

Lecture VIII:
"Mode of Baptism"

by

Leonard Woods

Introductory Note by KM: In his book, Leonard Woods defends infant baptism. Moreover, according to Chapter VII, he believes that baptism is a "substitute for circumcision" and a "seal of the covenant." I agree that both adults and infants were baptized by the Apostles. To his credit, Woods does not appear to agree with the view in Reformed Theology that baptism replaced the "Covenant of Grace," a covenant that does not exist in the Bible. However, I do not agree with Woods that baptism replaced circumcision in any sense. For more on this subject, see my paper, ["Did Water Baptism Replace Circumcision as the 'Sign of the Covenant'?"](#) In Chapter VIII, reprinted here, he presents a detailed and comprehensive argument that the mode of baptism is not specified in the New Testament and can therefore be performed in any of the modes. With this I fully agree.

Introductory remarks [by Leonard Woods]--Two propositions. 1. It cannot be determined from the New Testament that immersion is the only proper mode. 2. Christians should not make the mode of Baptism of essential consequence.

1. There is no *express declaration* in the New Testament that everyone who was baptized was *completely immersed* in water. Nor is there any command of Christ or of his Apostles expressly requiring that Christians should be baptized by *total immersion*. The manner of various purifications and other rites under the Mosaic economy *was exactly described*; and thus it was made evident that God would have those rites executed in *one precise form*. But the particular manner of administering Baptism is not described.

It cannot be certainly determined that total immersion was the only mode of Baptism from the signification of βαπτίζω and the nouns derived from it.

There are many reasons for supposing that βαπτίζω, being a derivative from βάπτω, has a less definite and less forcible sense than the original. And yet even βάπτω does not always signify a total immersion. This might be made evident from classic usage; and it is perfectly evident from the New Testament. See Matt. 26:23: "He that *dippeth his hand* with me in the dish"; ἐμβάψας--τὴν χεῖρα. Mark has it, ὁ ἐμβαπτόμενος, "*he, the person, that dippeth with me in the dish*." Now whatever liquid the dish contained, it cannot be supposed that Judas plunged his hand all over in that liquid. Nothing more can be meant than that he took the bitter herbs which were eaten at the Passover, or other articles of food, and with his fingers dipped them in

the sauce prepared. And yet it is said by Matthew that Judas *dipped his hand*, and by Mark that *he himself dipped* in the dish.

Βαπτίζω, *baptize*, does indeed signify to *immerse* or *dip in water*, but it also signifies to *wash*, and to wash in different ways. "Divers washings" are mentioned [in] Heb. 9:10. The original is διαφορῶν βαπτισμοῖς, *divers baptisms*. These were not all performed in one way, and certainly not by *immersion*. The adjective διάφορος signifies *different, of various kinds, dissimilar*, as in Rom. 12:6. The divers baptisms, or ablutions, mentioned [in] Heb. 9:10 doubtless included all the different ablutions, or ceremonial cleansings, prescribed in the Mosaic law. These were performed in different ways but chiefly by *sprinkling consecrated water*.

The word βαπτίσμος, *baptism*, is used with great latitude of signification in Mark 8:4. The Evangelist says the Pharisees hold many other usages, "as baptisms of cups, and pots, and brazen vessels, and *beds*." The common version has *tables*, for what reason I am unable to say, as the word κλίνη uniformly denotes a *couch* to sleep on or to recline upon at meals. Now the *baptism*, or ceremonial purification, of cups and pots and brazen vessels and *couches* might be performed in different ways. Cups and pots and brazen vessels might possibly be *immersed all over in water*, though this is not probable. But to suppose that *beds* or *couches* were immersed in the same way would be unreasonable, especially since one of the prescribed modes of ceremonial purification, and indeed the most common mode, was *the sprinkling of consecrated water*.

Since then it appears that βαπτίσμος, *baptism*, when used to denote ceremonial purification, did not by any means signify immersion exclusively, and generally signified other modes of purification, why should we suppose that the word βαπτίζω always signifies *to immerse* when used to denote the rite of *Christian Baptism*? If baptism was performed in different ways under the former dispensation, how can we determine merely from the use of the word that it is not to be performed in different ways under the present dispensation? What is there in the Christian religion which would prevent a word from being used with as much latitude of signification as it was under the Mosaic economy?

