

# The Evolution of Baptism

The Reverend Dr. Arnold Isidore Thomas

## Origin of Baptism

Baptisms arose from the Jewish purification ritual called Tevilah (meaning immersion) in which one, completely naked, was immersed in a body of flowing water or a mikveh (ritual bath) to cleanse oneself from any contact or association with that Jews considered unclean.

The word “baptize” comes from the Greek term “baptizein” meaning to dip, plunge or immerse frequently. Such rites of immersion were common practices within Judaism as acts of purification from sinful behavior or association with people, culture and acts considered unclean or profane. In Leviticus 16:4 Aaron is instructed to “bathe his body in water” before entering the sanctuary. Anything involving human emission, be it blood or semen, rendered one unclean, and the ritual of bathing in fresh water was part of the process by which one was once again considered clean (Leviticus 15:2-33). Ritual bathing was done after war and sexual intercourse; but also as a means of admitting converts into Judaism.



---

Excavated mikveh in Qumran, Israel (left, *Wikipedia*).

Modern-day mikveh at Temple Beth-El Synagogue in Birmingham, Alabama (above, *Wikipedia*).

---

## John the Baptist

In the case of converts or proselytes, baptism symbolized the transition from old, corrupt ways of the pagan world to new life as a child of Abraham and servant of God. John the Baptist applied this form of baptism to Jews as a means of escape from false notions of entitlement attributed to descendants of Abraham, and entry into life directed according to God's will and imminent realm (Matthew 3:1-10). This is the form of baptism Jesus received.

### Baptism by Water or Spirit

While water baptism is commonly connected to the preaching of John the Baptist or Jesus' disciples (John 4:1-2), Jesus himself is associated with a spiritual baptism that never required water.

In Mark's Gospel, John the Baptist says, "I baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (1:8). And Peter, according to Acts, "remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (11:16)

This was demonstrated in instances of conversions directly connected to Jesus' ministry, such as his ministry among Samaritans (John 4:5-42), his forgiveness of the criminal crucified next to him (Luke 23:43), his healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter (Matthew 15:21-28), the Samaritan leper (Luke 17:11-19), the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43), where faith was fundamental to the healing process, but water was never mentioned.

As a result, while most Christians prefer baptism by water, many (including Christian Scientists and Quakers) are convinced water is unnecessary.

### Different Forms of Baptisms

Baptism was the means whereby converts officially entered the Christian faith, and it was practiced in a variety of ways. While some Christians, as previously noted, considered baptism a spiritual revelation in which water was, therefore, unnecessary, most Christians, from the beginning of the church to the present day, regard baptism as an outward tangible expression of a spiritual transformation of one's life toward the way of Christ.

The earliest Christian baptisms were probably most commonly done by complete immersion, involving full body submersion, or partial immersion, involving the submersion of the head. Other methods used included *affusion*

involving the pouring of water upon the head of individuals as they stood in the water or, in the case of infants, were held over the water, or *aspersion* where water was sprinkled over one's head.

The first recorded baptismal liturgy was written by Hippolytus of Rome (170–235 AD) in his work entitled *Apostolic Tradition*, where he offered the following instruction to religious officiants and their churches:

1. *At the hour in which the cock crows, they shall first pray over the water.*
2. *When they come to the water, the water shall be pure and flowing, that is, the water of a spring or a flowing body of water.*
3. *Then they shall take off all their clothes.*
4. *The children shall be baptized first. All of the children who can answer for themselves, let them answer. If there are any children who cannot answer for themselves, let their parents answer for them, or someone else from their family.*
5. *After this, the men will be baptized. Finally, the women, after they have unbound their hair, and removed their jewelry. No one shall take any foreign object with themselves down into the water.*

As the liturgy indicates, Christian baptisms often occurred in the early morning when many were still asleep to avoid suspicion from those who might report such activity to the authorities and endanger the lives of Christians, since Christianity, before the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 313, was an outlawed religion in many parts of the Roman Empire. This was due, in part, to the unwillingness of Christians to acknowledge Caesar over the lordship of Christ. Most early Christian baptisms were held at Easter.

It should also be noted that while nakedness, a flowing body of water and the order by which people are baptized are no longer required in most Christian traditions (though these were procedures used in mikveh rituals, which were more modest and private ceremonies separating genders), the different forms of baptism practiced in the early church are still used today.

However, Early Church scholar, Laurie Guy, contends that complete nudity for baptismal candidates (especially women) would not be the norm. He notes that at certain times and in certain places candidates may have been totally naked at the point of baptism, but Jewish abhorrence of female nakedness, would have diminished or alleviated widespread practice of naked baptism. ("Naked" Baptism in the Early Church, *Journal of Religious History*, 2003) In later years, Christian attitudes toward nudity became more

restrictive, and baptisms were segregated by sex and eventually administered with clothed converts.

