



by Jethro Higgins

What is Baptism?

Christian baptism entails sprinkling or immersion in water along with some form of the Trinitarian invocation, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Baptism is an outward sign of Christian initiation and church membership. The purpose of baptism in most Christian traditions is the forgiveness of sins and incorporation of the newly baptized into the Body of Christ, which Christian churches recognize as the faithful who believe the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Original Sin and the Kingdom of God

The Christian faith, from the first century, has taught the truth of the above description of baptism. Yet, this isn't just the Catholic view. The Encyclopaedia Britannica contains an introductory paragraph of baptism that is very similar to the one above. Before there were bible teachings, there were the teachings of the Apostles, who lived side-by-side with Christ Jesus. Around 70 A.D. or earlier, a text called The Didache or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles began to circulate. It says the following about baptism.

Concerning baptism

And concerning baptism, baptize this way: "Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19) in living water. But if you have not living water, baptize into other water; and if you can not in cold, in warm. But if you have not either, pour out water thrice upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whatever others can; but you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before." (Didache ch.7)

What the Didache does not cover, however, is the belief that being baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity is baptism into death, Christ's death, a death to sin —

including original sin —and rebirth in water and the Spirit. Additionally, the Didache does not tell us that baptismal regeneration changes our destiny from eternal death to everlasting life in the Kingdom of Heaven. The reason for these omissions is that this particular text was written as more of an instruction manual for clergy than an apologetic work. To understand the spiritual importance of baptism, and its necessity, we need to take a look into Scripture.

A brief bible study on the Sacrament of Baptism

There is a lot about baptism in the Bible. Reading carefully, we will discover that God initiates nearly every major change in relationship with his people through water and the Spirit. In the creation story, God forms the world from the waters and breathes his Spirit into man. Noah brings mankind out of the flood through the help of a dove, prefiguring the Spirit to descend on Christ later. Moses leads his people out of Egypt, through the waters of the Red Sea, guided by the Spirit in the form of a pillar of fire and cloud. When John the Baptist brings the Lord Jesus Christ out of the waters of baptism, the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove.

"It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'" (Mark 1:9-11)

Catholic author Scott Hahn refers to these prefigurements of baptism as typology; each one being a type of baptism. Now at the end of the Gospel, Jesus brings the change of water and spirit into each individual's life by commissioning the Apostles to go out to the nations, baptizing.

"Then Jesus approached and said to them, 'All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples

of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” (Mt 28:18-20)

Later, we find St. Paul’s conversion to be highlighted by a vision of God commanding him to repent of his persecution of the Church of God. Immediately, upon having his vision restored, Paul was baptized.

“So Ananias went and entered the house; laying his hands on him, he said, ‘Saul, my brother, the Lord has sent me, Jesus who appeared to you on the way by which you came, that you may regain your sight and be filled with the holy Spirit.’ Immediately things like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. He got up and was baptized, and when he had eaten, he recovered his strength.” (Acts 9:17-19)

Finally we have the story of Philip and the eunuch (Acts 8:26-39). Philip is told by God to intercept a court official for the Queen of Ethiopia. He teaches him about the prophecy of Jesus in the book of Isaiah. He was apparently convincing, because the eunuch spies some water and immediately asks to be baptized. Philip baptized the eunuch and then miraculously vanishes.

So we can see clearly that it is God’s intent, through the teaching of Jesus, that all should be baptized, and that baptism should be the beginning of the Christian life.

Greek words - What does baptism mean?

In Greek, baptism is βαπτισμα (baptisma). It’s often helpful to look at the Greek, or Aramaic, context of a word from the New Testament to discern what was meant by the author. Language changes over time, and the Greek words often convey a much different meaning than their direct English translations. Often a term with religious significance comes from a Greek word that describes a common practice. In this instance, the action form of the word baptize carries much greater significance than its dictionary definition. A very helpful website for this type of research is bible study tools, which tells us that the verb “baptize” had two forms — the first of which signified a type of washing for the purpose of cleansing. The second form of the word, however, indicated a fundamental change in property of the thing being baptized. The example given is dipping cucumbers into vinegar to make them pickles. That is the form of the verb used in the sacrament of baptism, an action of washing that creates a fundamental change in the state of being of the object being baptized. This

helps us to better understand the Sacrament of Baptism as the Latin Church understands it.

