



What is Baptism?

The word 'baptism' is derived ultimately from a Greek word meaning 'washing in water' or 'plunging into water'. Many faith traditions over millennia have used water in their rites. We all know about Hindus and the River Ganges, for instance. There were Jewish ritual cleansing rites involving water at the time of Jesus.



The Rev. Ken Morris celebrating a baptism at St. Stephen's in the 1950s.



The first Biblical reference we have for baptism is at the very start of Mark's gospel, when we hear that John was going about the Judean countryside calling people to repentance and baptizing them. This was a ritual that signified spiritual cleansing, and washing away of sins.

John the Baptist recognized that Jesus was the Messiah and therefore that he needed to be baptized by him. Jesus instead asks John to baptize him in the River Jordan, presumably following the same rite or pattern that John had been using already. To this extent this rite was building on traditional Jewish rites. And we know that Jesus was an observant Jewish rabbi.

As with any tradition, these things are built up slowly, and built on the insights and traditions of former generations. Jesus' baptism was one of the turning points in the development of this ritual water-cleansing rite, when something new was added. As John administers baptism to Jesus, we are told by St. Mark's Gospel that God's voice is heard from the heavens, declaring Jesus as God's son, and that a dove comes down and settles over Jesus head. It marks the start of Jesus' public ministry.

John baptizes with water, but also tells people that Jesus brings a greater baptism – not only water, but the Holy Spirit as well. We're told in St. John's Gospel that Jesus also baptized people as he traveled the region, and John, Chapter 3 reports Jesus saying that we can only enter God's kingdom if we are born of water and the Spirit.

All of this means that, according to the accounts of the Gospels, we know that baptism has two components – baptism by water and baptism by the Holy Spirit, the water to symbolically cleanse, the Holy Spirit to be in some way be breathed into us. In other words, an outward symbol of an inward and spiritual grace, which the church calls, in shorthand, a sacrament.



Throughout Christian history this is the basic way in which the sacrament of baptism has been understood – that it is both a physical, tangible event, and at the same time a mystical, existential event: something that changes us both physically and spiritually.

Certainly that's what we learn from accounts of Christian baptism in the very earliest church. The key account here is from Acts Chapter 2. It tells us that on the Day of Pentecost Peter and the Apostles baptized around 3000 people, and it is explicit that the physical act of baptism leads directly to the Holy Spirit being given to those people.

From the early days of the Church, and following the command of Jesus in the Great Commission in the Gospels, the formula of words for Christian baptism has been ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’.

So, we have our two components. One is concrete and one is abstract.

First, the water. In the New Testament and the earliest church the norm was full immersion. Then by the time of the *Didache* – a manual of church practice from the late 1st century – partial immersion had become widespread. The usual manner now is either this latter form, or perhaps more commonly in Anglican and Episcopal churches, by affusion, which is the technical term for when water is poured over the head and there is no bodily immersion.

And now, second, the abstract component: the other qualities of baptism that are not tangible or concrete. We know, of course, that baptism calls the Holy Spirit to infuse that person being baptized. But what on earth does that actually mean? We take our cue here from the gospels and letter of the New Testament to say with certainty that baptism confers five main abstract effects:

- It signifies **death**. Water is poured over the head three times, or the person is immersed three times. This signifies not only the Trinity but the two days Jesus



was in the tomb and the resurrection on the third day. It symbolizes that we are reborn by water and the Spirit, as Jesus talks about in John chapter 3.

- It signifies **cleansing**, specifically from the guilt and corruption of human sin.
- It signifies **salvation**, such as salvation at the time we have to give account of ourselves and are judged by God
- It signifies **adoption** by God as his sons and daughters in the family of the Body of Christ.
- It signifies **solidarity** or **identification** with the person of Jesus, as we receive the same baptism as he did.

It's worth just adding that baptism is something we're invited to seek and that we must want to have conferred on us. The way this is referred to in the New Testament. John the Baptist preaches the message, he urges people to repent of their sinful ways and have their slates wiped clean, so to speak. We still have to want to be baptized. We have to seek it out and desire it. In the case of infants, we seek it out and desire it on their behalves.

One way that reinforces the notion of baptism as a partly ontological event (that is to say, effecting a change in our souls) is that virtually all Christian denominations believe that baptism is once-only and unrepeatable.

So, if that's what baptism consists of, and if that's what it confers, what is our response? Let's revisit Acts Chapter 2 again. After the baptism of those 3000 people, we are told that the result, the proper response of the new Christian is to:

- To live in a **Spirit-filled common life**
- To live in **fellowship**
- The **breaking of the bread**
- To exercise **prayer**