But even if it were the case that βαπτίζω always signifies *to dip* or *immerse all over in water* when applied to other subjects, it would by no means certainly follow that it has this signification when applied to the Christian rite of *Baptism*. There may be sufficient reasons why a religious rite, though denoted by a word in common use, should not be performed in a manner exactly in conformity with the common signification of that word. This we well know is the case with the words by which the other Christian ordinance is denoted. The word *Supper* in English and δεῖπνον in Greek have a very different sense when applied to that institution from what they have in ordinary cases. Eating a *morsel of bread* does not constitute a *supper*, a *principal meal*, although this is the common signification of δεῖπνον. But in this religious rite, *eating a small morsel of bread* is called a *Supper* (1 Cor. 11:20). And the Apostle charged the Corinthians with abusing the ordinance because they made use of more food than the design of the ordinance required.

Now if the word which denotes one Christian rite has a sense so widely different from its usual sense, why may it not be so with the word which denotes the other Christian rite? As *δεῖπνον*, in reference to one rite, signifies not a usual meal but only a *very small quantity of bread*, why may not *βαπτίζω*, in reference to the other rite, signify not a complete dipping or washing but the application of water in *a small degree*? This would present the two institutions in the same light. In the first, as bread and wine are used, not to nourish and invigorate the body but for *spiritual* purposes, or as a *sign of spiritual blessings*, a very small quantity is sufficient. Indeed, the Apostle decides that a small quantity is better suited to the ends of the institution than a larger quantity. So in the other. As water is used, not to cleanse the body but merely as a *sign of spiritual* purification, a small quantity of water must be sufficient--as sufficient for the purposes of this ordinance as a small quantity of bread and wine is for the purposes of the other. The nourishment of the body in the one case and the cleansing of it in the other being no part of the end to be answered, [it is plain then that] a large quantity either of bread or of water can be of no use.

I shall now endeavor to show that *the circumstances* which attended the several instances of Baptism recorded in the New Testament do not prove that immersion is the only proper mode.

The circumstance mentioned [in] John 3:23 does not prove this. "John was baptizing in Ænon, because there was much water there." In such a country as Palestine, John found it of special importance (as any Christian missionary would at the present day) to collect the multitude of people who resorted to him for instruction and Baptism in a place where there was an abundant supply of water. This he knew to be necessary for their accommodation and even their subsistence; so that there is not the least need of supposing that the mention of much water, or many springs or streams of water (*ὑδάτα πολλά*) had any reference to the particular mode of Baptism. For whatever the mode might have been, a large supply of water was indispensable to such a concourse of people; and such a supply could be obtained in only a few places in that country. But who can suppose the waters of Ænon were resorted to for the simple purpose of *baptizing* when three thousand were, in one day, baptized by the Apostles even at Jerusalem in the driest season of the year?

That total immersion was the mode of Baptism cannot be proved from the circumstance (mentioned in Matt. 3:16) that Jesus, when he was baptized of John in the river Jordan, *went up straightway out of the water*. The preposition *ἀπό* generally signifies *from*. "He went up *from* the water," an expression perfectly natural and proper on [the] supposition that he had only gone into the river where the water was a few inches deep, or that he had gone merely to the edge of the river without stepping into the water at all. It will be kept in mind that the river Jordan had banks of considerable height above the water, except when it was so swollen by the melted snows of Antilibanus as to fill its upper channel. Of course, Jesus must have *ascended*, or *gone up an ascent*, when he left the water, whether he had been *in* the water so as to be immersed or had been only to the margin of the water.

The same remarks may be made respecting the Baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38): "They went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And

when they were come up out of the water, &c." Everyone acquainted with the Greek language knows that the passage may be just as well rendered "they descended *to* the water, and ascended *from* it." Besides, it has often been remarked, and not without reason, that if going down *into* the water proves that the *eunuch* was wholly immersed in the water, it proves the same of *Philip*, which no one supposes to have been the case.

