

BAPTISM — a ritual practiced in the New Testament church that is still used in various forms by different denominations and branches of the Christian church. Baptism involves the application of water to the body of a person. It is frequently thought of as an act by which the believer enters the fellowship of a local congregation or the universal church. Widely differing interpretations of the act exist among Christian groups. They have different views on the nature of baptism, who should be baptized, and the appropriate method by which baptism should be administered.

The Nature of Baptism. Three major positions on the nature of baptism exist among Christian groups.

The sacramental view—According to this belief, baptism is a means by which God conveys grace. By undergoing this rite, the person baptized receives REMISSION of sins, and is regenerated or given a new nature and an awakened or strengthened faith. Both Roman Catholics and Lutherans have this view of the nature of baptism.

The traditional Roman Catholic belief emphasizes the rite itself—that the power to convey grace is contained within the sacrament of baptism. It is not the water but the sacrament as established by God and administered by the church that produces this change.

The Lutherans, on the other hand, concentrate on the faith that is present in the person being baptized. They also emphasize the value of the preaching of the word. Preaching awakens faith in a believer by entering the ear to strike the heart. Baptism enters the eye to reach and move the heart.

One Scripture especially important to the advocates of the sacramental view of baptism is John 3:5: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” They also believe that the act of baptism itself produces a change in the life of the believer.

The covenantal view—Other Christian groups think of baptism not as a means by which salvation is brought about, but as a sign and seal of the COVENANT. The covenant is God’s pledge to save humankind. Because of what He has done and what He has promised, God forgives and regenerates. On the one hand, baptism is a sign of the covenant. On the other, it is the means by which people enter into that covenant.

The benefits of God’s covenant are granted to all adults who receive baptism and to all infants who, upon reaching maturity, remain faithful to the vows made on their behalf at baptism. The covenant, rather than the sacrament or another person’s faith, is seen as the means of salvation; and baptism is a vital part of this covenant relationship.

In the covenantal view, baptism serves the same purpose for New Testament believers that circumcision did for Old Testament believers. For the Jews, circumcision was the external and visible sign that they were within the covenant that God had established with Abraham. Converts to Judaism (or proselytes) also had to undergo this rite. But now under the new covenant, baptism instead of circumcision is required.

Circumcision refers to a cutting away of sin and a change of heart (Deut. 10:16; Ezek. 44:7, 9). Similarly, baptism also depicts a washing away of sin (Acts 2:38; Titus 3:5) and a spiritual renewal (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:11–12). In fact, these two procedures are clearly linked in Colossians 2:11–12: “In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision

of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

Photo by Gustav Jeeninga

A baptistry, or bath, used for purification ceremonies in the Essene community at Qumran.

The symbolic view—This view stresses the symbolic nature of baptism by emphasizing that baptism does not cause an inward change or alter a person’s relationship to God in any way. Baptism is a sign, or an outward indication, of the inner change that has already occurred in the believer’s life. It serves as a public identification of the person with Jesus Christ, and thus also as a public testimony of the change that has occurred. It is an act of initiation. It is baptism *into* the name of Jesus.

According to the symbolic view, baptism is not so much an initiation into the Christian life as into the Christian church. A distinction is drawn between the invisible or universal church, which consists of all believers in Christ, and the visible or local church, a gathering of believers in a specific place.

This position explains that the church practices baptism and the believer submits to it because Jesus commanded that this be done and He gave us the example by being baptized Himself. Thus, baptism is an act of obedience, commitment, and proclamation, symbolizing the believer’s identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. A key text is Romans 6:3–4: “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

According to this understanding of baptism, no spiritual benefit occurs because of baptism. Rather than producing REGENERATION of faith, baptism always comes after faith and the salvation that faith produces. The only spiritual value of baptism is that it establishes membership in the church and exposes the believer to the values of this type of fellowship.

The Subjects of Baptism. Another issue over which Christian groups disagree is the question of who should be baptized. Should only those who have come to a personal, conscious decision of faith be baptized? Or, should children be included in this rite? And if children are proper subjects, should all children, or only the children of believing parents, be baptized?

Infant baptism—Groups that practice baptism of infants baptize not only infants but also adults who have come to faith in Christ. One of the arguments proposed in favor of baptizing infants is that entire households were baptized in New Testament times (Acts 16:15, 33). Certainly such households or families must have included children. Consequently, groups who hold this position believe this practice should be extended to the present day.

