

BAPTISMAL PRACTICES

in the Early Church

BY MARTHA BERGEN

THE WORD *BAPTISM* carries with it the idea of a religious ritual signified by water. While baptismal practices may occur in non-Christian circles, Webster defines baptism as “a Christian sacrament marked by ritual use of water and admitting the recipient to the Christian community.”¹

The Bible reveals that ceremonial washings occurred in both Old and New Testament eras (see Ex. 29:4; Lev. 14:8-9; Mark 7:3-4; and John 2:6) and served as a means of purification. During New Testament times, various sects and Jews who proselyted used water in their baptismal rituals and even immersed followers.² The Greek word for “baptism” is *baptisma* and is based on the verb *baptizo*, meaning “to immerse or submerge.” The term *baptisma*, unique to Christian literature, refers to John’s baptism or Christian baptism.³

Christian Baptism

The baptism John the Baptist practiced led the way for Christian baptism. Like Christian baptism, his baptism was connected to a person’s repentance and forgiveness of sin. Nevertheless, it differed in two ways. John’s baptism did not signify a personal faith in Jesus Christ, nor did it signify the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the new believer (contrast Mark 1:4 with Acts 2:38). The foundation of Christian baptism is John’s baptism of Jesus, the God-man who serves as an example for all humankind. An examination of Jesus’ baptism reveals two significant

occurrences: He was declared God’s Son, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove. Another basis for Christian baptism is Christ’s mandate found in Matthew 28:18-20, the “Great Commission,” which includes baptizing others in the name of the Trinity.

In the early church, baptism was indicative of a person’s relationship with Jesus Christ, following his conversion to Christianity. Baptism by immersion symbolized Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. The candidate’s being submerged into the baptismal waters represented his own “death and burial” to self and sin and his “resurrection” to a new life under Christ’s lordship (see Rom. 6:3-8). Many also see an eschatological significance, pointing to the bodily resurrection of Christians when Christ returns to earth and establishes His eternal kingdom. Not all Christians, however, have agreed on the manner and meaning of baptism. Even the early church fathers raised differing concerns regarding this topic.

Concerns and Issues Associated with Baptism

The church has had to address baptismal practices throughout its history.

Mode of Baptism. The means of baptism has been an issue throughout church history. What is the appropriate mode or method of baptism? Some have accepted immersion as the only justifiable mode, while



Left: Baptismal fount from the Coptic Museum, Cairo.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ/ COPTIC MUSEUM, CAIRO (15/17/3)

LESSON REFERENCE

FBSC: Acts 2:36-41;
Romans 6:1-10

others believe affusion (pouring) or sprinkling water over the head is valid. Those adhering to immersion support this mode as symbolizing Christ's death, burial, and resurrection and base their support on passages like Romans 6:4. Baptists support this view, highlighting the climactic work of Christ. Those who favor pouring or sprinkling often use the argument that baptism depicts more than just Christ's death, burial, and resurrection; but rather, the whole of His ministry, basing their position on passages such as Galatians 3:27.

Infant Baptism vs. Believer's Baptism. Another issue is who can be baptized. Baptists have always stressed the significance of believer's baptism, baptism that results from one's personal faith and trust in Christ. An individual, though sinful from conception, must come to the realization of his need for Christ (see Rom. 10:9-10). Infant baptism, therefore, contradicts this principle. Those supporting infant baptism, however, make reference to the baptism of households (note Acts 16:33), as well as to Christ's appeal to children as part of His ministry (see Matt. 19:14). While infant baptism was, by the fifth century, a common practice, some believe it may have originated because of the desire to safeguard children in the event of a premature death.⁴

Triune Baptism vs. Single Baptism. A third issue concerns the number of times one should be baptized. Triune baptism corresponds with the three Persons of the Godhead and as such must occur three times for baptism to be valid. Some believe, based upon Acts 2:38, that earliest Christian baptisms used the formula of "in the name of Jesus," whereas the trinitarian formula resulted from Christ's final commission (Matt. 28:19).⁵ Others suggest the use of Christ's name would refer to one's confession associated with baptism, rather than a prescribed formula for baptism. The debate over triple versus single immersion is reflected in the practice of eastern and western churches today—the former practicing triple immersion and the latter using a variety of practices.⁶ Baptists baptize into the three Persons of the Godhead but do so with single immersion.