It is evident then that the argument which has been urged in favor of *immersion* from the Baptism of Jesus and of the Ethiopian eunuch is founded on the mere sound of the words used in the common Version. On the slightest examination, the argument vanishes.

The circumstances attending the Baptism of the jailer equally fail of proving that he was baptized by immersion (Acts 16:19-39). In the first place, he was baptized in the night. Secondly, he was evidently baptized in the outer prison. Paul and Silas were thrust into the inner prison, or dungeon. After the earthquake the jailer brought them out, that is, out of the dungeon but clearly not out of the limits of the prison. There Paul taught him and his household and there, in all probability, he baptized them. Thirdly, after the jailer professed to believe, he was baptized *immediately*. These three circumstances, namely, his being baptized at *such a time, in such a place, and immediately after professing to believe*, are very far from proving that immersion was the mode of Baptism. They seem evidently to prove the contrary. If anyone should say there was probably a stream or fountain of water in the prison or a bath filled with water sufficient for baptizing by immersion, I would merely ask what evidence he finds of this in the New Testament.

Nor can it be proved that immersion was the prevailing mode of Baptism from the account given (Acts 10) of the Baptism of those who were converted at the house of Cornelius. After Peter had preached and the Gentiles believed and received the Holy Ghost, Peter said, "Can any man *forbid water* that these should not be baptized?" It is most natural to understand this to mean, *can any man forbid water to be brought?* It is far less natural to understand it to mean, *can any man forbid us to go out to a river or fountain of water?* Is it possible for anyone to think that this account favors the mode of baptizing by immersion?

And what evidence of this can be derived from the Baptism of the three thousand converts as related in Acts 2? The place of those numerous Baptisms was not by the river Jordan, nor at Ænon where there was much water, but at Jerusalem. It was too on the day of Pentecost, which was about the twentieth of March. At that season, which was summer at Jerusalem, there was no rain. The brook Kidron was dry. And there was no stream or fountain of water in Jerusalem or near it, except the pool of Siloam, or Siloah (also called Gihon, 2 Chron. 32:30), which is a fountain of water not far from the Southeast corner of the city at the foot of Mount Zion and Moriah. "This is the only fountain, whose waters gladdened the city."¹ Such having been the circumstances of the case, is there no difficulty in supposing that the Apostles found places where they could baptize three thousand in one day by immersion?

All the Apostles were undoubtedly engaged in baptizing at the same time. And if they baptized by immersion, they probably made use of separate tanks, cisterns, or bathing places in private houses. But is there no difficulty in supposing that they had access to so many bathing places? These doubtless were confined to the houses of the more wealthy (among whom few could at that time be found in Jerusalem) who were disposed in any way to befriend the cause of Christ.

1 See Jahn's Archaeol, and Journal of Fisk and others at Jerusalem in Miss. Herald.

There is not the least intimation that they made use of such bathing places for the purpose of baptizing the three thousand converts. And there is not a shadow of reason for supposing that such a multitude, who were suddenly collected from various regions and who, we must presume, were generally poor, had such changes of raiment as would have been necessary for baptizing by immersion.

But there is still another difficulty which meets us. After much consideration, I think it exceedingly improbable that the Apostles could have baptized such a number by immersion in so short a time. Before they began to baptize, all the other business mentioned in the narrative had been accomplished. The Apostles had met together in one place. The Holy Spirit had been poured out upon them so that they declared the wonderful works of God to people of many different countries in their own languages. The powerful effects produced by their preaching had been noticed. Heavy accusations had been brought against them. Peter had undertaken their defense and had reasoned with them largely from the Holy Scriptures. Multitudes had been pricked in their hearts and inquired what they should do to be saved. Peter had taught them the way of salvation. What is related [in] Acts 2 must be considered a very brief outline of the instruction he gave them, as appears from verse 40.

Now all those miraculous operations of the Holy Ghost, all those discourses of the Apostles to people of many different countries, all the agitations and differences of opinion which took place among such a vast multitude, the discourse of Peter, the convictions and anxious inquiries of three thousand souls with the particular instructions given them in regard to the way of salvation and the duties of a holy life--all these must have occupied a considerable portion of the day. It was the third hour, that is, nine o'clock in the morning, when some of the people, after having seen the effects produced by the effusion of the Spirit, accused the Apostles of being unduly excited by new wine. What has been mentioned could not have taken place in less than half the day; and they certainly could not have had more than half the day left for baptizing. Indeed I can hardly bring myself to believe that they devoted half the day to this ritual service.

