

Holy Baptism

There is confusion and diverse interpretation regarding the theology of water baptism. In approaching the subject I acknowledge there may be a difference of opinion to the mode, method, and timing of this sacrament. Some Protestant denominations will not even call it a “sacrament” but an “ordinance” because it was, according to Scripture, “ordered” by Jesus to be done, and obviously practiced extensively in the early church and throughout Christianity to this day.

Water baptism is not exclusively a Christian rite. There is a history of it being practiced by the Israelites prior to the birth of Christian practice, and was part of Jewish practice and worship at the Temple. It was administered to Gentiles who wished to worship in the Jewish Temple and be identified with Judaism. At the time of Jesus’ appearance at the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist (baptizer), it was widely practiced, especially among the Essenes. The Essenes practiced the rite numerous times as a cleansing, immersing themselves in water to wash away the effect of that sin. Some records indicate Essene immersion occurred repeatedly, sometimes as much as ten times in one day, a sign of repentance for whatever sin the believer committed in thought, word, or deed. Some believed John the Baptist might have been a member of the Essenes although that is not factually supported, but definitely at the time he was administering water baptism, an Essene village was not far from the site at the Jordan believed to have been where John baptized Jesus. Years ago on one of my Holy Land pilgrimages I visited the excavated Essene village near the Dead Sea.

Churches with historical roots to the early Church consider water baptism as a one time sacrament. Some denominations that emerged since the Reformation hold different views concerning this rite. Some require immersion in water in their particular church for membership, and may not recognize immersion by another denomination as qualifying them. Some churches advocate immersion is the only valid form of baptism. Others baptize for whatever reason more than once. I was hosting a trip to the Holy Land and a lady with another group found out I was a clergyman. She wanted me to baptize her in the Jordan at a location where public baptisms for tourists was held. She had also told me she was a Methodist minister. When I asked had she not already been baptized, she replied, “oh yes, many times. I like to do it again every time I come here.” The meaning she attached to it definitely was more self-gratification than theological.

In his epistle to the Romans, Saint Paul compares baptism to burial. It is a death to the Adamic nature and a new birth to life in Jesus. Immersion best illustrates this as the candidate is “buried” in the water, and “raised” to a new life. Some churches have begun the practice of immersing a baby in a tub of water, passing the infant quickly through the water, and then taking the child to a private area to be dressed and brought back for the completion of the service.

When Archbishop Loren Thomas Hines, Charismatic Episcopal Church’s Primate of Southeast Asia, began his move from the Assemblies of God to the CEC, he held a special adult baptismal service on Easter. The facility then being used for their Church was a theatre and lacked a baptismal pool. He rented the stadium at Fort Bonifacio

Marine base in Manila, and built a stage behind which was a large hot tub. A screen back of the stage prevented the congregation sitting in the bleaches from seeing what was going on. A Pentecostal friend in Manila warned me to have no association with then Father Hines, prior to his Consecration to the Episcopacy. I asked why. He said, "that man baptizes people with no clothes on." This was the objectionable reputation given by clergy opponents to this Pastor because of the growth his leadership was reaping for the Charismatic Episcopal Church. I was unsure if the accusation was the Bishop was not wearing clothes, or if those baptized were nude. Then one Sunday I attended the service at the Marine stadium.

In the Philippines there has been a big evangelistic move of the "Jesus Only" group and men who joined the Charismatic Episcopal Church and had been baptized in the name of Jesus only, was required to be baptized with a valid Trinitarian baptism. Following the practice of the very early church, the candidates would line up in the yard with the people watching, and pass behind the screen. The men were wearing their old clothes. Behind the screen and out of sight of the worshippers, the candidate was immersed in the hot tub, removing his old clothes, dried with a towel, and appeared on the other side of the stage wearing a white robe. This action represented the candidate's stripping himself of his old life and leaving it behind as he left his clothes in the hot tub and accepted the new robe as representing his new life in Christ. My Pentecostal friend failed to recognize the practice of the early church where the Deacon immersed the person in the river, remove his clothes, exited to the other side, robed and presented to the Bishop for the laying-on-of-hands to receive the Holy Spirit. Male Deacons baptized the men; female Deacons baptized the women. Archbishop Hines was following the practice of the early church, and it was the baptized one who eventually had on no clothes; not the Archbishop. Eventually he had to stop because the Charismatic Episcopal Church does not ordain women hence no female Deacon, and the ladies joining wanted the same service as given to the men, and that was impossible. He still immerses some babies in a large font who after the baptism are dried and dressed and presented to the congregation in the completion of the rite.