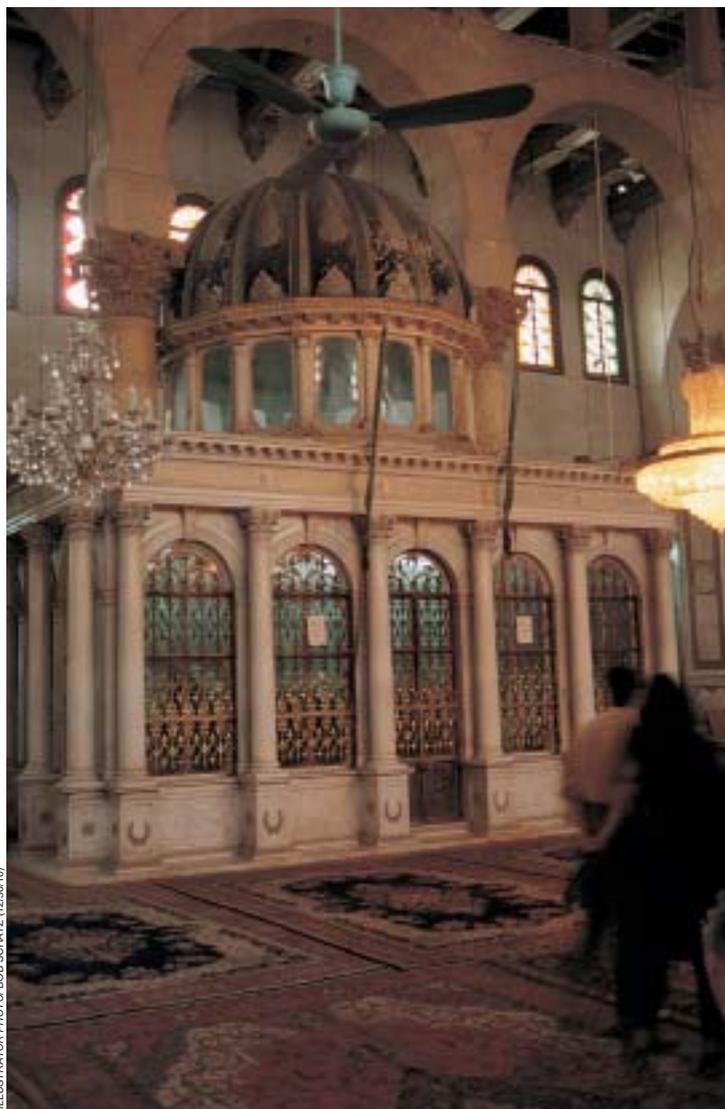
Baptismal Preparations and Ceremonial Practices

Early Christian worship practices probably somewhat paralleled Jewish patterns. However, they received a new perspective in light of Christian conversion. Worship was a means of instruction whereby its elements (baptism included) were teaching tools. While one's conversion to Christianity almost immediately resulted in baptism and seemingly had little to no instruction (see Acts 16:11-15), the encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch gives evidence that instruction did occur in some instances (note Acts 8:30-38) and should not, therefore, be dismissed.⁷

Though texts throughout portions of the New Testament mention baptism, the Scriptures offer no evidence of a prescribed formula for its preparation and practice. However, supplemental sources, for example the *Didache* and *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, give evidence that moral instruction, fasting, and prayer preceded the actual event. Teachings from the *Didache* allowed pouring water onto the head three times

Right: The Double Church of Mary at ancient Ephesus is a good example of early Christians adapting the Roman basilica as a church. The shallow baptismal pool located in a baptisterion is evidence that the earliest churches used immersion in their baptisms. The shallow pool leads scholars to believe that candidates knelt on their knees and were submerged forward (face down).

Below: Tomb of John the Baptist in a mosque at Damascus.





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS (6/5/10)

Right: This 6th-7th centuries tombstone has a dove representing the Holy Spirit in the center. Around the rosette at its top hover two angels. The inscription, in Coptic, commends the deceased to God.

Below: Tub with cross on it in an ancient church at Amphipolis. The tub may have been used for infant baptism.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS/BOSTON (3/27/11)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO © BOB SCHATZ (11/21/06)

if running water was not available. Cold water was preferable to warm water. Both the baptizer and the one to be baptized were to fast for two days prior to the event, along with others who were able.⁸

By A.D. 200, an established ceremony was in place. The candidate, having gone through a season of instruction (possibly up to three years), faced a verbal examination prior to his baptism. At the time of baptism, believers offered prayers beseeching the Holy Spirit into the baptismal waters. On the eve before Easter, the candidate would undress, renounce Satan, and be anointed with oil. This was known as the “oil of exorcism,” which was to strengthen the candidate in his final struggle with Satan.⁹ As he stood in the water, the candidate confessed his faith in each Person of the Godhead, being immersed after each confession. Afterwards he was anointed, dressed, and anointed a third time before a “laying on of hands.” At this point the candidate received the kiss of peace from the congregation, followed by participation in communion.¹⁰

Baptism and Circumcision

Around the time of Christ, Jews accepted Gentile converts and began to baptize them. Yet circumcision remained the chief means into Judaism. Baptism has often been compared to the circumcision event. However, this analogy is flawed. Only males are circumcised, whereas both males and females are baptized; moreover, while circumcision concerns the “flesh,” baptism concerns the “heart” and is thus spiritual. God’s promise in Christ is to “spiritual Israel,” not the “Israel of the flesh.” Those who are spiritual Israel are so because of their faith.¹¹

The early church demonstrated faith as it practiced Christian baptism. First and last it pointed to Jesus Christ, the one who was baptized to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15, NIV) and who expects His followers to do likewise, giving testimony of their relationship to Him. **B**

1. See “Baptism” in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1993), 91.
2. A. Hamman, “Baptism: Baptism in the Fathers” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 107.
3. Lars Hartman, “Baptism” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 583.
4. Everett Ferguson, “Baptism” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), 133.
5. R. P. Roth, “Baptism (Sacramentarian View)” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 465.
6. Ferguson.
7. James E. Reed and Ronnie Prevost, *A History of Christian Education* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 73.
8. Didache, chapter 7, Charles H. Hoole. trans. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-hoole.html>.
9. Hamman, 108.
10. Ferguson, 132.
11. Johnnie Godwin, “Baptism,” and Chris Church, “Infant Baptism” in *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 150, 696.

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