But let it be supposed that they baptized three thousand in five hours. This would make six hundred an hour, and for each apostle fifty an hour or two hundred and fifty in five hours. That is but little short of one a minute for each Apostle through the whole of that time. According to this calculation, who can suppose they were baptized by immersion without supposing at the same time that God worked wonders in this as in other occurrences of that memorable day, and that he miraculously multiplied *the hours and minutes* as he had on another occasion multiplied the *loaves and fishes*?

There are two places in the Epistles which contain allusions to the rite of Baptism and which have been thought by some to prove that immersion was the mode: Rom. 6:3,4 and Col. 2:12. In these texts believers are said to be *buried with Christ in*, or *by Baptism*. I remark, first, that the language is figurative. In this all are agreed. Secondly, the word *συνετάφημεν*, *we were buried*, does not relate to *living* men but to *dead* men; not to *water* but to *earth*. It does not mean we were *immersed* or *plunged in water*, but as dead bodies we were *interred* or *covered up in a grave*, or *laid in a tomb*. The figure of speech is the same as in the expressions used in connection with this, in which Christians are said to be *crucified* and *dead*. It designates the character which they sustain in consequence of their union to Christ. They are *crucified to the world*, *dead to sin*; and to make it more forcible still--*dead and buried*.

And this *mortified* temper of Christians and their conformity with Christ is signified by Baptism; and equally so, whatever may be the mode of Baptism. According to the representation of the Apostle in the context, it is as true that believers are *crucified* with Christ and *dead* with Christ in Baptism as they are *buried* with him in Baptism. And so far as I can judge, there is nothing in the language employed in these passages which implies that Baptism has any more resemblance to Christ's *burial* than to his *crucifixion* and *death*.

In Gal. 3:27 the character of Christians is set forth in a similar way by another metaphor. "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have *put on* Christ." The metaphor is taken from the putting on of clothes. Believers *have put on Christ*, have assumed his character, have *invested* or *clothed* themselves with his moral excellence as one covers himself with a garment. And this is signified by their being baptized into Christ. But who would ever think of inferring from this that the *mode* of Baptism must have a resemblance to *putting on clothes*? And yet this would seem to be as reasonable as to argue from the other passages that because it is said [that] those who are baptized into Christ are *buried* with him, therefore the mode of Baptism must have a resemblance to Christ's *burial*. After all, it will be seen that there is no small difficulty in finding any great resemblance between a man's being dipped or plunged in *water* and Christ's being laid in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock.

Let me just remark in addition, that if *circumcision* had been continued as the seal of the covenant under the Christian dispensation, it would evidently have been just as proper as it is now for the Apostle to make use of the metaphors found in the passages above quoted, and to say that those who are *circumcised with Christian circumcision* are *crucified* with Christ, *dead* with Christ, and *buried* with Christ; i.e. in consequence of their union to Christ they are *crucified, dead, and buried* as to sinful and worldly objects, but alive as to God.

But there is something farther to be noted here. The Apostle says [in] Rom. 6:3, "so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized *into his death*." But what is it for believers to be baptized into Christ's *death*? The answer is to be found in the general train of thought exhibited in this passage, and particularly in vs. 11, 12. "In that Christ died, he died unto sin (or on account of sin) once; but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin (or in respect to sin) but alive unto God through Jesus Christ."

The design of the Apostle is to illustrate the character and obligations of believers from the circumstance that they are, or should be, in a certain respect conformed to Christ's *death*; that is, as he died *for* sin so they are dead or are under obligation to be dead *to* sin; an expression of the same import as that they are *not under the dominion of sin*--that they are *holy* or are by their profession *obliged* to be holy.