Within the Catholic Church

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is the best source of information to help one understand the beliefs and practices of the Catholic faith. In the Catechism it says:

“Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (vitae spiritualis ianua), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: ‘Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.’” (CCC 1213)

That last phrase about baptism being “the sacrament of regeneration” has been discussed at length since the beginning of the Church. In short, baptismal regeneration is the belief that baptism is intimately linked to salvation and the reception of sanctifying grace. Jesus himself seems to be pretty clear about the importance of baptism for salvation as seen in the Scripture passages above. The Church Fathers have also written pages and pages on the subject, with names such as St. Ambrose, St. John, St. Gregory, Pope Stephen and Pope Nicholas all weighing in. St. Peter’s words really hammer home the point of baptismal regeneration, comparing one’s baptism to those saved in Noah’s ark. St. Peter says:

“In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet. 3:20-21)

“Baptism now saves you...by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” I’m not sure how one could make the point more clearly than that, but there are those who still do not believe in baptismal regeneration. However, the Council of Trent and the Council of Florence have both stated very clearly that baptism is necessary for salvation. The Catholic Encyclopedia New Advent begins its entry on Baptism by quoting the Council of Florence:

“Holy Baptism holds the first place among the sacraments, because it is the door of the spiritual life; for by it we are made members of Christ and incorporated with the Church. And since through the first man death entered into all, unless we be born again of water and the



Holy Ghost, we can not enter into the kingdom of Heaven, as Truth Himself has told us."

Infant baptism or adult baptism?

There are other points about Catholic baptism that are contested by our Protestant brothers and sisters. Baptizing infants and little children is a point of contention. Some Christian churches object to the baptism of infants and profess only adult baptism because they believe that baptism requires a statement of faith, and those younger than the age of reason can't make a personal statement of faith. As Catholics, we also believe faith is required, but that before the age of reason that statement of faith is made by the parents. This point of disagreement is tied to the previous point of baptismal regeneration and the necessity of baptism. Recall the point about Greek words above; if you believe that baptism is simply a submerging in water and that it doesn't fundamentally change the baptized person like the pickle in the vinegar, then you would naturally place more emphasis on the statement of faith and treat baptism as primarily symbolic. However, if you believe — as the Catholic Church does — that baptism is necessary to salvation, then you would want to baptize that cucumber as soon as possible, because only pickles go to heaven. That is why the Church encourages infant baptism. To understand our differences and reach for the reunion of all Christians someday, it's important to know where we differ on these important points.

The Name of Jesus: Jehovah's Witness and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

The Catholic Church believes in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. So, although we may differ in the details of practice with other non-Catholic churches of Christ, we would still see their baptisms as valid baptisms — provided they follow the proper form. More on that later. There is a problem, however, with the validity of baptisms for a Jehovah's Witness or a Latter-Day Saint. The big word that is the source of this problem is Christology. In other words: who do we mean when we say the **name of Jesus**? In order to baptize into the names of the blessed Trinity we have to be sure we are talking about the same people.

- **Jehovah's Witness** – In the Jehovah's Witness' theology, Jesus Christ is not equal and consubstantial with the Father. Instead, he is understood to be a created being. Actually, the belief is that he is the archangel St. Michael. In their field ministry or kingdom ministry, evangelizers who come door to door, rarely bring up this important distinction.
- **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints** – For the LDS church, there is also a Christological issue

in referring to their baptism as the one baptism prescribed by Jesus. Mormons believe that Jesus, and God the Father for that matter, are created beings and distinct from each other. This breaks down the coequal and coeternal relationship between God the Father and God the Son. A Latter-Day Saint also believes that their human nature is essentially the same as God's nature was when he first came into being, and that he was begotten by divine parents who also once had that same nature.

