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The Renewal of the Practice of Adult Baptism by Immersion during the Reformation Era, 1525-1700

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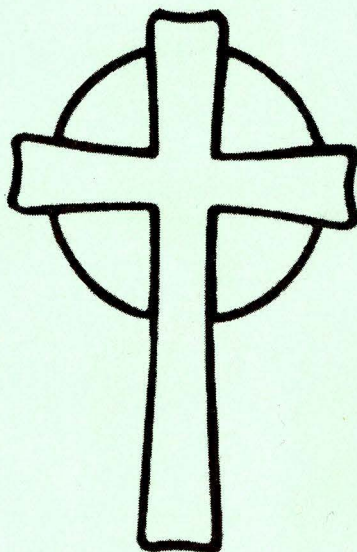
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THE RENEWAL OF THE PRACTICE OF ADULT BAPTISM BY IMMERSION DURING THE REFORMATION ERA, 1525–1700¹

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Although countless books and articles treat the subject of Christian baptism during the Reformation era in one way or another, very few offer much information about immersion. The few that do are often either older works that lack significant information made available by more recent research or are so narrowly focused on a person, movement, or geographical region that they leave out significant parallel thought and practice in other areas. Such works also tend not to trace historical influences outside their focus. This omission has also led to a considerable amount of misunderstanding about who practiced immersion and why. The purpose of this brief study is twofold: 1) to correct widespread misunderstandings about who practiced immersion, in particular the false notion that Anabaptists in general practiced immersion; and 2) to bring together material from numerous sources to present a more comprehensive overview of how and why adult baptism by immersion began to be practiced during the Reformation (1525–1700).

I. Misperceptions about Who Baptized by Immersion

Since adult baptism by immersion is prominently practiced by the largest denomination in the Protestant world, the Baptists, the assumption often is that it was also practiced by their precursors, the Anabaptists, from whom they borrowed much theology and religious practice. Such, however, is not the case. The first “Baptists,” that is, Anabaptists, located in Germanic Europe, did initiate the practice of believer’s baptism, but they baptized by sprinkling or pouring and consciously rejected immersion. The only exceptions were the Polish Anabaptists, the Polish Brethren, and a handful of individual teachers who taught immersion, but were by and large unable to generate any significant following.

¹ Presented at the Eighteenth Annual Christian Scholars Conference, July 16–18, 1998, at Pepperdine University.

Yet the misperception of Anabaptists practicing immersion persists. Perhaps the most prominent example is that of Justo Gonzalez, one of the leading church historians of our day. In his very influential *The Story of Christianity* (1985), he states, in reference to the Anabaptists, "Later, as they sought to conform to the New Testament, they began baptizing by immersion."² The popularity of the Gonzalez text has unfortunately served as the source for numerous other works in spreading this misinformation.³ It is difficult to determine on which source Gonzalez relied. The earliest source of this misunderstanding that I have been able to find is Albert Newman's *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism* (1897)⁴ and John Lumpkin's *A History of Immersion* (1962).⁵ Probably this misunderstanding will not be perpetuated indefinitely due to recent research that is now becoming more widely recognized.⁶

II. Origins of the Practice of Immersion during the Reformation Era

A. Anabaptist Baptism by Sprinkling

Immersion was the primary mode of baptism in the early church and persisted as common practice well into the sixteenth century in the Western church.⁷ The Eastern Orthodox Church, of course, maintains immersion as the primary mode of baptism to this day. Although sprinkling was accepted in some areas as early as the time of the *Didache* (ca. 120), it was clearly accepted only on an exceptional basis. In the Western church immersion had been the common practice of baptism well into the twelfth century. Thomas Aquinas clearly noted

² Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (vol. 2; San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1985), 55. In personal correspondence with Dr. Gonzalez, I pointed out to him the inaccuracy of this and a few other items in his text. He responded graciously that he would make the corrections if he ever published a second edition.

³ I have been able to find at least two works that have perpetuated this inaccuracy by citing Gonzalez: C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, Tex.: ACU Press, 1988), 128, 133; and R. Dean Peterson, *A Concise History of Christianity* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1993), 150.

⁴ Albert H. Newman, *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1897), 170. Newman's source is at best very speculative. All other information about the early Anabaptists clearly demonstrates that they did not immerse.

⁵ John H. Lumpkin, *A History of Immersion* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), especially 21–28, in which he, among others, cites Newman, *History of Anti-Pedobaptism*. In spite of citing a number of sources, neither the sources nor Lumpkin's conclusions are very persuasive, except for the unusual case of Wolfgang Ullmann and the Polish Brethren, where it is quite clear they practiced immersion.

⁶ Note particularly, George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (3d ed. (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992).