Thus it appears that for believers to be baptized into Christ's *death* is to become obligated by their profession to die unto sin, or to be *holy*. This character and obligation of Christians is signified by Baptism. But how does Baptism signify this? Not surely by being a sign or symbol of *death*, or *the state of the dead*; for *water*, or *washing in water*, never was a sign of this. But water used in ceremonial ablutions, whether by washing or sprinkling, always signified the fact or the acknowledged necessity of *purification*.

Now being *dead*, or in a *state of death as to sin*, is the same thing as to be *spiritually purified*, or made *holy*. And this is the very thing that *Christian Baptism*, coming in the place of ablutions under the former economy, is exactly adapted to signify. Or to say all in a word: water used in Baptism is a sign of that *moral purification* of believers, which the Apostle means to express by their being "crucified," and "dead," and conformed to Christ's "death." Their being *dead* or in a state of *death* in conformity with Christ is the expression which contains the metaphor. Now is Baptism meant to be the sign of a *metaphor* or of *the thing* intended by the metaphor? The argument in favor of immersion, which some derive from this passage, is founded on the supposition of a real resemblance between *Baptism* and *death*. This supposition, we think, is very unnatural and far different from what the Apostle had in view.²

What has been said above as to the *obligation* implied in Baptism may be confirmed by 1 Cor. 10:2. The Apostle says the Israelites "were all *baptized* unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea." Baptism, as a religious rite, was not then instituted. But the Apostle, knowing the special obligation implied in Baptism, makes use of the word to set forth the obligation of the children of Israel. "They were *baptized* unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea." That is, in consequence of God's mercy towards them, especially at the Red Sea, they came under special obligations to obey Moses, the servant of God; or which is the same thing, to obey the commands of God *by Moses*. Their being *baptized* does not surely imply that they were *immersed* or *plunged* in the cloud and in the sea (which was not the fact, for they went through on *dry ground*); but it implies that they were there brought under special obligations to worship and obey their gracious Deliverer.

As to 1 Pet. 3:21 ["*There is also an antitype which now saves us--baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*"], I shall stop to make only two concise remarks. First, the Apostle here expressly tells us that the thing he had in his mind when he spoke of Baptism was not an *outward* but an *inward spiritual washing*. Secondly, the condition of Noah and his family in the ark was not like the condition of persons *buried* or *immersed in water*. This was the condition of the ungodly world. It was *from* this condition, as the Apostle tells us, that those in the ark were *saved*. And this preservation from the ruin of the ungodly world he refers to as illustrating the salvation of Christians who have that *inward purification*, that "*answer of a good conscience towards God*," which he tells us is what he meant by Baptism.

The mistake into which some Pedobaptist as well as Baptist writers have been betrayed in regard to several of the passages which relate to Baptism, particularly Rom. 6 and Gal. 3, has in my apprehension been owing to their not attending with sufficient care to the nature and design of the metaphorical language there used.

I have now given you the result of my serious and long continued inquiries on the mode of Baptism so far as it can be determined from the Christian Scriptures. This result is, that Christ and the Apostles have left it *undecided*. And then the question which naturally arises in my mind is why have they left it undecided unless it be to show us that they did not deem *the*

2 **KM:** Woods does not defend this statement by any citation of Scripture, but there is a verse that demonstrates that Woods' statement is absolutely correct: Acts 22:16 indicates what baptism really resembled in the minds of the Apostles. Ananias tells Saul (Paul): "Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name." Baptism pictured *washing*--washing away sins.

particular mode of any material consequence, and that God would have it conform to circumstances and would be well pleased with Baptism in every decent mode, provided that it be performed with a cordial desire to do his will.

Our Baptist brethren undertake to prove from Ecclesiastical History that immersion was the prevailing mode of Baptism in the ages following the Apostles. I acknowledge the validity of the argument. And I am very willing to acknowledge also that immersion was *one* of the modes of Baptism used in the time of Christ and the Apostles, and that the Christians in the following ages probably derived it from them. This is acknowledging all that can be proved, or even made probable.

In regard to this argument from Ecclesiastical History, I remark first that it is the only conclusive argument in favor of immersion as the mode of Christian Baptism. It must, I think, be apparent that no clear and incontrovertible proof can be found in the Scriptures. Secondly, those who rely upon the testimony of Ecclesiastical History as a conclusive argument in favor of baptizing by *immersion* must, to be consistent, allow the same testimony to be conclusive in favor of *Infant* Baptism. If they reject this last argument, they ought also to reject the former.

