



### **B is for Baptism (and the Body)**

Baptism, like atonement in our first chapter, is one of those topics that is vitally important to the Christian tradition but which has developed and evolved over time to have a multiplicity of perspectives. Baptism is literally overflowing (too cheesy?) with imagery and demonstrates a surplus of meaning. There is multitude of implications and an abundance of imagery built into the practice.

A major element of the imagery of baptism has to do with new life. We were birthed physically into this world through blood and water so the imagery of our second birth (spiritually born anew) involves those same themes. There is also a layer of imagery in baptism related to forgiveness and the cleansing or washing away of sins. In addition there is a sub-theme of belonging as one enters the family of God / household of faith. Because it is a public ritual there are also complimentary elements of testimony and witness.

Baptism is rich in both its symbolism and its diverse in its expressions. There is a depth to this ritual that which beckons us to embrace its layered and multifaceted nature. It is this exact complexity that makes baptism a target for those who are tempted toward reductive or simplified understandings. Both the imagery and diversity of practices related to baptism Let's talk about some of the implications.

Sprinkling, pouring and immersing in water are the 3 main methods. There are churches that have baptismal fonts built in, others have a basin they can put out when needed. Some have baptismal tanks at the back of the platform. My favorite are the tanks built below the stage that can be uncovered when needed by pulling back the floor boards.

For groups that do not do baptisms during the worship service, they may choose to go to a member's house and gather around the swimming pool or to the nearest lake, river, or ocean. Some people want to be very rigid and prescriptive about the

Here are four aspects of baptism that intrigue me:

**1-** I grew up in a tradition that did 'believer's baptism' and so we 'dedicated' infants to the Lord. I now work in a tradition that baptizes babies and then has confirmation for teens. I see the strength of both ... and the weakness. I wish that we could combine these two and that churches who do a) immersion and b) believer's baptism also had confirmation class for those desiring to be baptized. The early churches had a lengthy process that 'catechumens' had to go through. It was a multi-year process \*\*\*. Some modern denominations continue this tradition.

**2 -** My evangelical background doesn't do 'sacraments' as much as 'ordinances'. Baptism and communion are ordinances because Jesus A) did them and B) commanded them. I now work in an institutional context which seems nearly 'catholic' by my evangelical sensibilities. It is not just sacramental but practically sacerdotal.<sup>1</sup>

What intrigues me is that for the nearly unanimous expectation of baptism in the Eastern and Western, Catholic-Protestant-Orthodox, ancient and current churches ... there is no unity or uniformity about how it should be practiced.

In fact, historically people have even fought and died over this issue. Christians have killed other types of Christians over this issue of baptism! Even today, there are groups which will not recognize (or transfer) members of another group who practice baptism differently.

For something so central to the Christian practice you would think there would be more continuity.

It is helpful to know that leaders of the earliest churches had a built-in plurality to

**3 -** Baptism is a great example of a major difference between Christianity and other religions like Islam. I find it really illustrative.

There is nothing geographic about the Christian practice of baptism.

- We don't have to go to the Jordan River (like Jesus did)
- We don't even have to baptize in a river.
- We don't have to face East to Jerusalem when baptized.
- We don't have a specific time of year when we baptize.

I am fascinated with how little geography is involved in Christianity. Sometimes people use the word 'universal' when they talk about some aspect of Christianity. I shy away from that. It's not that it is universal so much as it is not earthly (or earthy).

*This is something that concerns me very much.*

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<sup>1</sup> *whereas sacrament is concerned with elements (like bread or water) , sacerdotal is concerned with who can perform this sacred ceremonies. 'Priests only' is the elevation of certain commissioned individuals being the only ones allowed to.*

**4)** The New Testament stories of baptism do not happen in a vacuum. Many people have no idea that part of the Temple worship of Jesus' time involved frequent baptism - or ceremonial washing. There were actual [permanent pools with two sets of steps](#) - in and out - for purification.

This is so important to know and I am shocked at how many bible-believing people don't know this biblical scholarship or background. John the Baptizer being A) outside of Jerusalem and B) in a river not a man-made pool is a massive critique and protest against the corrupt religious-political-financial systems of the Temple religion.

What John and (later) Jesus' followers were doing was not original to them nor was it the sentimental ceremony it is often portrayed as. What a fascinating way to begin a ministry. It impacts the whole rest of the gospel ... and most people I talk to read it without this context or knowledge.

You may find it interesting that the early churches had developed a set of expectations related to baptism as it became more formal. We have this passage in the Didache (also called 'the teaching of the twelve') that gives direction -or permission- for how baptism can be conducted depending on your context.

#### Chapter 7. Concerning Baptism

And concerning baptism, baptize this way: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Matthew 28:19 in living water. But if you have not living water, baptize into other water; and if you can not in cold, in warm. But if you have not either, pour out water thrice upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whatever others can; but you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.

Baptism remains an important part of the embodied practices of the church. In fact, the imagery is built in for many as baptism is how one becomes (is birthed) into the body of Christ (Romans 6:3-7).