

BAPTISM

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The Synoptic Gospels (Mark 1:9–11; Matthew 3:13–17; Luke 3:21–23) mention the ritual immersion practiced by John the Baptizer in which Jesus himself participated. Matthew 29:18–20 also portrays the risen Lord, in a post-Resurrection narrative, commanding his disciples to baptize using a Trinitarian formula. The words came not from the historic Jesus, biblical scholars suggest, but from early church practice around the year 80 CE.

The word “baptism” is derived from Latin and Greek words meaning to immerse or to plunge in water. Historically people have participated in Baptism by being dipped or immersed in water, having water poured on their heads, or even just splashing some water on the head of the person being baptized.

John the Baptizer was an itinerant Hebrew preacher active in the area of the Jordan River in the first century CE. John used Baptism as the central symbol of his pre-messianic movement. Most scholars agree that John baptized Jesus and that certainly some of Jesus' disciples had been participants in John the Baptizer's religious movement. Being baptized by John demonstrated a desire to refocus one's life and make a commitment to follow God's law in anticipation of the Messiah's arrival.

For Jesus, his Baptism marked a moment of personal discernment and preparation for his own public ministry, which was far greater than the ministry of John the Baptizer.

That a ritual immersion in water was important in the earliest decades of the Jesus movement is clear from the many references to it in the New Testament. When Paul speaks of being “immersed in one spirit” and “into one body,” he is talking about the ritual's marking an entrance into the community and sharing a communal spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). But Paul did not develop an elaborate theology of Baptism. Borrowing from Hebrew ideas with which he was familiar, Paul saw it as a symbolic immersion and an initiation not only into the community of believers but into the very way of life that Jesus himself had lived.

The earliest and best second-century source on believer's Baptism is the *Didache* or “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” 100-110 CE. It reveals how Hebrew Christians saw themselves and how they adapted their practice for Gentile Christians. The *Didache* not only establishes moral qualifications for the adult who is about to undergo Baptism but also requires the baptismal candidate to fast for a day or two.

Originally the minister of Baptism was the overseer (bishop). Later presbyters (priests). But over the years, official RCC teaching about the minister of Baptism has

evolved. A layperson can baptize when a priest or deacon is not readily available. This, for example, has been happening for some time in Austria and Switzerland. Most recently, in March 2022, Bishop Franz-Josef Overbeck, Bishop of Essen, Germany, appointed 18 lay pastoral and parish workers - 17 women and one man - as extraordinary baptismal ministers, for a three-year period. Then in November 2023, Bishop Gebhard Fürst, in the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart in Southwestern Germany, commissioned 26 theologically trained, non-ordained, men and women to administer the sacrament of Baptism in his diocese.

Infant Baptism? Traditionally, advocates of infant Baptism say that its practice dates back to the apostles. Yet there is no proof for this assertion. No clear evidence for infant Baptism exists before the third century.

Baptism began as a ritual for adults. But it developed greatly in the third century, and by the fourth and fifth centuries, Baptism had become a several-weeks-long adult exercise involving prayer, instruction, and learning the creed: all leading up to the actual baptismal washing on Easter. The ceremony was usually conducted by the overseer (bishop) of the Christian community.

Although some infants were being baptized in the third and fourth centuries, infant Baptism did not really become widespread until the fifth century, thanks to the introduction of his Original Sin understanding by Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 CE).

For many traditionalist Christians, the doctrine of “Original Sin” is firm and definite. In fact, however, there are no biblical and no historical indications that Jesus knew of or believed this doctrine. Neither did the early church. Original Sin is a theological construct created by Augustine of Hippo in the late fourth century. Augustine taught that through sexual intercourse all humans inherited a tainted nature. He identified male semen as the means by which Original Sin was inherited and passed on. He stressed however that the historic Jesus of Nazareth was free of Original Sin because he was conceived without any semen.

Augustine believed as well that sexual desire itself was a consequence of Original Sin. Oddly enough, as a young man, Augustine had had few qualms about sexual desire and engaging in sexual relationships. When a 17 year old student in Carthage, he began a long-term relationship with a mistress. He had at least one son, who died as a teenager, named Adeodatus i.e. “a gift from God.” He left his mistress at the prompting of his mother, Monica, who wanted him to marry a young heiress in Milan. That did not happen. Augustine did find another mistress. But then he had an anti-body and anti-sex “conversion,” and became a celibate priest.

Most importantly we need to understand Augustine’s Original Sin impact on infant Baptism. Augustine held that when unbaptized infants died, they went straight to hell as a consequence of Original Sin. Remember that infant mortality in those days of course was quite high. Augustine therefore became a strong advocate of infant

Baptism, and in the church, thanks to Augustine, infant Baptism would become the norm.

Quite honestly, Augustine's negative understanding of human sexuality and his creation of the Original Sin doctrine have always been theologically problematic.

Back to adults. Some post-Reformation Christian traditions strongly rejected infant Baptism. The Anabaptists, started in 1527, believed that Baptism was valid only when candidates freely acknowledged their faith in Christ and requested to be baptized. The word "Anabaptist" comes from the Greek word *ana* meaning "again" as in "baptized again." Anabaptist groups today include mainly the Amish, the Brethren, and the Mennonites.

Other contemporary Christian traditions, of course, stress the importance of adult believer's Baptism. "Baptists" form a major branch of Evangelical Christianity distinguished by baptizing adult professing Christian believers and doing so by immersion.

In many ways I can resonate with the stress on adult Baptism, but I doubt very much that infant Baptism will disappear. Regardless, Baptism is not a thing. It is an initiation into the community of believers. The Community of believers, therefore, has a major responsibility to support and promote the healthy Christian development of all of all of its members. Just as parents, family, and friends promote the physical, mental, and intellectual development of babies and children, so too parents, family, and Christian communities bear a heavy responsibility to promote and support the Christian faith and values development of their babies and children.

Yes, there is "continuity and change" in all of the sacraments. Meaningful sacraments are not just rituals that celebrate beliefs but those that truly celebrate lived and living realities. A dynamic and meaningful sacrament should connect people, whatever their age, with an experienced spiritual reality: an experience of the Sacred in the depth of our human lives.

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