2. I proceed now to my second general proposition, which is: that *Christians ought not to make the mode of Baptism of any essential consequence.*

We are all in danger of attaching more importance to external rites and forms than really belongs to them. The people of God were exposed to this danger under the former dispensation; and the prophets frequently warned them against it, and told them plainly that outward rites, though enjoined by divine authority, were of little consequence compared with spiritual duties. Christ often found it necessary to guard his disciples against the same danger, and to teach them that obedience to the moral precepts of the law was the great thing required and that outward observances were comparatively of but little consequence.

In the time of the Apostles Christians had a zeal about the externals of religion, which proved a great hindrance to the peace and prosperity of the church. And some of them needed to be told by St. Paul that *the kingdom of God consisted not in meats and drinks, that is, in external observances, but in righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.* I am well satisfied that Christians are exposed to mistake on this subject at the present day, and exposed in a high degree where any external rite or form is made the subject of controversy and strife. Against this mistake, especially in regard to the *mode of Baptism*, I would earnestly and affectionately warn the followers of Christ.

From the foregoing examination, I think it must have become evident that no particular mode of Baptism is exactly described in the New Testament and represented as the one which believers are required to use exclusively of all others. I would not allow myself to speak with unbecoming confidence on such a subject. But I confess I am unable to find a single text which, according to just rules of interpretation, clearly proves that Baptism was administered by immersion, or which requires it to be administered exclusively in that or in any other particular way. And the conclusion which I draw from this fact is that if we contend for any one mode as proper for Christians, exclusively of every other mode, we go beyond our rule. We attempt to do what

Christ and the Apostles left undone; and which they left undone, as appears to me, for the very purpose of showing that they did not regard the particular form of the rite as of any material consequence, and so would have Christians at liberty to vary the form as circumstances might require.

I am confirmed in this view of the subject by other considerations. Christ intended that his people should be free from inconvenient and burdensome rites and should have no yoke put upon them which was not easy to be borne. But scarcely anything in the Mosaic ritual was so inconvenient and burdensome as Baptism would, in some circumstances, be if it could be administered in no way but by immersion. The coldness of some climates, and of some seasons of the year in more temperate climates, renders it almost impracticable to baptize in this way. Those who practice immersion find it, in some cases, exceedingly inconvenient and difficult, and submit to it merely because they think God requires it.

Now I have serious doubts whether all this is consistent with the simplicity and spirituality of the Christian religion, and whether the unqualified declaration of Christ--that *his yoke is easy and his burden light*--would lead us to expect that an outward rite, in some circumstances so difficult to be performed, would be enjoined upon all Christians without exception. And I have still stronger doubts whether it is consistent with the genius of Christianity that Baptism by immersion should be required of all believers when I consider that the thing required is, in some places, rendered impossible for want [lack] of sufficient water, and in various instances must necessarily be given up on account of long-continued bodily infirmity.

The Christian religion was designed to be a *universal* religion, and its external rites as well as its spiritual precepts were unquestionably adapted to this design. But the rites of Christianity, in order to be adapted to the design of making it a universal religion, must be such as to be capable of being varied in outward form as circumstances in different parts of the world may require, while the substance of them shall, under all external variations, be preserved and the ends of them secured. An absolute, unvarying uniformity in the mode of administering either Baptism or the Lord's Supper, or in the mode of performing public worship, would operate as a hindrance to the spread of the Gospel.

As to public worship, we never think of such uniformity, but vary in regard to external forms just as the ends of public worship seem to require. And we feel that we have the same liberty in regard to the Lord's Supper. As to the exterior of this solemn rite, we depart almost indefinitely from the original pattern. We do not observe the institution as Christ observed it, with his Apostles *in the night* or *in an upper room*. They *reclined* at the Sacramental Table. This posture we should feel to be unsuitable for us. They used *unleavened* bread and *the pure juice of the grape*. We do not imitate them in either of these. And if we should be in places where neither bread nor wine of any kind could be had, we should consider it admissible to make use of other articles of food and drink in their stead. All this we believe to be according to the will of our condescending and merciful Saviour and to the spirit of his religion.