⁷ Hughes O. Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 264–82. Old's work is very unusual in that he dedicates a whole section of a chapter to the topic of the mode of baptism.

a preference for immersion in his day (late thirteenth century). The first church council to give credence to a general acceptance of sprinkling was the Council of Ravenna, 1311. Evidence indicates that the widespread practice of sprinkling occurred first in northern France during the fourteenth century and then spread slowly into most of Europe, with evidently England being the most reluctant to convert to sprinkling. The mode of baptism was often a local affair, and even after common practice was given to sprinkling, there were occasional theologians and sporadic parochial situations that gave preference to immersion. The subjects of baptism were, of course, infants. Infant baptism had been the practice since the early Middle Ages.⁸

The turbulence created by the Reformation affected nearly every aspect of Christian thought and practice, including reconsideration of baptism. On January 21, 1525, baptism of adult believers was initiated when Conrad Grebel baptized George Blaurock in a private home in Zurich⁹ (not in the Zurich city square as again mistakenly stated by Gonzalez), thus giving symbolic birth to the movement known as Anabaptism. All the various Anabaptist groups that developed during these early years of the Reformation baptized by sprinkling. The only known exception was due to the unusual personal request of Wolfgang Ullmann to be immersed. Although these groups simply continued the commonly practiced mode of baptism, the innovation of adult baptism could also be viewed as a first step toward the eventual practice of believer's baptism by immersion.¹⁰

Primarily stimulated by a desire to restore the apostolic church, the Anabaptists quickly developed a hermeneutic that was expressed more through a call to true discipleship within a community of believers than simply being baptized as adults. Nevertheless, baptism became the most distinctive symbol of

⁸ I have found only three publications that deal with the history of immersion (in the Western church) as the primary subject: Lumpkin, *History of Immersion*, 40; John T. Christian, *Immersion, the Act of Christian Baptism* (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1893 [the only book-length treatment, but does not deal with the wealth of material produced by the Polish Brethren or the Dutch Collegiants]); and J. G. de Hoop Scheffer, "Overzicht der Geschiedenis van den Doop bij Onderdompeling," *Verslagener Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Academie van Wetenschappen Afd. Letterkunde* 2 reeks deel XII (1883): 119-70. In many ways Scheffer's article is the most informative for the Reformation period, but is relatively brief. It is also rarely cited by later works on baptism, perhaps because of the language (Dutch) and inaccessibility to the periodical. For example, Old, *Baptismal Rite*, in an otherwise quite extensive bibliography, does not cite Scheffer in his section on immersion.

⁹ G. R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 182.

¹⁰ The single most extensive monograph on the history and basic theologies of sixteenth century Anabaptism is George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992).

this spiritual perspective. Roland Armour, whose *Anabaptist Baptism* remains the most extensive and comprehensive study of the baptismal theology of the sixteenth century Anabaptists, states:

In summary, we can say that Anabaptist baptism symbolized all the basic elements of their view of the Christian life. Whether one looks to their experience of regeneration through the Holy Spirit, to their conception of the nature of the church and foundation upon which it would stand, or to their understanding of the life the Christian would lead, their answer was the same—it was a “baptism”.¹¹

What is, of course, of concern to this study is why they did not consider immersion. It was rarely mentioned in their prodigious amount of writing on the subject of baptism; and when they addressed it, they either rejected it or felt that the mode of baptism was unimportant. There are various logical reasons for such conclusions: 1) sprinkling was so deeply ingrained in theology and practice that it was simply not seriously questioned; 2) the social and religious controversies created through their rejection of infant baptism was radical enough to occupy all their energies, with little left over to spend on a perceived triviality; and 3) although many were well-trained former priests, Greek studies did not figure prominently in their writings, thus moderating against a literal application of the very word that helped define their movements; as noted by Armour, “baptism” to them was a spiritual commitment whose literal interpretation was expressed in a life of discipleship rather than through a burial in water.

The writings of Menno Simons provide an interesting insight on the topic of immersion. In his magnum opus, *The Foundation Book* (1558), he based much of his defense of believer’s baptism on Rom 6:3–4. Some scholars contend that his exegesis was so persuasive that later the Particular Baptists copied his wording almost verbatim in their first Confession of Faith (1644) in the section dealing with the necessity of baptism by immersion.¹² A similar (mis)reading of Menno’s work influenced the Mennonite Brethren Church to change from sprinkling to immersion (1860).¹³ The irony is, of course, that Menno practiced only pouring as a mode of baptism. Even in the modern era there was briefly some debate on whether Menno was arguing for immersion, but further evidence from numerous sources confirmed conclusively that Menno neither taught nor practiced immersion.¹⁴ It is certainly possible that cursory reading among

¹¹ Rollin Armour, *Anabaptist Baptism: A Representative Study* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1966), 140.

¹² James M. Renihan, “An Examinatin of the Possible Influence of Menno Simons’ Foundation Book upon the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644,” *ABQ* 15 (September 1996): 190–207.

¹³ John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Hillsboro, Kans.: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1975), 55–56.

¹⁴ John Horsch, “Did Menno Simons Baptize by Immersion?” *Mennonite Quarterly*

Anabaptist documents by scholars may have contributed to the misperception of the Anabaptist practice of baptism.

B. Anabaptist Exceptions to Sprinkling

There were some notable exceptions, though few had much influence outside their immediate individual surroundings. The earliest of these was Bernhard Rothmann, the leading theologian in the fateful city of Münster. Münster was the only city taken over by Anabaptists during the Reformation, transforming it into a brief (1533–35) reign of radical reformers that forever sullied the name “Anabaptist” because of the extreme measures undertaken, namely, forced adult baptism, communitarianism, polygamy, and use of the sword in the name of the Lord in literal fulfillment of their apocalyptic interpretations. In the space of just a few years, Rothmann helped lead the city from Catholicism to Lutheranism to various stages of Anabaptism, each one more extreme than the previous.

