

The Mode of Baptism – A Brief, Pastoral Reflection

This is not a research paper. I have many, many great books on baptism that I would love to put into your hand. I will not cite them here (maybe someday I will update this reflection with footnotes and research). This is a pastoral reflection, a brief letter to my church, to my beloved in Christ.

Yours ever,
Fr Chris+

Holy Saturday, April 16, 2022

Many of us grew up in traditions that taught (exclusively), “Baptism is only baptism if you get dunked.” You’ve probably heard said that the word βάπτισμα (baptism) means “immerse.” It’s not that simple.

Words gain meaning from their context. When I say, “It’s really hard,” the word *hard* gains meaning from context. Am I touching a rock? Am I trying to win a carnival game? What is the context? “Hard” can mean physically hard, or difficult, hard to win (and probably many other meanings). The same is true of every word, and the Greek word βάπτισμα is no different.

In most contexts in the New Testament, it seems that baptism is by immersion (to be completely covered in water). But not necessarily submersion (to go under the water). Infants are often baptized as you would wash them in the kitchen sink (not submersion, but immersion—we hold them in the water and pour water over them, head to toe).

Jesus went down into the water to be baptized, but we don’t really know if John dipped him backwards, or forwards, whether they walked down waist deep or to their shoulders. It is entirely possible that they walked into the water and John poured water on Jesus’ head. Or, did he get dunked once (as most Western churches practice) or three times (one for the Father, the Son, & the Holy Spirit, as they do in the Eastern churches)? Or, did they walk into the water and then pour water three times or just once? We don’t know.

A Brief, Very Simple History

From the earliest days of the church, it is clear that there was a variance of practice, but still there was One Baptism. The normative practice was immersion, and so, whenever possible, churches were built with large cross-shaped baptismal pools, in which you stepped and were baptized, but even then, the mode is not explicitly known (did they submerge, or did they walk into the water and pour, or...?). And there were also much smaller baptismal fonts in churches.

The Apostles teaching on baptism emphasized what God did, not a mode.

The Apostle Peter wrote:

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. **Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience**, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.” (1 Peter 3:18–22)

Were Noah and his family submerged in the flood waters? No. Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, but his baptism, which now saves us, corresponds to the washing of blood and water that he poured out at the cross (John 19:34, “blood and water”; Mark 10:38, his “baptism” of crucifixion).

St. Peter reminds us that the mode of water baptism, and even in extreme circumstances baptism itself (Luke 23:43), isn’t what saves us. It is the washing of regeneration by the Spirit (Acts 11:16). But Peter can still write, “Baptism now saves you,” because from the beginning, Holy Baptism and salvation were inextricably tied together—every Christian was baptized. The rare exception proved the rule. “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38, 2:41, 8:12-13,).

The late first century letter called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, commonly called *The Didache* gives instructions for baptism:

“Now concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having first taught all these things, baptize ye into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. And if thou hast not living water, baptize into other water; and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, pour [water] thrice upon the head in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” (Didache 7:1-3)

Here’s the takeaway: if you have a lake or a river nearby (“living water”), then that’s the easiest place to get baptized. If not, fill a bath. If not, fill a bowl and pour the water. *The mode is not the most important part of Holy Baptism.* The God who created water is. In the end, His presence and action at Holy Baptism is all that matters. He must wash us, inside and out.

More on Modes

Baptism, like all sacraments, brings together many different and complementary threads into one. So baptism symbolizes passing from death to life, the cleansing of God, and the pouring out of the Spirit. Here’s just a few references. Looking forward to the new covenant, Ezekiel writes:

“I will *sprinkle* clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” (Ezekiel 36:25)

Ritual cleansing by sprinkling, by blood and water, is fully and finally fulfilled in Christ, and to participate in Christ requires us to be cleansed by him (John 13:8).

“For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the *sprinkling* of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal *Spirit* offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” (Hebrews 9:13–14)

“...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the *Spirit*, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for *sprinkling* with his blood” (1 Peter 1:2)

We do not practice baptism by sprinkling. But neither do we stand in condemnation over those who do sprinkle. More than sprinkling, the New Testament is filled with references to the Spirit being “poured out” like water upon believers. Pay attention to Luke’s beginning to the Acts of the Apostles...

“[Jesus said:] ...for John baptized with water, but you will be *baptized* with the Holy Spirit *not many days from now*...

‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will *pour out my Spirit* on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will *pour out my Spirit*, and they shall prophesy’ ...

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the *Holy Spirit*, he has *poured out* this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.” (Acts 1:5, 2:17–18, 2:33)

To be βαπτισθήσεσθε (baptized, Acts 1:5) is carried out by and fulfills the ἐξέχεεν (pouring out, Acts 2:33) of the Spirit.

“...he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the *Holy Spirit*, whom he *poured out* on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,” (Titus 3:5–6)

Baptism brings together many different needs that we cry out to God for: new life (death, burial, resurrection), cleansing from the uncleanness of sin (sprinkling), and the gift of the Holy Spirit (pouring). Each aspect of this new creation work of the Holy Spirit in water baptism is pictured in these different modes. Bible Christians are humble Christians, and Holy Scripture is deep and wide—who can fathom it’s depths?

Concluding Thoughts & A Prayer

Baptism (like all sacraments) is meant to point us to God, not to *ourselves*. It is not about me, not about my being cleaned up, not about my profession, not about how good I repent or how enthusiastically I testify. We simply show up and we ask God to work in us and with us, at His Table, in Holy Baptism, and even in non-dominical means of grace (like marriage or confession). “Hosanna, God save us!”

Baptism includes us in someone, Jesus Christ, and it unites us outwardly to his Body, the Church. It is not about me. **It is about us, in Him.** In countless ways, our prayer book is trying to reclaim this historic teaching of the Church.

“Eucharistic prayers in particular were influenced by the re-discovery of patristic texts unknown at the Reformation, and often bore little resemblance to what had for centuries been the Anglican norm. Baptismal theology, especially in North America, was affected by radical revisions to the received Christian understanding, and came perilously close to proclaiming a gospel of individual affirmation rather than of personal transformation and sanctification.” (BCP, p. 4)

We say every week in the creeds that baptism is for “the forgiveness of sins.” It is a mystery, it is a gift, it is a sacrament given to us by God for our good and for our salvation. It is an outward and visible (physical) sign of God’s grace (not our belief).

Therefore, let us give thanks to God! Father, we thank you for the waters of baptism—they are better than deliverance from the Flood, better than deliverance through the Red Sea out of Egypt, better than crossing the Jordan into the land, better than deliverance from Rome or evil dictators or political oppression—you have saved us from death and sin and the grave! Whether we “immerse or pour” water (BCP, p.169), we need God to save.

And so we pray, and we give thanks together:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon all of us your servants the forgiveness of sin, received us all as your own children by adoption, made us altogether members of your holy Church, and raised us to the new life of grace. Sustain us, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit, that we may enjoy everlasting salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Yours ever,

Fr Chris+