So as you can see, simply affirming that one has accepted Christ and that one must be baptized to be saved is not quite enough for baptismal unity among churches. Unless we can be sure that in accepting Jesus we have accepted the same person, we can't be sure that in practicing baptism we are actually doing the same thing. It becomes complex to discover whether or not a believer's baptism is part of the one baptism of Jesus in the current state of Christianity, where each local church sometimes claims a different theology with different rites of baptism.

When we can look at the theology of an entire denomination, that judgement becomes much more clear. As John Piper, a pastor in the Baptist Church lays out, we can clearly identify Baptist theology on baptism and see, that like the majority of Christian churches, the Baptist Church believes that baptism is an ordinance divinely ordained by Jesus himself. We can see that they believe in the same Christ that Catholics profess. In fact, the main difference between Baptist Church baptism and the sacrament of baptism in the Catholic Church is the question of baptized infants. Baptists believe only in the baptism of adults for the same statement of faith issue, which I addressed above.

Modes of baptism in the Catholic Church

Baptism has taken a couple different forms ritually throughout the ages. But currently, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the initiation Rite of Baptism requires:

- **Intent** – *The baptizing persons must intend to accomplish what the Church intends for baptism*
- **Godparents** – *Witnesses to the sacrament who make promises to help the baptized on their journey toward heaven.*
- **Baptismal water** – *The water of baptism is holy water blessed by the ordinary ministers of the sacrament in a baptismal font, which is sprinkled or poured, or a large baptismal font can allow for full immersion in water*
- **Exorcism** – *A prayer is said by the ordinary minister over the candidate for baptism*



- **Laying on of hands or anointing with the oil** – Accompanied by an explicit renunciation of Satan
- **A statement of faith in Christ** – Also known as baptismal promises, these show the candidates' commitment to Christ. Before the age of reason, this statement would be made by the candidate's guardian(s).
- **Trinitarian form** – In the English language this phrase must be said to administer baptism: "N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."
- **Anointing with sacred Chrism** – Signifies the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the newly baptized
- **A white garment** – Signifies that the newly baptized has put on Christ
- **A candle** – Lit from the Easter candle, it signifies the enlightenment of the newly baptized and the call to share "the light of the world"

Of course the Church doesn't require that all other denominations take this canonical form for their baptisms to be valid baptisms. In fact, in emergency circumstances, anyone can perform a baptism which would be valid – even a non-Christian. As long as someone pours water over the candidate for baptism with the intent to do what the Church does when it baptizes, and the individual is baptized in the name of the Trinity with the phrase mentioned above, then that individual will receive baptism. Canon law actually explicitly states this:

"Can. 861 §1. The ordinary minister of baptism is a bishop, a presbyter, or a deacon, without prejudice to the prescript of can. 530, n. 1. §2. When an ordinary minister is absent or impeded, a catechist or another person designated for this function by the local ordinary, or in a case of necessity any person with the right intention, confers baptism licitly. Pastors of souls, especially the pastor of a parish, are to be concerned that the Christian faithful are taught the correct way to baptize."

Water baptism is actually not the only way an individual can receive the necessary grace to attain heaven. Two other possibilities are:

- **Baptism of blood** – Those who suffer death for the sake of the faith without having received baptism are baptized by their death for and with Christ. (CCC 1258)
- **Baptism of desire** – Like the Baptism of blood, if a person dies before baptism, but ardently desires

to receive it, and is repentant of their sins, they are assured the salvation they would have otherwise received through baptism.

The baptism of desire is especially comforting for the parents of unbaptized infants who pass away early in life. Because we believe in infant baptism through the statement of faith of the parents, and in the baptism of desire, we can have hope in the salvation of children who die before they are able to be baptized.