One of his earliest works (1533),¹⁵ in defense of his and the city’s transition into Anabaptism, dealt with baptism. Similar to most Anabaptist treatises on the subject, its main emphasis was bifocal: an attack on infant baptism as unscriptural and the scriptural validity of adult baptism. Along the way, however, he was the first among Anabaptists to articulate a persuasive explanation and defense of immersion. He based his position primarily on three arguments: first, he argued along grammatical lines, interestingly not Greek grammar but Dutch/German. He contended that the meaning of the Dutch translation of baptism must be taken literally. Fortunately, the Dutch¹⁶ words “doepen” and “dampelen” meant literally to immerse or “dunk in water.” It is important to note that although Rothmann was technically correct on this point of grammar, it was also as commonly understood that there was a long standing theological exception as practiced by the church, namely sprinkling. Second, the Scriptural explanations of baptism in such passages as Rom 6:3–4 (baptism = burial), Col 2:11–13 (baptism = burial), and 1 Pet 3:21 (baptism = washing of the body, or bath) graphically describe an immersion. Third, he cited a few ancient authorities, Tertullian, Origen, Gratian’s Decretum, and Beatus Rhenanus (by which he meant collections of ancient texts edited by Rhenanus, a contemporary

Review 1 (January 1927): 54–56.

¹⁵ Robert Stupperich, ed., *Die Schriften Bernhard Rothmanns* (Münster: Aschenдорfsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1970); Heinrich Detmer and Robert Krumbholtz, eds., *Zwei Schriften des Münsterschen Wiedertäufers Bernhard Rothmann* (Dortmund: Druck und Verlag von Friedrich Wilhelm Ruhfus, 1904).

¹⁶ See Detmer and Krumbholtz, *Zwei Schriften*, 4–5. The spelling is actually not Dutch but the Plattdeutsch dialect common to the area. The correct Dutch spelling would be “doop” (noun) and “doopen” or “dampelen” (verbs); all however with the same meaning: to dip, dunk, plunge, immerse, (or noun equivalent).

of Rothmann), who at least to some degree supported directly or indirectly adult baptism and immersion. Since the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster did not last long under its most extreme forms, just how comprehensively immersion might have been implemented is unknown, although clearly many were immersed.

In a limited way, Rothmann's influence did seep out further than the environs of the Anabaptist kingdom in Münster. Pilgram Marpeck, a prominent contemporary leader among South German Anabaptists, relied heavily on Rothmann's treatise on baptism in the publication of one of his own works on the Anabaptist faith, *Vermahnung* (1542).¹⁷ In it he drew from Rothmann in stating a clear preference for immersion, though he also moderated that stance by allowing sprinkling as an acceptable alternative. No evidence exists that either Marpeck or any of his circle of admirers practiced or taught immersion.

There is also reference to a group of Anabaptists called Gabrielites who formed around the gifted leader Gabriel Ascherham in Silesia and Moravia, who evidently for a short time practiced immersion. At one time they numbered in the hundreds but eventually were absorbed into various other Anabaptist groups in the area, primarily the Hutterites and Mennonites, at which time they discontinued the practice of immersion.¹⁸ No information is extant on the theological reasons given for their practice of immersion.

C. Anabaptist Debates over Immersion

The most extensive debate over the mode of baptism among the Anabaptists of which we have records was that carried on between the leader of the seventeenth-century Hutterites, Andreas Ehrenpreis, and a near contemporary of his among the Polish Brethren, Christoph Ostorodt.¹⁹ Although this exchange took place some one hundred years after the beginning of the Radical Reformation, it nonetheless reflects quite accurately the theology and practice of basic Anabaptism.

Over a period of about one hundred years, these two groups carried on a lively dialogue over various theological concerns common to the Anabaptist faith: communitarianism, the relation between faith and reason, the relationship between discipleship and the state, and later, trinitarian questions. The mode of baptism was sharply debated, but did not appear as prominently as the other topics.

¹⁷ Frank J. Wray, "The 'Vermahnung' of 1542 and Rothmann's 'Bekentnisse,'" *ARG* 47 (1956): 243–51.

¹⁸ *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 2, "Gabrielites"; Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 629, 666, 1068, 1073.

¹⁹ Wes Harrison, *Andreas Ehrenpreis and Hutterite Faith and Practice* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1997), 218–32. By the time Ehrenpreis responded to Ostorodt, the latter was long dead. However, his writings were used by later Polish Brethren in their correspondence and debates with Ehrenpreis.

As will be seen later, the Polish Brethren presented a formidable scriptural defense of immersion. It was even incorporated into their Racovian Confession of Faith (1604). In time, however, the irenic and intellectual-rationalist orientation of the movement, along with the victory of the liberal branch, undermined nearly all dogmatic concerns as it developed into a complete unitarianism. Nonetheless, in the early stages dogmatism was strong enough to create sparks over the mode of baptism.

In response to their position, Ehrenpreis conceded that although biblical descriptions of baptism most often indicated immersion, this was not sufficient grounds to prove exclusivity. Without going into great detail, he glibly stated, "whether one baptizes with water from the priest's hand or by immersion" the mode did not effect salvation or Christian discipleship. He contended further that to demand immersion dogmatically was unacceptable.

Two additional points of interest did arise in this dialogue. First, both Ehrenpreis and the Polish Brethren occasionally cited the *Herborn Bibelwerk* of Johannes Piscator (1610), due to its widely respected Greek translation and commentary. The Brethren pointed out to Ehrenpreis that Piscator often translated the Greek *baptizein* into German with *untertauchen* (immersion) rather than the more common *taufen*, commonly understood as sprinkling, thereby bolstering their argument. Ehrenpreis did on occasion refer to Piscator's work when it aided his cause, but made no response to this particular joust.