A second argument cited is Jesus’ treatment of children. Jesus commanded the disciples to bring the children to Him. When they did so, He blessed them (Mark 10:13–16). Because of this example from Jesus, it would seem inconsistent to deny baptism to children today.

A third argument put forth by covenant theologians is that children were participants in the Old Testament covenant: “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7). They were present when the covenant was renewed (Deut. 29:10–13; Josh. 8:35). They had a standing in the congregation of Israel and were present in their religious assemblies (Joel 2:16). The promises of God were given to children as well as adults (Is. 54:13; Jer. 31:34). Circumcision was administered to infants in the Old Testament (Gen. 17:12). Since baptism has now replaced circumcision, it is natural that it should be administered to children, according to those who practice infant baptism.

Those who believe in baptismal regeneration (Catholics especially) argue that baptism of infants is necessary. In traditional Roman Catholic teaching, unbaptized infants who die cannot enter heaven in this state, but are instead consigned to a state of limbo. If this fate is to be avoided, they must be baptized in order to remove the guilt of their sins and receive new life.

Although Lutherans also believe in baptismal regeneration, they are not as certain that God’s grace is communicated through this sacrament. They believe that God may have some method, perhaps not yet revealed to us, of producing faith in the unbaptized. But this, if it is true, would apply only to children of believers. Lutherans are careful to affirm that this whole area of belief is a mystery, known only to God.

A final argument presented in support of infant baptism is the historical evidence. Infant baptism has been practiced in the church from early times, certainly as early as the second century, according to those groups that baptize infants.

An issue that divides those groups that practice infant baptism is the question of which infants should be baptized. In general, the covenant theologians (Presbyterians, Lutherans, and the various Reformed groups) insist that only the children of believing parents (hence, members of the covenant) should be included. Roman Catholics, however, tend to baptize even infants and children whose parents have not made such a commitment. These different positions on this question show how these groups feel about the role of personal faith in one’s salvation.

For Roman Catholics, this question presents no real difficulty, since they believe the sacrament of baptism has power in itself to bring about salvation. The only faith necessary is that someone has enough faith to bring and present the child. Faith is also necessary for the person administering baptism. He must believe that the sacrament has saving power.

Lutherans, however, with their strong emphasis on faith as the means of salvation, face a more difficult problem. It is obvious that an infant does not have faith. One way of handling this problem is to resort to the concept of unconscious faith. Reasoning power and self-consciousness, they point out, must not be thought of as faith. Luther observed that people do not cease to have faith when they are asleep or preoccupied or working strenuously. Thus Lutherans believe the Bible teaches the implicit faith of infants (Matt. 18:6; Luke 1:15; 1 John 2:13). If Jesus could speak of “these little ones who believe in Me” (Matt. 18:6), and if John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb, then little children can have implicit faith. Lutherans also believe that the faith necessary for the salvation of children can be communicated through their parents.

For covenant theologians, the problem of the faith of children is not a difficult issue. It is a potential faith. So also is their salvation. God promises to give the benefits signified in baptism to all adults who receive it by faith. This same promise is extended to all infants who, when they grow to maturity, remain faithful to the vows that were made on their behalf at the time of their baptism. In this view, baptism's saving work depends on the faith that will be, rather than upon the faith that is.

Photo by Howard Vos

A baptistry in the form of a cross in the Church of St. John at Ephesus.

Believer's baptism—Those who hold to this view believe that baptism should be restricted to those who actually exercise faith. This approach excludes infants, who could not possibly have such faith. The proper candidates for baptism are those who already have experienced the new birth on the basis of their personal faith and who give evidence of this salvation in their lives.

Both positive and negative arguments are advanced in support of this view. The positive approach argues from evidence in the New Testament. In every instance of New Testament baptism in which the specific identity of the persons was known, the persons being baptized were adults. Further, the condition required for baptism was personal, conscious faith. Without this, adherents of believer's baptism point out, baptism was not administered. This is especially evident in the Book of Acts (2:37–41; 8:12; 10:47; 18:8; 19:4–5), as well as Matthew 3:2–6 and 28:19. In the New Testament, church repentance and faith came first, followed by baptism.

