMMERSION

I. DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND

"Triune immersion" means baptizing a person three times, instead of only once. Usually, it is done with the candidate on his knees, having his head pushed forward under the water three times. It is practiced by a number of smaller denominations. Mead ("Handbook of Denominations in the United States") says that various groups, generally known as "Dunkers" (from German word for dip) have practiced this since their beginning in Germany, 1708. They were originally called "Church of the Brethren" (pages 64-67). Although not widely practiced, this teaching can be difficult to answer when run into.

II. RATIONALE FOR ITS PRACTICE AND RESPONSE

Claim #1: It is claimed that the Greek word for "baptize" ("baptizo" Grk. βαπτίζω) means "repeated immersion."

Response: Only a few, very old Greek lexicons give that definition, and they seem to be influenced by a prevailing practice during their time and in their location (just as current dictionaries say "sprinkling" for baptism). The vast majority of Greek lexicons say that "baptizo" means simply, "to dip, plunge or immerse."

Response: If it does mean repeated immersion, then how many times must one be immersed to fulfill the correct number? Seven? (II Kings 5:14); Three? (Matt. 28:19).

Claim #2: It is claimed that the suffix "zo" on the Greek form of the word conveys the idea of "repeated action."

Response: Again, if it means repeated action, why should three times be the correct number? ("Seven" is considered the perfect number in the Bible. See also II Kings 5:14)

Response: Some reliable authorities say the "zo" ending on the word conveys "rapid action." With such uncertainty, how can a doctrine be made for triune immersion from such a philologically questionable argument?

Claim #3: It is claimed that the Greek version of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint (LXX), uses "baptizo" only one time and that is in the case of Naaman, who immersed himself repeatedly.

Response: The repeated action of Naaman's immersion was indicated by the use of the numeral "7" and not by the use of the word "baptizo."

Response: Where the Scriptures require a repeated action, they always indicate it by the use of the numeral, not by the word used. (See Ex. 23:14; Lev. 4:6, 17; 8:11; Deut. 16:16, etc. etc.)

Response: If the case of Naaman should be used to determine the repeated action of immersion, then it should be "septune immersion" instead of "triune immersion."

Claim #4: It is claimed that the early "church fathers" practiced and endorsed triune immersion, proving it to be the proper practice, since presumably they followed the apostolic teaching of the early church. They cite Tertullian, Cyprian, Chrysostom, and Pelagius.

Response: The farthest back that any reference to triune immersion can be found in the "church fathers" is to Tertullian, who wrote about AD 200-230. Since he was clearly non-apostolic on other matters, how can we be sure he was apostolic on triune immersion?

Response: The only passage of Scripture that anyone can cite to uphold triune immersion is Matthew 28:19. There is no hint of it elsewhere in the New Testament.

Claim #5: The strongest argument for triune immersion is based on Matt. 28:19, which mentions the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in connection with baptism.

Response: The number three, alluded to in Matt. 28:19, can only be applied to the number of personalities mentioned in the Godhead [i.e., the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit], NOT to the number of times the person is to be immersed.

Response: The passage does NOT say, "baptized into the name of the Father and *into the name* of the Son, and *into the name* of the Holy Spirit." If that had been the wording, there might have been a basis for arguing three immersions.

Response: All other references to baptism using [in the Greek] the phrases "in the name of" (Acts 2:38; 10:48) or "into the name of" (Acts 8:16; 19:5) make use of the name of Christ only! This suggests that baptism "in" or "into" the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is fulfilled when one is baptized into Christ (See Col. 2:9).

III. THE BASIS FOR THE RISE OF TRIUNE IMMERSION

The controversy over the "Trinity" in the early centuries of Christianity may have led to triune immersion becoming an attempt to establish a stronger case for the three personalities of the Godhead.