Second, during his polemic Ehrenpreis referred to a certain group that practiced immersion cited by the Polish Brethren. These he called "Jordaner" (Jordanians) in mockery of their literal interpretation of receiving baptism at age thirty because Jesus was thirty years old when he was baptized in the Jordan. He suggested that if they were literal about the age of baptism, they should also be as literal about the place, the Jordan river—noting sardonically that they had probably never even seen the Jordan. Very likely, this reference was to the Paulicians, a small but persistent Eastern sect that had maintained its existence from the early Middle Ages.²⁰ The Paulicians shared a number of affinities with the Anabaptists in general and in particular with the Polish Brethren in regard to immersion. Ehrenpreis's own brotherhood had briefly entertained a group of "Jordaner" from Thessalonica a few decades previous to these debates, so he was familiar with their practices. These earlier Paulicians eventually joined the Swiss Brethren (an Anabaptist group closely related to the Hutterites), evidently abandoning their practice of immersion in the process. The debates ended with Ehrenpreis's win over a handful of Polish Brethren, but the respective churches remained unchanged in their views about immersion.

For mainstream Anabaptists, pouring or sprinkling was simply carried over from the traditional practices of the Catholic Church. The noted exceptions aside,

²⁰ Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 456–57.

most of their leaders were aware of the historical and biblical reasons for immersion, but felt them to be either unpersuasive or unimportant. Dodging exile, imprisonment, fire, and sword for weightier matters tended also to undermine concern for the amount of water used for baptism.

D. Exceptions outside Anabaptist Circles

As noted earlier, the Western church, lately changing from immersion to sprinkling, always viewed immersion as acceptable if not always convenient. Well-trained churchmen were aware of its place in history and theology, an awareness that was occasionally realized in practice. The turbulence of the Reformation caused the Reformers to spend considerable time readjusting their views of baptism. But as with the Anabaptists, the mode of baptism received little attention. Martin Luther suggested in his early writing (*Taufbüchlein*), however, that immersion was preferable due to its more accurate application of the Greek *baptizein*.²¹ This was one among a number of more daring proposals by the young Luther, who quickly learned to moderate them in order to achieve a greater stability against those who were taking unstabilizing liberties, such as Andreas Karlstadt and the radical Thomas Müntzer, both early converts to Lutheranism.

In Zurich, Leo Jud followed Luther's *Taufbüchlein* closely in writing perhaps the first Protestant baptismal guide (1523), in which immersion was the prescribed form of baptism. Zwingli's alterations of this baptismal guide (1525) did not specify the mode of baptism even though he had been sympathetic to immersion in some of his earlier writings. By the time Heinrich Bullinger took over the reins of the Reform in Zurich after Zwingli's untimely death, pouring was clearly the mode of choice for baptism.²²

John Calvin was also aware of the meaning of baptism as used and described in the NT, but felt that the mode was inconsequential, stating: "But whether the person being baptized should be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, whether he should only be sprinkled with poured water— these details are of no importance, but ought to be optional."²³ However, he argued that if one demanded immersion exclusively, it was nothing short of heresy, as will be noted in his accusations against Michael Servetus.

In an effort to restore the church to its apostolic roots, most of the leading Reformers noted the meaning of the Greek word for baptism (immersion) and its supporting illustrations in the NT (Rom 6:3ff.) and recognized its historical precedent in the early church. However, efforts to emphasize immersion were quickly thwarted, largely because the populace had grown accustomed to

²¹ Old, *Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite*, 265.

²² *Ibid.*, 264–82. Note Old's effort to defend sprinkling.

²³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.15.19.

sprinkling. In addition, theological explanations emphasized the spiritual dimensions of the rite, that is, the cleansing or purification of the soul that was signified through the use of the terms sprinkling and washing (Heb 10:22, "Let us draw near with a true heart . . . sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water"; 1 Pet 3:21, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience"), thus adequately expressed through baptismal sprinkling or pouring. Immersion remained an acceptable option and, as in the case of Piscator, received emphasis occasionally thereafter from Reformed theologians.

One of the wandering scholars of the period, which could boast more than its share, was Michael Servetus, whose trial and execution in Geneva in 1553 gave the century one of its most notable *causes célèbres*. His views on antitrinitarianism and believer's baptism were the main reason he was imprisoned, interrogated and executed under the personal involvement and evident delight of Calvin. Less known amidst this flurry of theological sensation were Servetus's writings on baptism. Particularly on this topic, he was clearly one of the most imaginative writers of the century. Well trained over a broad range of subjects, linguistics, law, theology and medicine, he was able to present a formidable case for believers' baptism by immersion. Also noting the original meaning of the word in Greek, he turned for greater emphasis to a more theological defense of immersion. He cited the baptism of Jesus at age thirty as a primary proof text. Servetus noted the double emphasis on completeness—mature in age and in full submersion in water. He contended, therefore, that baptism should be undertaken only by those who could fully grasp the import of such a conversion and that immersion was the only means appropriate to being completely engulfed by the Spirit of God. Just as Jesus received a special illumination at his baptism, signified by the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove, so the convert also experienced a similar illumination and emersion with Christ. Immersion was for him of utmost importance because it represented the culmination of a pattern of ritual experiences in the relationship between God and man, for which he cited many examples: Noah, Moses through the Red Sea, Joshua in leading the Israelites through the Jordan, Naaman, and ultimately, the Christ himself in the Jordan experience.²⁴