The negative arguments given to support believer's baptism are generally responses to the arguments for infant baptism. One of these revolves around the household baptism issue. Paul spoke the word to the Philippian jailer and all the people in his house. And the jailer "rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household" (Acts 16:34). Crispus, the synagogue ruler, also "believed on the Lord with all his household" (Acts 18:8). Those who hold to believer's baptism only point out that these passages do not state specifically that infants were included among those baptized. All the people in these households could have been adults.

The other argument concerns Jesus' blessing of the children. The believer's baptism position on this incident from Jesus' life is that baptism is not mentioned or even implied. These children illustrate simplicity and trust, like that which all believers should display. Jesus blessed the children, these groups agree, but that was not baptism. Many believer's baptism groups do practice a ritual known as child dedication, which is more a dedication of the parents than of the child.

The Form of Baptism. The final major issue is the method or form of baptism—whether by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. On this issue, Christian groups organize into two major camps—those that insist upon the exclusive use of immersion, and those that permit and practice other forms.

The immersionist position—This group insists that immersion is the only valid form of baptism. One of their strongest arguments revolves around the Greek word for baptism in the New Testament. Its predominant meaning is "to immerse" or "to dip," implying

that the candidate was plunged beneath the water. But there are also other arguments that strongly suggest that immersion was the form of baptism used in the early church.

The *Didache*, a manual of Christian instruction written in A.D. 110–120, stated that immersion should be used generally and that other forms of baptism should be used only when immersion was not possible.

In addition, the circumstances involved in some of the biblical descriptions of baptism imply immersion. Thus, John the Baptist was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, “because there was much water there” (John 3:23). Jesus apparently went down into the water to be baptized by John (Matt. 3:16). The Ethiopian said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36).

The symbolism involved in baptism also seems to argue that immersion was the biblical mode, according to those groups that practice immersion exclusively. Romans 6:4–6 identifies baptism with the believer’s death (and burial) to sin and resurrection to new life, as well as the death and resurrection of Christ. Only immersion adequately depicts this meaning, according to the immersionist position.

The pluralist position—Holders of this view believe that immersion, pouring, and sprinkling are all appropriate forms of baptism. They point out that the Greek word for baptism in the New Testament is sometimes ambiguous in its usage. While its most common meaning in classical Greek was to dip, to plunge, or to immerse, it also carried other meanings as well. Thus, the question cannot be resolved upon linguistic grounds.

These groups also argue from inference that immersion must not have been the exclusive method used in New Testament times. For example, could John have been physically capable of immersing all the persons who came to him for baptism? Did the Philippian jailer leave his jail to be baptized? If not, how would he have been immersed? Was enough water for immersion brought to Cornelius’ house? Or, did the apostle Paul leave the place where Ananias found him in order to be immersed?

Those groups that use sprinkling or pouring also point out that immersion may not be the best form for showing what baptism really means. They see the major meaning of baptism as purification. They point out that the various cleansing ceremonies in the Old Testament were performed by a variety of means—immersion, pouring, and sprinkling (Mark 7:4; Heb. 9:10). Others note the close association between baptism and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which was from above. Thus, in their view, true baptism requires the symbolism of pouring rather than immersion.

BAPTISM OF FIRE — a concept used by John the Baptist to describe the work of Christ: “He [Christ] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16). Some scholars believe that two different baptisms are mentioned here: “the baptism of the Holy Spirit” (the baptism that brings mercy, forgiveness, and life) and “the baptism of fire” (the baptism that brings judgment, condemnation, and death). When this interpretation is followed, the baptism of the Holy Spirit belongs to the present age of grace and the baptism of fire belongs to a future age of judgment.

Other scholars believe that only one baptism is meant: Christ baptizes “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” They point to the experience of the Day of Pentecost when “there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:3–4). These scholars see this as a reference to the work of the Holy Spirit in purifying God’s people.

BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD. A practice mentioned by the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 15:2). The exact meaning of this passage is uncertain. Some scholars believe it refers to a re-baptism of Christians for the benefit of people who had died unbaptized but already believing. But other scholars insist it refers to a baptismal formula in the Corinthian church that promised that believers would rise from the dead at the end of time to reign with Christ.