While immersion best illustrates the death and new life analogy given by Saint Paul, nevertheless, there is doubt as to the mode practiced in the early church. The Greek word "*baptiso*" can be interpreted both as "dipping" or "pouring". When I was Bishop in Africa there were blessed times when I had the privilege to baptize many people. There was no river or baptismal pool so I requested a large bucket of clean water. The candidate would bend over the bucket placed on a table and with both hands cupped together, I baptized. They got real wet, and the hem of my alb got muddy because the church floor was dirt. It was no sprinkling of water but a large amount that covered their head and ran down their face, and splashed on the dirt floor soiling my alb. It was fabulous!

The place at the Jordan near Jericho believed to have been the area at which John was baptizing, the river is shallow. It could have been deep enough to immerse a person but some believe John only stood in the water and with his hands poured the water over the candidate's head. That is debatable. In the Jewish rite for Gentiles a sprinkling or

pouring of water was used in their admission rite. With the Essenes immersion in a reservoir of water was the common practice.

When you come to the Acts of the Apostles you encounter a questionable procedure. Paul was baptized in the house of Ananias. Did Ananias, a relatively young Christian, have a baptistery in his house? And bathtubs as we know them had yet to be invented. Peter baptized Cornelius and his household, but it leaves question as to whether it was in the nearby Mediterranean Sea or in Cornelius' house. Paul baptized the Philippian jailer and his household apparently in the jailer's house. The Deacon Philip in Samaria baptized a group of people and it could have been a pool of water captured by a small dam at the spring from whence the water originated, or it could have been water drawn from the well where Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman. The mode was not the important issue. It was what the baptism symbolized – death to the old life and birth to a new life in Christ Jesus.

Water baptism is the most difficult decision for a Moslem or Jew who wishes to accept Jesus as Savior and Messiah. They understand the significance of baptism, and while they may secretly make an acceptance of Jesus, when publically baptized, they are declaring a renunciation of former beliefs and a commitment to a new religious life. To the proponents of their respective religions the convert is considered dead, and sometimes they are put to death for betrayal to their original Faith.

Baptism is not an initiation to join a local church, although it is used for that intent by some denominations. Baptism is uniting with Jesus in the Kingdom of God and membership in the Body of Christ. It is a dying to the old life; a dying to sin and a confession of trust in the atoning blood of Jesus. It is a cleansing and renunciation of the Adamic nature brought upon every human being by the fall of Adam. Sin is a natural part of a person whether an infant or adult. It is our human (Adamic) nature to be more incline toward those things contrary to God's purposes than to be committed to the principals of the Kingdom of God. This is called "original sin". Baptism is a cleansing of that stain on every soul born of flesh. Baptism says we reject the control Satan wishes to have over us, and surrender ourselves to the life values given in the teachings of Jesus. It admits our inability to be justified before God, and that our only justification is in Jesus and what He did by way of His crucifixion and resurrection. Just as we are born into this world through amniotic fluid, we are born into the Kingdom of God through water baptism. Does not Jesus reflect on this twin birth involving water when he discusses being born again with Nicodemus?

So why baptize infants when they are unable to answer for themselves? As Christian parents who believe in and follow Jesus, they would want the same for their children. Those who advocate waiting until the child matures enough to decide for himself would not adhere to that same practice in matters of health and welfare of the child. Would you wait until the child is old enough to decide whether or not he wants to go to school? Would you wait until the child is old enough to make his own decision as to what foods he should eat? I could ask additional questions to which the answer would be "no",

because we want the best for our children and give to them those things that will cause them to be healthy and strong. Why not the same principal apply to the spiritual life?

In lieu of baptism, some denominations have a dedication service in which the child is dedicated to God. Only one time does that occur in the Bible. Hannah prayed fervently for a child and when Samuel was born, after being weaned he was taken to the Temple to be dedicated to God. After the dedication he was left to Eli the priest to be raised by him. When people tell me they dedicated their baby I jokingly ask if they brought the child back home. Dedication and Baptism are not the same.