Williams suggests that additional influences on Servetus's views on baptism may have come from his Basque backgrounds. The backwaters of the Basque highlands of northern Spain conserved the traditional practice of immersion when most of Spain had long adopted sprinkling. Also that the forced conversion

²⁴ Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 52–58, 400–504; on immersion 450–51, 1052, 1144; see the index for further information on Servetus.

demanding of Spanish Jews who were "sprinkled" into the Christian faith most often clearly proved to be only a surface ceremony rather than a true conversion no doubt detracted from the symbolic efficacy of sprinkling. Further influence could also be attributed to his association with Paulician thought that very likely had filtered through early Anabaptist sources.²⁵

Although Servetus sought to develop no following, a few were greatly attracted to his viewpoints, one being Peter Gonesius,²⁶ who would help introduce Anabaptist thought into Poland and who was very interested in developing a national following.

E. The Polish Brethren

Until recently references to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Anabaptism often did not include the Polish Brethren. The reason for this is the relatively rapid evolution of the Brethren from basic Anabaptism to Unitarianism within about one hundred years. Although the historical roots of the Unitarian movement were vaguely known, relatively little scholarly attention had been given to this period of their development. Reconsideration of the early years of their movement is particularly important for this study because of the significant contribution they made to the development of believer's baptism by immersion.

The reform of the Catholic Church in Poland and Lithuania lagged noticeably behind that of its predecessors in western Europe. Lutheranism moved persuasively among the German-speaking populace in eastern Europe but was relatively quickly united with Calvinism, which had spread more prominently among the Polish-speaking populace by the 1560s. Anabaptist thought had infiltrated the land by the mid 1530s and by the 1560s had developed a considerable following—so much so that it could justifiably call itself the Polish Minor Church of the Polish Brethren, in contrast to the Major Protestant/Calvinist Church.

Those involved with the early formation of the Polish Brethren already held ideas tainted with antitrinitarianism, at least a proto-antitrinitarianism that was prominently discussed within many Calvinist circles at the time. Some early adherents had filtered through Geneva, where they had absorbed such ideas from Servetus; one such was the already noted Peter Gonesius, whom one historian called the Servetus of Poland.²⁷ As with their continental cousins, the Polish Anabaptists became impatient and dissatisfied with the progress of the Reformation in their land and felt they needed to take it to the apostolic limits of believers' baptism, a separatist/gathered church, and a disciplined discipleship.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 456–57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, index "Gonesius, Peter."

²⁷ Earl Morse Wilbur, *Socinianism and Its Antecedents*, vol. 2 of *A History of Unitarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945), 292.

The mode of baptism played a significantly more important role for the Poles and Lithuanians than for their German cousins.²⁸ The pattern leading to immersion usually began with reservations about infant baptism, then the rejection of it, implementation of believers' baptism, then concern over the mode, leading finally to the adoption of immersion. Anywhere along the way groups became satisfied with a particular position of the debate and remained at that point, while others argued further, eventually arriving at the position that believers' baptism by immersion was the only acceptable biblical form of baptism, forming what became known as the conservative wing of the movement.

While they were careful to announce publicly that they were in no way extremists as those in Münster, their concerns over baptism focused on the Scriptures and less so on historical practices and ecclesiastical traditions. Also, like their Anabaptist cousins, as much emphasis was placed on opposing infant baptism as on promoting believers' baptism.

Although greatly influenced by Anabaptist thought from numerous groups and thinkers from the West, they had an indigenous dimension to the formulation of their own thought due primarily to the fact that many early leaders did not read German, the language of western Anabaptism. Both, however, shared the conviction that a study of the Scriptures themselves held the key to restoring the true apostolic church.

Thus their conviction that immersion was the true biblical baptism was based on a knowledge of the Greek text and a literal understanding of such passages as Rom 6:3–4 and Acts 8:36–39. In correspondence with Swiss Brethren in Strasbourg (1591),²⁹ Christoph Ostorodt argued that true, scriptural baptism was immersion, “not sprinkling as practiced by the Antichrist [Catholic Church].” He argued further along linguistic lines, noting that the primary and literal meaning of the German and Dutch translations of the Greek term for baptism, respectively *Taufe* (immersion, dip in, dunk) and *doopen* (to immerse), unmistakably indicate immersion rather than sprinkling. Clearest of all was the literal meaning of the Greek term *baptizein*, which of course meant immerse. Scriptural explanations for baptism such as Rom 6:3–4, 1 Cor 10:1–2 (“baptized into Moses under the cloud and sea”) and 1 Pet 3:21 (baptism, “not a cleaning of the flesh,” thus clearly indicating a bath/submersion in water) demonstrated the literal meaning of the term. He concluded his letter by noting, “Look for

²⁸ The most extensive work on the Polish Brethren and their practice of baptism as immersion is Dariusz D. Jarmola, “The Origins and Development of Believers' Baptism among Polish Brethren in the Sixteenth Century” (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, 1990).