BAPTISM. It is well known that ablution or bathing was common in most ancient nations as a preparation for prayers and sacrifice or as expiatory of sin. In warm countries this connection is probably even closer than in colder climates; and hence the frequency of ablution in the religious rites throughout the East. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is the rite or ordinance by which persons are admitted into the Church of Christ. It is the public profession of faith and discipleship. Baptism signifies—

1. A confession of faith in Christ; 2. A cleansing or washing of the soul from sin; 3. A death to sin and a new life in righteousness. The *mode* and *subjects* of baptism being much-controverted subjects, each one can best study them in the works devoted to those questions. The command to baptize was co-extensive with the command to preach the gospel. All nations were to be evangelized; and they were to be made disciples, admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, by baptism. Matt. 28:19. It appears to have been a kind of transition from the Jewish baptism to the Christian. The distinction between John's baptism and Christian baptism appears in the case of Apollos, Acts 18:26, 27, and of the disciples at Ephesus mentioned Acts 19:1-6. We cannot but draw from this history the inference that in Christian baptism there was a deeper spiritual significance.

Baptism, Christian

A. Commanded by:

Christ Matt. 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15, 16
Peter Acts 10:46-48
Christian ministers Acts 22:12-16

B. Administered by:

The apostles Acts 2:1, 41
Ananias Acts 9:17, 18
Philip Acts 8:12; Acts 8:36-38
Peter Acts 10:44-48
Paul Acts 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:14-17

C. Places:

Jordan Matt. 3:13-16; Mark 1:5-10
Jerusalem Acts 2:5, 41
Samaria Acts 8:5, 12
A house Acts 10:44-48
A jail Acts 16:25-33

D. *Subjects of:*

Believing Jews Acts 2:14, 41
Believing Gentiles Acts 10:44–48; Acts 18:8
Households Acts 16:14, 15, 27, 33; I Cor. 1:16

E. *Characteristics of:*

By water Acts 10:47
Only one Eph. 4:5
Necessary Acts 2:38, 41
Source of power Acts 1:5
Follows faith Acts 2:41; Acts 18:8

F. *Symbolism of:*

Forecast in prophecy Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:16–21
Prefigured in types 1 Cor. 10:2; 1 Pet. 3:20, 21
Visualized by the Spirit's descent John 1:32, 33; Acts 2:3, 4, 41
Expressive of spiritual unity 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27, 28
Figurative of regeneration John 3:3, 5, 6; Rom. 6:3, 4, 11
Illustrative of cleansing Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5

Baptism, John's

Administrator—John Matt. 3:4–7
Place—at Jordan Matt. 3:6, 13, 16
in Aenon John 3:23
Persons—people and Jesus Mark 1:5, 9; Acts 13:24
Character—repentance Luke 3:3
Reception—rejected by some Luke 7:29, 30
Nature—of God Matt. 21:25, 27
Insufficiency—rebaptism Acts 19:1–7
Intent—to prepare Matt. 3:11, 12; Acts 11:16; Acts 19:4
Jesus' submission to—fulfilling all righteousness Matt. 3:13–17

BAPTISM. JOHN'S:

Matt. 3:5-8,11,13-16 Mark 1:8-10; Luke 3:7,8; John 10:40.
Matt. 21:25 Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4.
Mark 1:4,5
Luke 3:12,21
Luke 7:29,30
John 1:25,26,28,31,33
John 3:23
Acts 1:5,22
Acts 10:37
Acts 11:16 Acts 18:25.
Acts 19:3,4

CHRISTIAN:

Matt. 28:19

Mark 16:16
John 3:5,22
John 4:1,2
Acts 1:5,22
Acts 2:38,41
Acts 8:12,13 v. 16.
Acts 8:36-38
Acts 9:18
Acts 10:46-48
Acts 16:14,15,33
Acts 18:8,25
Acts 19:4,5
Acts 22:16
Rom. 6:3,4
1 Cor. 1:13-17
1 Cor. 10:1,2
1 Cor. 12:13
1 Cor. 15:29
Gal. 3:27
Eph. 4:5
Eph. 5:26
Col. 2:12
Heb. 6:2
1 Pet. 3:18,21

OF THE HOLY SPIRIT:

Isa. 44:3
Joel 2:28,29
Zech. 12:10
Matt. 3:11 [Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16.]
Matt. 3:16 Luke 3:22; John 1:32,33.
Luke 24:49
John 3:5
Acts 1:5
Acts 2:1-4,38,41
Acts 8:15-17
Acts 10:38,44,45,47
Acts 11:15,16
Acts 19:2,6
1 Cor. 12:13
Tit. 3:5,6
1 Pet. 3:20,21 See **HOLY SPIRIT.**