Another extraordinary baptism situation worth mentioning is conditional baptism. As a result of an emergency baptism, or an unknown state of baptism, it is possible to conditionally baptize an individual. In other words when in doubt of the existence of a valid baptism, the priest or extraordinary minister should instead use this phrase, "If you are not already baptized, N. I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This prevents the potential for a situation where somebody might be "re-baptized." "Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark (character) of his belonging to Christ" (CCC 1272) and can therefore only happen once.

Death, burial and resurrection:

The effects of baptism

Once a Christian is baptized into Christ, they begin to walk in newness of life in Christ. What they receive from baptism fundamentally changes them, like the Greek pickle mentioned above. Both original sin and personal sin are washed away. Sin is still a reality because of our concupiscence, our natural inclination to sin from our fallen state, but through the Sacrament of Reconciliation we can continue to be cleansed of sin as we advance our spiritual life towards our ultimate union with Christ.

The initial rite of the Sacrament of Baptism baptizes the believer into the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. United with Christ's death, the people of God die to their own sins. Through his burial the new believer in Christ puts away the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the Devil. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too, in the Spirit of God as his adopted sons and daughters, will participate in that resurrection of Jesus, if we stay the course. We are called to live differently as a disciples of Christ through the virtue of our baptism. To live that call means to put away old habits and pick up daily devotional habits instead. A life lived for the glory of the Father can't fall back into those habitual patterns of sin. Like a wedding ring reminds us of the covenant we share with our spouses, our baptism reminds us of the new covenant we participate in with God.

You are what you eat

It's not only true with food. You become what you expose yourself to. One of the most frequently asked questions (and answers) I get in ministry is "I want to change, but I don't know how." Like I tell those high schoolers every chance that I get: if you want to change the output of your life, you have to change the input. That means taking a hard look at the types of media we consume and their related topics. If you want to live out your baptismal call, you have to do hard things for the sake of the Gospel. Maybe, as an act of obedience to that call, we can take a small step by changing some of the movies or music we listen to that leads us away from the path toward Christ. Here are some good pieces of media you might want to consider: three fantastic songs about the Sacrament of Baptism and our call to discipleship.

Gather at the Water

by Sarah Hart (ocp.org/songs/89271)

From her new album "Sacrament" this uplifting song is a beautiful slice of Americana with a spiritual, Appalachian, feel. Sarah captures the sacrament of baptism beautifully with lyrics that could only have come from Sarah. Honestly, I've been listening to it on repeat while writing this blog. It's incredible, but I'll let Sarah do it the justice it deserves. Here's a short video with some background followed by the song itself about half way through.

Healing Waters

by Trevor Thomson (ocp.org/songs/51429)

Trevor's song "Healing Waters," part of Spirit & Song is a song about the waters of baptism renewing the life of the Christian. This is a great song to use during a sprinkling rite. This song exudes the joy appropriate for this sacrament of initiation.

I Saw Water Flowing

by Curtis Stephan (ocp.org/songs/51429)

Sometimes it can be hard to find a good sprinkling rite song for contemporary liturgy. I've tried different things, but I feel like Curtis has really nailed it with his setting of the text "I Saw Water Flowing". This song lives in the place where contemporary style and beautiful tradition grind together to produce young saints, and I love it.

This series is intended to provide a more in-depth look at each of the Sacraments their institution in the Bible, current practice, and some beautiful musical suggestions. Explore more from related articles in this series:

- **Baptism:** *What is Baptism?*
- **Eucharist:** *What is the Eucharist?*
- **Confirmation:** *What is the Sacrament of Confirmation?*
- **Confession:** *Sacrament of Reconciliation*
- **Anointing of the Sick:** *Last Rites and the Anointing of the Sick*
- **Matrimony:** *Being husband and wife*
- **Holy Orders:** *What is the Sacrament of Holy Orders?*

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