²⁹ Theodor Wotschke, “Ein dogmatisches Sendschreiben des Unitariers Ostorodt,” *ARG* 12 (1915): 150–51.

yourselves and you will see that this is the truth. Don't pay attention to old, customary practices because they come from the Antichrist; rather pay attention to the truth."³⁰

The most significant early catechism of the Polish Brethren (1574) also described baptism as both an immersion in water and an emersion into a new spiritual life in Christ:

Baptism [is] the immersion into water and the emersion of a person who believes in the gospel and exercises repentance in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, or in the name of Jesus Christ, whereby he publicly professes that by the grace of God the Father he has been washed from all his sins in the blood of Christ by the aid of the Holy Spirit; so that having been ingrafted into the body of Christ he may mortify the old Adam and be transformed into the heavenly Adam, in the firm assurance of eternal life after the resurrection.³¹

This was also carried over into the later Rakovian Catechism of 1604,³² even after the emphasis on the literal practice of immersion had been greatly moderated by the spiritualist/unitarian teachings of Fausto Socinus.

In addition to the emphasis on scriptural purity, the Polish Brethren made other significant contributions to the unique development of baptismal practices. Deep within the national psyche, baptism played an important patriotic role because the baptism (immersion) of prince Mieszko in 966 was the point at which Poland began to be recognized as a Christian nation; in fact, this incident was referred to as the "Baptism of Poland." The later marriage of a Catholic prince to a Russian Orthodox princess also "married" Catholic sprinkling with Orthodox immersion, which eventually resulted in acceptance of both until the more powerful Catholic perspectives drove out the Orthodox. These incidents contributed to the unique nature of the baptismal question.

Other factors also helped elevate baptism to a more prominent level than elsewhere in Europe. The immediate presence of Jewish communities would have familiarized the interested populace with the practice of proselyte baptism (*tevilah*), which was an immersion. Discourse between the populace and contemporary groups that practiced or at least taught immersion, such as the Gabrielites, Servetus and other Italian Anabaptists, would have incited curiosity especially for those who already shared a considerable amount of theological sympathies.

Dialogue, which was established by the 1570s, became common among Anabaptist groups in a few key areas throughout Europe. A particularly lively avenue was created between the Polish Brethren and Mennonites in northern Germany, Switzerland, Strasbourg, and especially Holland. After the decree of

³⁰ Ibid., 151. See also Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 1145.

³¹ Jarmola, *Origins*, 166.

³² Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 1174-75.

1658 in Poland, which demanded conversion for all "Arians and Anabaptists" to either Calvinism or Catholicism or death, many Socinians (as Polish Brethren came to be called in deference to the great influence of Fausto Socinus) fled to Holland and England, which in turn became centers for the Unitarian faith. Through earlier visits and writings and now in person, they also brought with them the Polish heritage of immersion.

F. *The Dutch Collegiants*

Throughout the mid- to late-sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth century lively exchanges occurred between radical groups huddled within those rare islands of religious toleration in eastern Europe and Holland. By mid-seventeenth century, however, Holland alone offered some measure of tolerance for society's "lunatic fringes." These uncommon circumstances drew diverse bands and lone seekers from both eastern Europe and England. This also enhanced the prestige and importance of the Mennonites because they were the longest lived "heretical" group in the Lowlands, having hammered out a well-conceived faith based on a literal interpretation of Scripture, a demanding call to discipleship, and a congregational ecclesiology—all widely shared ideals among the era's dissenters. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, these accomplishments were spiritually sealed through martyrs' blood, of extreme importance to a time that produced two of the most influential books circulated among "heretics": Tieleman van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror* and John Foxe's *Actes and Monumentes (Foxe's Book of Martyrs)*.

On the other hand, schism among the Calvinists of Holland at the beginning of the seventeenth century also produced its own brand of dissent. Under the challenge of Jacob Arminius, basic Calvinist predestinarianism was replaced with a theology of unlimited atonement and a faith that could be greatly influenced by human effort. These so-called Remonstranten were quickly labelled Arminianists, giving a name to a theological counter to Calvinism. This in turn created an atmosphere out of which grew a distinctly lay movement called the Collegiants, centered in Rijnsburg, who were dissatisfied with what they felt to be incomplete measures of the Remonstranten.³³ Never a tightly organized movement, the Collegiants did share enough characteristics to maintain a recognizable identity for about one hundred fifty years (1620s–1780s). Though strongly rationalist in thought and unitarian in orientation, they also shared some basic ideas with Mennonites, especially in the early years of the movement. Of particular importance for this study is that they also practiced baptism by immersion.

³³ J. C. van Slee, *De Rijnsburger Collegianten: Geschiedkundig onderzoek* (Utrecht: Hes Publishers, 1980 (repr. of 1895). On baptism, see 300ff.; on Richard Blunt, 380.

With the contemporary dissenters' desire to restore the apostolic church through a simple interpretation of Scripture and no doubt influenced by the various exchanges on the subject of baptism between the Mennonites and Polish Brethren, they began baptizing adults by immersion. Writings by the Polish Brethren, such as those of Ostorodt and the Racovian Catechism, would have been readily available to the Collegiants, many of whom were drawn from Mennonite circles. In the flush of a new movement that sought to experience a more literal expression of apostolic Christianity, they found a more literal display of the symbolic rebirth particularly attractive. Although some among the Mennonites found immersion persuasive, the Collegiants were the only group that practiced adult immersion as a matter of conviction.

As with the Polish Brethren, immersion played an important, but definitely a secondary, role among the Collegiants. Their emphasis was on pious living, sharing much in common theologically with Mennonites. Their baptismal practices, often public, did bring an unusual amount of attention to them as a group. Their aversion to dogma and theological debates, however, eventually undermined an already loose cohesion, and the movement dissolved by the late-eighteenth century.