### **Baptism from Jewish Purification to Christian Rebirth**

It is important for us to remember that baptism in a Christian context is quite different from baptism within Judaism, including the nomenclature.

As earlier mentioned, the Christian sacrament of baptism is closely akin to the Jewish purification ritual called *Tevilah*, which was most likely employed by John the Baptist as an outward expression for Jews in conveying their spiritual transformation to the way of this first-century Jewish reformer. And while *Tevilah* was used as a means by which converts entered Judaism, it was more often used as an act of cleansing, rededication and renewal among Jews.

John the Baptist, followed by Jesus, introduced baptism as a once-and-for-all act of repentance and conversion, quite unlike *Tevilah* which is a frequent act of purification, except in the case of conversion to Judaism. But John the Baptist and Jesus were not the founders of a new religion, but the reformers of an old religion. They lived, worshiped and died as Jews, so what were converts who followed after them converting to?

Followers of John and Jesus were disciples of a new sect or movement within Judaism that, following the resurrection of Jesus, became known as *the Way* (Acts 9:2) or *Nazarenes* (Acts 24:5), but ultimately was called *Christian* (Acts 11:26, 26:28, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4:16).



This third-century fresco from the Catacombs of Saint Callisto in Rome is one of the earliest depictions of baptism (Wikipedia).

By the close of the first century, Christianity had become increasingly Gentile in makeup and identity, partly due to the Council of Jerusalem, mentioned in Acts 15:1-29, which occurred around 50 AD and decided that Gentile converts to Christianity were not obligated to keep most of the Law of Moses, including the rules

concerning circumcision. One can read evidence of this in the Gospel of John where Jews who don't acknowledge Jesus as the messianic savior of the world are commonly referenced as *the Jews* in contrast to the faithful followers of Christ. Of the sixty-three times in which this reference is made, nearly half are used to negatively castigate Jews as a whole. This is not to suggest that the author of the fourth gospel was ant-Semitic. Most likely, he also was Jewish. However, his narrative fueled the fires of a movement in which Gentiles would eventually outnumber Jews and look upon Jews with hostility as those who ousted them from the synagogues, crucified Christ, and persecuted them for their belief in Jesus as the Messiah. The distinct characteristics that professed belief in Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah and no longer required followers to observe Jewish law are the factors that eventually separated Christianity from Judaism.

These characteristics also contributed to a different understanding of baptism, especially following the death and resurrection of Jesus. No longer was baptism simply the path to repentance and renewal, it was the means by which converts died with Christ, through their immersion, and then were raised or resurrected from the watery grave, as Christ rose from the tomb, to experience rebirth and new life with their Savior. The Apostle Paul makes this abundantly clear when he says:

*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)*

### **Baptism Becomes the Bridge to New Life in Christ**

Christian baptism continued the ritual of Tevilah, but for the sole purpose of receiving converts into the faith; a faith that, possibly by the end of the first century, had a greater number of Gentiles than Jews as members.

Following the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by Roman forces in 70 AD, Jewish sects competed for dominance as the authoritative voice over the spiritual direction of Jews. The Sadducees, whose priesthood was confined to the temple, died away with its destruction, leaving the Pharisees, Essenes and Christians to contend with each other.

Pharisees clearly controlled the upper-hand since they led the synagogues, which were present in nearly every town of Palestine. John's Gospel mentions followers of Christ being thrown out of synagogues (16:2) enabling

what would eventually evolve into the various forms of rabbinical Judaism we know today to manage the medium, message and outreach by which Jews were instructed and led.

Despite persecution both within and outside Judaism, some sects among Christians continued to identify equally, if not more, with Judaism. One such group was the Ebionites, who regarded Jesus as a prophet rejecting his divinity and virgin birth. They adhered to Jewish law and customs, acknowledged Matthew (starting at chapter 3) as their only gospel, and revered the leadership of James, the brother of Jesus. However, such groups continued to dwindle in number as Gentile converts increased. Present-day variants of these groups are seen among those who identify as *Messianic Jews*, though no convention of Judaism recognizes them as Jews.



Modern-day Tevilah among Nazerenes (Messianic Jews) in Israel

Yet Gentiles saw themselves as the newly chosen people of God and spiritual descendants of Abraham, who continued to fulfill the prophesy that Israel, in their minds, had forsaken; the prophesy in which God promised Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” Genesis 12:2-3). This understanding was promoted by Paul who elaborates:

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:27-29)*

Paul clearly saw the writing on the wall regarding the future of a faith in which he played a vital role, a future that would no longer include a Jewish identity and heritage he intimately cherished. He may have privately mourned the fact that he, more than even the inner circle of Jesus' hand-picked disciples, had contributed to the phenomenal growth of a movement that exceeded its Jewish roots and his own capacity to define and control. This was the spiritual baptism in which he was immersed and from which he would be raised, no longer a Jew or Greek or Roman, but for better or worse, a follower of Christ and child of God.