And why should we not judge and act on the same principles in regard to the other Christian rite? What reason can we have for considering an exact adherence to *one invariable form* more necessary in Baptism than in the Lord's Supper? We should rather think it less necessary, inasmuch as we find less evidence in the New Testament of the particular mode in which

Baptism was administered than of the mode in which the Lord's Supper was administered.

I shall just refer to another subject on which Christians are generally agreed and which, in my view, they treat according to the will of Christ. After he had, with the most condescending, amiable kindness, washed the feet of his disciples, he commanded them to *wash one another's feet*. This command of Christ was as express, and for aught that appears in the command, as much intended for all his followers as the command to baptize or to eat the Sacramental Supper. And yet we dispense with a *literal* observance of it and content ourselves with obeying it *virtually*; that is, with performing acts of condescension and brotherly kindness. And to justify ourselves in this we plead that present *usages* are different from what they were when the command was given; that what was then an act of kindness would not be so now; that it cannot be supposed that our Lord and Master would have us violate the common customs and civilities of social intercourse for the sake of conforming to the *letter* of such a precept; and that a conformity to the *spirit* of it, in doing acts of condescension and love, must be more acceptable to him and more beneficial to our brethren.

Of the correctness of treating the command of Christ referred to in this manner, I am fully satisfied. And why should we not proceed on the same general principle as to the form of Baptism? Even if it could be certainly determined that Baptism was at first administered by immersion, might not a regard to common *usage*, to *decency*, or to *convenience* be a sufficient reason for varying the mode? Might not compassion for those believers who are in a state of infirmity be a sufficient reason for exempting them from an exposure which they cannot bear, and baptizing them in a manner suited to their circumstances? And why should we not content ourselves in such cases with conforming to this Christian rite *virtually*, though not *literally* and *exactly*?

I say this even on the supposition that immersion was evidently the form of Baptism in the time of Christ and his Apostles. But this supposition wants [lacks] proof. And accordingly the reason in favor of conforming the mode of Baptism to circumstances is to my mind strong and conclusive. And it is very clear that if we fix upon immersion as the proper mode and utterly refuse to vary from this in any circumstances, some Christians who are allowed to be qualified for Baptism and are desirous of receiving it must be debarred.

There is another consideration relative to the subject before us which I think [is] calculated to have a very salutary influence on our minds. The consideration is, that God *equally* approves of sincere Christians whether they are baptized by immersion or by sprinkling. My meaning is, that the judgment of God respecting Christians depends altogether upon their real internal character, and that if they are *equally holy* they are *equally the objects of his approbation* although they are baptized in different ways. Their not observing an external rite in the same manner can be of no account with God. In the midst of the discussion and controversies in which we may at any time be engaged respecting outward rites and forms, let us charge ourselves to remember this.

That God does in fact regard Christians who are baptized in different ways with equal approbation might be made evident from the representations of his word and from his actual administration. But formal proof cannot be necessary. Those who are familiar with the Scriptures have learned that God judges of men in the manner I have described. And we cannot

fail to receive the same impression from what is manifest in his administration.

I am happy to acknowledge those who prefer immersion as the mode of Baptism to be sincere friends to Christ; and I would not cease to rejoice in all the tokens of the divine favor which they receive. But do not those Christians who use sprinkling or affusion receive as many tokens of divine favor? Does not God give them as high a degree of the influence of the Holy Spirit? And in consequence of this, do they not exhibit as high a degree of sanctification? Have they not as ardent love to the Saviour and as much zeal for the promotion of his cause? Do they not labor as diligently and pray as fervently for the salvation of the world? Are not their labors as successful? And do not their prayers meet with as much acceptance and obtain as many gracious answers? Do they not as sensibly enjoy the presence of God in the special ordinances of the Gospel in seasons of affliction and in the hour of death? Will not as welcome and joyful an entrance be ministered to them into the everlasting kingdom of their Saviour? And will they not enjoy as high a degree of blessedness in heaven?

