

The Meaning of *Baptizein*

5.1 The verb *baptizein* (to baptize) and the noun *baptizma* (baptism) are not translated in English versions of the Bible, the Greek word has simply been translated into an English word. Like the words 'bishop' (originally 'overseer/foreman') and 'church' (originally 'assembly'), 'baptism' is a 'religious' word in our culture.



The word originally meant 'dip' or 'immerse'.

It could be used of clothes being dyed (dipped in fluid) or ships 'sinking' and by extension means 'overwhelm' or even 'wash' (so Lk 11.38). It never means sprinkle or pour.

This fits well with three things: (i) the theological ideas of baptism as a washing and a burial. (ii) It also fits with what we know of the physical places of earliest baptisms: John at the Jordan (Jn 3.23); the *mikva'ot* (ritual baths) on the Temple steps in Jerusalem and (iii) the earliest known Christian baptism font (in the oldest known church) in Dura Europos in Syria (241-256AD) which is a stone bath of roughly a metre cubed. Most early Christian icons of (Jesus') baptism show the hand of the baptiser on the head of the one being baptised with the assumption that they would crumple at the knees as the hand of the baptiser pushes them down into the water. Modern baptismal practice is generally moving towards using more water (eg. pouring water rather than sprinkling) and towards baptising by immersion in particular.

5.2 There are many NT texts that *might* refer to baptism. Some best candidates are: *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (Rom 10.8) - is it a reference to baptismal liturgy? *Put on the Lord Jesus Christ* (Rom 13.14; Gal 3.26) - does this refer to 'redressing' after baptism? *When you heard the word of truth...and believed in him, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit* (Eph 1.13) - but 'the seal of the Spirit' is the Holy Spirit not baptism. *the eternal life ... about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses* (1 Tim 6.12) - this is speaking in court not making confession in or at baptism (so 1 Tim 6.13)?

5.3 The NT gives only hints about the practicalities of baptism. However the *Didache*, an early Christian text (~95AD), discusses baptism in detail including baptismal practice:

¹*Concerning baptism: baptize thus: Having first rehearsed all these things, baptize in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running water;* ²*But if you have no running water, baptize in other water, and if you cannot in cold, then in warm.* ³*But if you have neither, pour water three times on the head 'in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.'* ⁴*And before the baptism let the baptiser and the one to be baptised fast, and any others who are able. And you shall bid the one to be baptised to fast one or two days before. (Did 7.1-4)*

This clearly shows: (i) immersion was preferred: in cold running water (ie. outside where there is a natural water source); (ii) *in extremis* pouring is an alternative method of baptism; (iii) the three-fold name was used (corresponding to three pourings and possibly three 'dippings'); (iv) fasting was part of preparation (which implies that babies are not in view.)



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1 Introduction – The Precedents for Christian Baptism

1.1 The Flood: 1 Peter 3.20-21 is complicated by its reference to Jesus addressing the spirits imprisoned since the flood (based Jewish interpretations of Genesis 6.1ff).

However, the parallel with baptism is fairly simple:

the ark ... in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

²¹*Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as the putting off of the filth of the flesh but as an pledge(/appeal) (eperōtēma) to God of (for) a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ... (1 Pet 3.20-21).*

Noah and his family were saved both *from* water but also *by* water (the ark floated!). This leads to one of the strongest statements in the NT on baptism: '*baptism... saves you*' (but note) '*through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*'. Some think this language is strong to make the parallel with the flood, others that salvation is effected through the water of baptism (the official view of the Catholic and Anglican churches). Note two other things: the contrast with washing dirt away which hints at the opposite: washing away sin; and the idea of a pledge of a good conscience: a promise of future living a holy life (directed to God).

1.2 The Exodus is expounded as a warning against idolatry in 1 Corinthians 10.1-5.

Neither baptism (nor participation in the Lord's Table) are an automatic guarantee of salvation. Led by Moses, Israel passed from slavery in Egypt *via* the Red Sea:

Our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea... (1 Cor 10.2-3)

God provided manna and the rock gushing water in the wilderness as 'spiritual food' and 'spiritual drink'. Israel had these blessings at the sea and in the desert, but still rebelled by making the Golden Calf at Sinai and were judged by God.

1.3 Jewish baptisms. We know that in later centuries those converting to Judaism were baptised. This probably started as a parallel initiation ceremony for female converts for whom circumcision did not apply. Judaism may have copied baptism from Christianity not the other way round. Ritual washing was part of Jewish prayer and Temple worship in C1AD. These may be the roots of...

1.4.1 John 'the Baptizer' preached a baptism of repentance in preparation for the Coming One '*who will baptise in Holy Spirit (and fire)*' (Mk 1.8; Jn 1.33 (Mt 3.11; Lk 3.16)). 'Baptism' is here also a metaphor for being 'immersed' in the Spirit.

1.4.2 John baptises Jesus. This is odd (cf Mt 3.13-15 and Jn 1.29-36) given John's emphasis on repentance, but Jesus' baptism becomes the paradigm of Christian baptism in theology and iconography. Note the separation between Jesus' baptism and the coming of the Spirit on him: '*when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended...*' (Lk 3.21ff)

A Theology of Baptism

2.1 Key Elements of NT Baptism

2.1.1 NT Baptism is missional baptism

2.1.2 Water baptism is part of conversion and initiation - hearing the gospel, repenting, believing, receiving the Spirit, then growing in Christ and in holiness in the church.

2.1.3 Baptism is principally about being joined to Christ (joining the church is secondary) *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit.* (1 Cor. 12:13). It is baptism in the Spirit (not water baptism) that means we are one body.