Prior to baptizing a child I met with the family; the parents and godparents. I explained to them that in baptizing an infant, the parents and godparents assume the responsibility to raise the child in the Christian faith, teaching them the things they should know about their Faith and Church. They take them to Sunday School and Worship. They say prayers with them in the home. They set the example, raising the child in an atmosphere of love and faithfulness. They prepare the child so when he does reach an age of understanding and accountability, he can accept Jesus personally because the parents and godparents have shown in their life and practice the importance of believing in Jesus as the Son of God and personal savior. It is not the occasion to be followed by a champagne party. It is a very serious day in the life of the child, the family and the Church.

The Jewish practice was to circumcise the male child on the eight day after birth. The child had no idea what this meant but the parents knew. It was the sign that certified a covenant relationship with God. The bar mitzvah was the child's commitment to the belief in God the parents had taught him to believe. In many churches, Charismatic Episcopal Church being one, the Sacrament of Confirmation is comparable to the Jewish bar mitzvah. The baptized child is brought to the Bishop for Confirmation. It is a confirming of what was done for the child at infancy through baptism. They may have been prepared and received "first communion" at age six or seven. The things pertaining to the Christian life has been an ongoing part of their early years, and now as they prepare to enter adolescence, they kneel before the Bishop to receive the strengthening gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The early church as reflected in the Acts of the Apostles believed baptism was the beginning. When I attended Saint Luke's School of Theology at the University of the South, my church history professor knew I was formerly a Methodist minister. One day he asked me if I had received "the second blessing". I had no idea what he was talking about because by time I came along in the Methodist Church, this was not emphasized or taught. By the "second blessing" he meant the "heart warming experience" that happened to John Wesley on Aldersgate Street in London when he attended a meeting and the Preface to the Book of Romans written by Martin Luther was taught. Wesley, an Anglican priest and missionary to America, was strangely affected by the Holy Spirit and as he described it, his "heart was strangely warmed". Many believe that night John Wesley experience the overflowing of the Holy Spirit as those on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem experienced. At a later time his brother Charles intimated that experience in his hymn "O For A Thousand Tongues To Sing". The Baptism in the Holy Spirit as we

understand it from the Acts of the Apostles is, sacramentally, Confirmation. As the Apostles in the early Church laid hands on those baptized, they conferred the strengthening gifts of the Holy Spirit empowering the person to be witnesses to Jesus Christ as He promised the disciples prior to His Ascension (Acts 1: 5, 8).

We will deal with the Sacrament of Confirmation in another lesson.

David duPlessis, known as Mr. Pentecost, once said “God has no grand children; only children”. He meant that one does not come to salvation through their parents or grand parents, but by their personal acceptance of Jesus as Savior. In the Sacrament of Confirmation the child baptized at infancy personally accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord. Not all people have a gutter-to-glory testimony. Most of us come to a personal relationship with Jesus because some where in our childhood we had believing parents or grand parents who nurtured us in the Christian Faith.

I am told that I was baptized at age three weeks in Fort Hill Methodist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia. I remember being “confirmed Methodist style” at age twelve. It was basically “joining the church”. I was reared by Christian parents and grand parents. I do not remember ever missing Sunday School and Church unless it was due to sickness. I learned Scripture. I learned how to pray and was often called upon to offer the opening prayer in our Sunday School assembly. All this said and experienced, Jesus became personal and real to me one Sunday afternoon at age fourteen when attending a city wide evangelistic crusade, a Jewish believer named Hyman Appleman gave his testimony as to why he believed Jesus was the Messiah. He concluded his message by saying, “if you want to meet my Jesus, come up here”. He meant come to the platform where he was standing. Along with several hundred other people I went forward and joined in praying what was called “the sinner’s prayer”. It was asking forgiveness and acknowledging Jesus as savior and my need for Him. It was a prayer where I invited Him into my life. Something happened! Jesus became real to me; the Jesus I had learned about in Sunday School. My father taught me the Lord’s Prayer before I entered the third grade of elementary school. I had a Bible given to me when I entered the Intermediate Department at Fort Hill Church. All this was spiritual food that prepared me for that Sunday afternoon. I don’t know what would have been my fate had I not been “plugged in” to the Christian Faith through baptism when I was three weeks old. I had been plugged in and now that Sunday afternoon the light turned on.

When did I become a Christian? When I was baptized at three weeks of age. It was God’s action although adults presented me and sponsored me for baptism. It is God’s good pleasure, not man, to adopt us into His family and that is done through Baptism. He revealed this desire in all the events displayed in the life and ministry of Jesus. Through water we are born into this world; through water we are born into the Family of God.