G. The English Baptist Movements

The traditional practices of both the Catholic Church in England and the Anglican Church were quite different regarding baptism from that commonly found on the Continent. Infant baptism by immersion remained a common practice in England long after it had lost vogue on the Continent, although many historians mistakenly assume that the English baptismal practice was the same as that of the Continental experience.³⁴

The Sarum Manuele (the guide to ritual practice at the Salisbury Cathedral), received its definitive form by the mid-thirteenth century and served as the most widely used ritual order in England.³⁵ It specified immersion as the mode of baptism, although sprinkling was allowed in exceptional cases. Its influence is clearly noted in the first Book of Common Prayer (1549), composed by Thomas Cranmer, defining the new liturgical structure of the king's church for England, and, regarding baptism, maintaining the traditional preference for immersion, in this case trine immersion: "First, dypping [immersing] the right side; secondly, the left side; the third time, dypping the face toward the fonte."³⁶ In the 1552 edition, trine baptism is abandoned to include only single immersion: "And naming it [the child] after them . . . he shall dip it in the Water discreetly and

³⁴ For example, *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 1, "Baptism"; 3, "Immersion." Similar perspectives are common in church history texts.

³⁵ *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 12, "Rites, English Medieval."

³⁶ Cited in Christian, *Immersion*, 163.

warily. . . . But if they certify that the Child is weak, it shall suffice to pour Water upon it."³⁷ This is the first official church document in Great Britain that authorized pouring as an exceptional alternative.³⁸ Within the next one hundred years there was a gradual change in preference from immersion to pouring and later to sprinkling. One historian noted a surprisingly large number of births of certifiably "weak children" in England during this time.³⁹

The debates in the Long Parliament (1645) regarding the appropriate mode of baptism (sprinkling or immersion) for the newly reformed state church reflected perhaps more the English liturgical heritage than the vigorously argued perspectives of the recently formed Particular Baptist Church. By one vote the preference was given to sprinkling.⁴⁰ William Wall, a noted eighteenth-century historian who wrote a multivolume work on the history of infant baptism, attributed this change to Calvin, as previously noted, who saw no significance in the mode of baptism. This was reflected in the wording of the section on baptism in the Westminster Confession: "Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person."⁴¹

For English Catholics, the emphasis on immersion as expressed in the Sarum Rite was replaced by the *Rituale Romanum* in 1614, which prescribed baptism by pouring without so much as mentioning immersion: "[T]he priest takes baptismal water from a vessel or ewer and pours some of it over the head of the infant."⁴² Thus by the early-seventeenth century both Catholics and Anglicans were rapidly moving from immersion to pouring.

England, of course, had a long history of dissent, dating most prominently from the times of John Wycliffe. Anabaptist ideas spread to England soon after their initiation in Europe although they enjoyed little success. Later, with dissenters such as Robert Browne and Henry Barrow, among others, separatist movements began to become more common. Many among these fled England to find refuge in Holland, a gathering place of dissenters from the "four corners of Europe," thus making Holland a catalytic connection between orthodoxy and dissent of various kinds.

The disgruntled dissident John Smythe fled intolerant London for Holland in 1608 with a small group of followers and founded what became known as the General Baptists, primarily due to their adoption of adult baptism, though it was

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 180.

³⁹ Ibid., 162.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 163.

⁴¹ Ibid., 162-63.

⁴² Horton Davis, *Worship and Theology in England from Andrewes to Baxter and Fox, 1603-1690* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 476.

by sprinkling. At Smythe's defection to the Mennonites, Thomas Helwys transplanted the group back on English soil in 1612, becoming thereby the father of the English Baptist movement. Along with Helwys's General Baptists, London became a hotbed of various sorts of dissents. From Recusant Catholics to Muggletonians, the city seemed to harbor the full gambit of theological possibilities.⁴³

One group that evolved during this time shared much with the General Baptists but were distinct enough to form their own identity. Among their primary concerns was baptism and its proper administration. Not only was the proper mode of baptism of deep concern to them, but also the question of clerical authority. That is, since they had no heritage of ministerial order or authority, decisions on creedal matters became problematical; who had authority to set church polity and practice? They were aware of John Smythe's controversial self-baptism, but were uncomfortable with that since there was no NT precedent for it. In order to solve this quandary, they decided to follow the tradition of going to Holland to consult prominent radical groups there. In late 1640 they sent one of their leaders, Robert Blunt, who spoke Dutch, to Holland to consult with the Mennonites. It has become quite a point of historical contention as to whether Blunt was immersed in Holland or whether he returned with that conviction to initiate it on English soil. Whatever the truth of that minor point was, immediately after his return to England, sometime around late 1641, the practice of immersion rapidly became the mode of Christian initiation among this group that had taken on the name Particular Baptists because of their neo-Calvinist theology. Within three years the Particular Baptists had worked out a complete confession of faith that included a carefully delineated theology and practice of immersionist baptism. Their London Confession of Faith of 1644 stated:

The way and manner of the 1) dispensing of this Ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water: it being a signe, must answer the thing signified, which are these: first, the 2) washing the whole soule in the blood of Christ: Secondly, that interest the Saints have in the 3) death, buriall, and resurrection; thirdly, together with a 4) confirmation of our faith, that as certainly as the body is buried under water, and riseth againe, so certainly shall the bodies of the Saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of the resurrection, to reigne with Christ. [Note on Margin: The word baptizo, signifying to dip under water, yet so as with convenient garments both upon the administrator and subject, with