Now if it is indeed so that God grants to those who believe sprinkling or affusion to be a proper mode of Baptism as many tokens of his approbation and love as to those who prefer immersion, is not the conclusion perfectly obvious that God does not consider the particular form of Baptism to be of any essential consequence as to the great interests of religion? And does it not follow that *we* ought to love the followers of Christ who baptize in one way as much as those who baptize in another way? And that if we consider the form of this rite as of any essential consequence, or suffer it to have any great influence upon our feelings, we commit a lamentable mistake and, in regard to this point, place ourselves in opposition to the mind of God? And how deeply is it to be deplored that any Christians should, through weakness or imperfection, cherish views and feelings which are at variance with the divine will and the divine administration?

And here, as I am about to take my leave of this subject, I must solicit the candid indulgence of those who differ from me in regard to the mode of Baptism, while I allow myself in great plainness of speech and utter my thoughts seriously and unreservedly as in the presence of him who is the Saviour and Judge of the world.

We must all, I think, be satisfied that the salvation of sinners and the spiritual prosperity of Christ's kingdom, together with our own sanctification and eternal life, ought to be the great objects of desire and pursuit to all Christians; that no other objects should be suffered to come into competition with these; and that we should do nothing and countenance nothing which can in any way interfere with them. But have these great, spiritual interests been always kept uppermost in the mind? Have they not sometimes been almost forgotten? And have they not too frequently been made subordinate to local or sectarian interests?

I have heard of Christians and of Gospel ministers who have made the *mode of Baptism* their grand, engrossing subject. I have heard of those who have been actuated by such an intense zeal in favor of one particular form of this external rite that they have seemed almost inclined to make it the sum of all religion. Even in those auspicious seasons, when God is pleased in mercy to pour out his Spirit and produce in the minds of multitudes a deep and overwhelming impression of the evil of sin and the value of eternal salvation, there are some Christians and some teachers of religion (I hope the number will be found small) who show an unaccountable forwardness to introduce discussions respecting the *mode of Baptism*. And instead of striving

with all their hearts to bring sinners into the kingdom of heaven and to promote the holiness of believers, make it a favorite object to convince them that Baptism should not be administered by sprinkling but by immersion.

Now it is well known that discussions of this kind have a direct tendency to grieve the Holy Spirit and to divert the attention of saints and sinners from the one thing needful. I am fully persuaded that the introduction of such a subject, especially in a revival of religion, is offensive to God and will be followed, as it often has been, by the withdrawal of his gracious influence. And I would earnestly beseech any ministers or Christians who are inclined to such a course as that to which I have now referred, to pause a few moments and seriously to inquire whether they are pursuing the great object for which Jesus died on the cross, and for which he has given us the Gospel and the day of salvation; whether they are not in danger of substituting an excessive zeal for an outward rite, or rather the *form* of an outward rite, in the place of pure love to Christ and to the immortal souls of men; and whether they have any reason to think that such a *form* as this will appear as important to them at the Judgment day as it does now.

Those Christian brethren with whom I am expostulating expect to dwell eternally in heaven with an innumerable multitude of God's people who differ from them as to the mode of administering Baptism. And I am very sure that "the general assembly and church of the first born, who are written in heaven," and "the spirits of just men made perfect," will not be divided into different and contending parties on account of their having received Baptism in different ways. The presence of their Saviour and their glowing, perfect love to him will make them *all one*. And any strife or prejudice or coldness existing among them in this world will either be buried in a happy oblivion or will be remembered with grief (if grief can be found in that happy world), and with high emotions of gratitude for that infinite grace which has delivered them from the weakness and imperfection of their earthly state and prepared them for the holy employments and pleasures of heaven.

With these few suggestions I dismiss a subject which was no pleasure to me to introduce. But there are other subjects relating to the present and future happiness of all the children of God on which I should love to enlarge. If we are real Christians, we are entitled to an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away. Christ is even now the portion of our souls; and we shall shortly be with him where he is. Having this hope in us, let us purify ourselves, as Christ is pure. Let us walk by faith, not by sight.

Lecture VIII from *Lectures on Infant Baptism* by Leonard Woods (Andover: Flagg & Gould, 1828). **Note:** The text has not been modified except punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.