2.1.4 Baptism marks a change (not confirmation) of status - from outside Christ to 'in Christ'.

2.1.5 Baptism was usually 'in(to) the name of Jesus' but Jesus commands baptism in the (one) three-fold name: 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (Mt 28.19) (hence triple dipping is resisted).

2.2 The Theological Meaning of Baptism

2.2.1 Washing away sin: [Ananias to Saul/Paul]: *And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.* (Acts 22:16)

2.2.2 Burying our old self Rom 6.2f: *all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him though baptism into death... Col 2.12: ...having been buried with him in baptism, in whom you were also co-raised by faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead.*

2.2.3 Promising of good conscience to God: 1 Peter 3.20f. NB Not a witness to others.

2.3 Three Broad Views on 'What Happens' at Baptism

2.3.1 Baptismal Regeneration: Rightly practised baptism conveys the benefits of salvation

2.3.2 Ordinance: It is an act of obedience to the command of Christ. No benefit is conveyed.

2.3.3 Sacrament of Faith: Combined with faith, baptism is an opportunity for the conveying or renewal of the benefits of salvation. To faith, baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace.

3 Why not 'do' babies?

There are some common arguments for baby baptism. Here are the best ones:

It shows God's grace is most important

Since baptism parallels circumcision (Col 2.11) children of believers are 'in the covenant'.

It is early - see the household conversions in the NT (1 Cor 1.16; Acts 16.15, 33-34)

Jesus welcomes children (Mk 10.14)

The promise of the Spirit is to 'you and your children...' Acts 2.39

Children of one believing parent are 'holy' in 1 Cor 7.14

Baptism should only happen once - we shouldn't re-baptise (Eph 4.5)

Its real roots are in doctrines of baptismal regeneration and original guilt

Its logic tends in the direction of indiscriminate baptism - why not baptise any (sponsored) child?

It involves the dubious notion of 'proxy' faith - promises made on behalf of a baby.

It tends to create a 'church' of nominal Christians not a disciples' church

It demands the separation of baptism from conversion - and places baptism first

Baby baptism separates conversion from discipleship

It robs believers of the experience and memory of baptism

It robs believers of the proper holistic and integrated start to their Christian life

It leaves lots of Christians playing catch up

A Brief History of Baptism in Five Episodes

4.1 New Testament Baptism is *missionary* baptism. People are baptised pretty much immediately after they respond to the gospel as part of mission, evangelism and church planting.

Baptism is part of the conversion and initiation process which includes hearing the gospel, repenting believing, being baptised and receiving the Holy Spirit.

4.2 From 100AD to 400AD the main questions centre on the relationship between the baptism and discipleship. Here are five key developments:

(i) More people were Christians because they were born into Christian families. For many baptism moved from being a missionary act (converting to Christ) to being pastoral (joining the church).

(ii) Linked to a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, high infant mortality rates led to an increasing desire and practice of the baptism of infants. See Tertullian below.

(iii) Some practised death-bed baptism (like the Emperor Constantine himself). The main concern was over the problem of post-baptismal sin. This dies out: baptism is neither a promise of perfection but nor is it OK to delay baptism to allow for deliberate sin.

(iv) From 313AD onwards Christianity moved quickly from an illegal religion to the state religion of the Roman Empire. Membership of church and of the state became more closely identified.

(v) The church became concerned about the status of those baptised sub-orthodox 'churches'. Valid baptism has to be trinitarian and as only valid in the catholic church.

The **first certain reference** to infant baptism is in Tertullian, writing in North Africa in around 200AD. Because he wants a church of practising believers he recommends delaying baptism.

Babies should wait until they can exercise their will to 'come to Jesus'. Those who make promises for the very young can't necessarily keep them and put themselves in spiritual danger.

According to everyone's condition and disposition, and also his age, the delaying of baptism is more profitable, especially in the case of little children. For why is it necessary—if [baptism itself] is not necessary - that the sponsors should be thrust into danger? For they may either fail to keep their promise by death, or they may be mistaken by a child's proving to have wicked disposition.... They that understand the weight of baptism will dread the receiving of it more than the delaying of it. The Lord does indeed say: 'Forbid them not to come to me.' Let them come, then, while they are growing up; let them come while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the remission of sins? (de baptismo ch18)

4.3 Augustine of Hippo (354-430AD) taught the doctrine of original guilt (usually called 'original sin'). Based mainly on a mis-translation of Romans 5.12, Augustine taught that all human beings were 'in Adam' when he sinned in Eden so that when Adam sinned they too sinned. It meant babies were born already guilty of sin and baptism was an immediate priority to deal with sin. Though Augustine was not baptised as a baby (despite being born to a Christian mother) the result was a huge theological boost for the practice of baptising babies. Allied to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, Augustine's view nearly universally prevailed until the Reformation.

4.4 At the Reformation the mainstream Reformers (and Anglicans) kept baby baptism and the identity of church and state. Most emphasised that faith (not just the rite) is the necessary pre-condition for baptismal regeneration. Since babies cannot show faith, promises are made on their behalf by godparents, at least one of whom must be a Christian.

4.5 The Ana-Baptists Felix Manz (martyred by Reformers by drowning in Lake Zurich 15 March 1526) and George Blaurock baptised each other as believers by pouring on 21 January 1521 in Zurich. They had agreed with Zwingli that baptism was an act of obedience that conveyed no grace. As such infant baptism was void. Distinctive tenets of anabaptist faith were believers' baptism, a believers church, pacifism, not swearing oaths, not being magistrates.