⁴³ Works dealing with the origin of the English Baptists are prodigious; it may be more helpful to mention two bibliographies of Baptist history in general and on baptism in particular: Susan Mills, "Sources for the Study of Baptist History," *The Baptist Quarterly* 34 (1992): 282-96; A. Gill, *A Bibliography of Baptist Writings on Baptism, 1900-1968* (Rüschlikon-Zürich: Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969).

modestie. 1) Mat. 3,16. Joh. 3,23. Acts 8:38. 2) Rev. 1.5 & 7.14, with Heb. 10,22. 3) Rom. 6.3,4,5. 4) I Cor. 15.28,29.]⁴⁴

Similar to the Polish Brethren, the English Baptists inherited a legacy of immersion, though theirs was far more distant than the Polish experience. They were also aware of the practice of immersion as debated among the residual Polish Brethren and the Mennonites in Holland. Also they shared with many dissenting groups the desire to experience more fully an apostolic restoration to which the symbolic literalism of immersion would be particularly appealing. Fundamentally, however, the primary persuasion was based on Scripture. As noted in the Confession, only immersion fully expressed the spiritual symbolism of baptism as described in the Biblical passages: washing and death-burial-resurrection. They also took notice of Greek grammar.

From these circles of dissent, the practice of immersion spread throughout England, the American colonies and various places in Europe. It should be noted also that although Roger Williams shared much in common with the English Baptists, coming to similar conclusions independently, he did not teach or practice immersion.⁴⁵

H. Minor Groups Practicing Immersion

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the question of the mode of baptism, that is immersion, remained a minor irritant especially among the Mennonites, where it occasionally arose, creating various splinter groups that sometimes remained more or less under the Mennonite umbrella and sometimes became independent denominations. More often than not these conflicts were introduced through contact with the English and later American Baptists. Mennonite groups affected by this were the Dompelaars in Hamburg, the "Hahnsche Mennonites" in Baden, Germany, the Mennonite Brethren from Southern Russia, the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren in the Crimea, the Evangelical Mennonite Church, and the United Missionary Church.⁴⁶ Another group, more distant from the Mennonites that would adopt immersion, was the River Brethren (Brethren in Christ) in Pennsylvania.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ William Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959), 167; see his earlier chapters for brief but helpful historical overviews and the introductions to the various Confessions.

⁴⁵ Jefferson P. Hamilton, "The History of Immersion in England," *Methodist Review* 46 (September–October 1897): 93–95.

⁴⁶ "Baptism," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 1 and 5 (Supplement); "Immersion," 3 and 5 (Supplement). See also entries under the individual church names in the *Encyclopedia* and supplement volume.

⁴⁷ Donald Durnbaugh, "Nineteenth-Century Dunker Views of the River Brethren," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 67 (April 1993): 133–51.

One small but significant church that developed somewhat independently from these others was the group that came to be called Dunkers, later officially adopting the name Church of the Brethren. It was established through the leadership of Alexander Mack in Schwarzenau, Germany, in 1708. Influenced by both Pietism and Anabaptism, the group wanted only to follow the teachings of the NT and, in regard to baptism, came to teach and practice trine immersion. Their baptismal views were determined by NT studies and the corroboration found in such writings as those of Gottfried Arnold,⁴⁸ who in his history of heresy noted that the early church practiced trine immersion as well as footwashing, which the Brethren also adopted into their cardinal practices. They evidently had had no contact with the English Baptists, but were familiar with Mennonite literature and thus no doubt could have been indirectly influenced by the Polish Brethren in regard to immersion. The Brethren emigrated to the United States in 1719 and 1729, where they established a considerable following in Pennsylvania and the Midwest.⁴⁹ Some historians among the Brethren believe their views on baptism had more influence on Alexander Campbell than did the Baptist Church.⁵⁰

III. Conclusion

Why did the practice of baptism by immersion reappear during the Reformation era? First, in many areas in the West there remained at least a vague legacy of immersion. In some regions, notably Poland and England, this was far more than just a legacy. Second, the desire to restore completely the apostolic church incited a renewed interest in the practices of the pristine Christian church, absent the accumulation of centuries of ecclesiastical baggage. This led to a more literal understanding of baptism. Third, a renewed recognition of the Greek "baptizein" led obviously to a literal application. Fourth, scriptural descriptions of baptism, both in its literal application as well as in its symbolic explanations, confirmed immersion as the apostolic mode. Fifth, awareness of the Eastern baptismal ritual and the Jewish "tevilah" gave further credence to immersion. Finally, enlivened searches of medieval and patristic writings provided corroborating evidence for the practice.

Once the success and permanence of the English Baptist Church was established, along with reasons already given, the practice of immersion began to be widely reconsidered and adopted by many later groups, especially in the United States, not the least of which was the Restoration Movement.

⁴⁸ Gottfried Arnold, *Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie, von Anfang des Neuen Testaments bis auf das Jahre 1688* (4 vols.; Frankfurt, 1699–1700).

⁴⁹ Carl F. Bowman, *Brethren Society: The Cultural Transformation of a "Peculiar People"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

⁵⁰ Roger E. Sappington, "How the Brethren Were Influencing the Development of Other Denominations between 1785 and 1860," *ATJ* 8 (September 1975): 82–86.