

Holy Baptism

SESSION I: By water and the Spirit

The Origins and history of Baptism

Introduction to Holy Baptism

"Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's body, the Church. The bond which God establishes at Baptism is indissoluble." (Book of Common Prayer, page 298). In these words, the Book of Common Prayer clearly states the position of this Church: Baptism by water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is the only requirement for full initiation in this Church. Baptism is the root from which all other sacraments and rites of the church proceed.

Origins of Baptism

Water, a necessity for life, is valued as precious by people all over the world. From the primordial waters, life emerged. Civilizations gathered their communities along rivers and streams, around pools and lakes. Used for drinking, washing, irrigation, and recreational activities, it was and is experienced as life-giving. However, its formidable characteristics are also known--the destructive force of tidal waves and the tragic experience of drowning. Such variety and disparity of experiences make for a profoundly rich and powerful symbol.

Ancient peoples of many cultures recognized water as a potent symbol. When used ceremonially, it could express the notion of cleanliness or purity. Therefore, water was often used with religious rites to make clean, or to signify the ritual setting apart, purity, or holiness of people or things as sacred. It is with this connection between water and cleanliness that John the Baptist, within the ancient Jewish context, baptized people in water as a sign of their "repentance and the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). This action was at once a personal sign of rededication to the God of Israel and a sign of cleansing of ceremonial impurity. Although Christian Baptism has its origin in such water-washing ceremonies, and shares much with them, its meaning is expanded by and primarily focused on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ .

Baptism in the New Testament

We owe much to the Apostle Paul who, through his writings, left a record of how the early Christian community understood Baptism.

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 was, for the early Christian community, a sacramental action to convey that one was experiencing spiritual conversion and renewal--the end of one life and the beginning of another in Christ. By using the metaphorical language and imagery of death, burial, and resurrection, the early community ceremonially expressed, that in Baptism, we die to our destructive and distorted ways of being, relating, and acting, and that by the goodness and faithfulness of God, we are raised from death to a new life, guided by and filled with the Spirit of God. It was an outward and visible sign of the spiritual transformation God was doing in one's life. It was a symbolic action performed to depict what was happening within the life of one on a spiritual journey toward communion with God, the people of God, and all God's creation.

Although the metaphor of being raised from death to new life is the dominant image of Christian Baptism in the New Testament, no single image or metaphor can exhaust the rich meaning of one's conversion and experience of spiritual renewal. Consequently, there developed other images and metaphors in Scripture that express how the early Christian community spoke of their conversion of life and experience of renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Among them are:

- Spiritual Rebirth (John 3:3-10)
- Spiritual Awakening (Romans 8:37-39)
- Initiation into the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-13)
- Transformation of the whole person (Romans 12:1-2)
- Made a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- To turn from darkness to light (Ephesians 5:8, Colossians 1:11-14)
- To be saved (Titus 3:3-7)

Baptism Exercise

Look up the different passages from scripture referenced above. Which passage most speaks to your understanding of Baptism? Why does that passage resonate with you?

Water plays an important role in our lives. Describe your earliest memory of encountering water (ocean, lake, stream etc). What made that encounter memorable?

It is through water and the Holy Spirit that we are baptized into the Body of Christ. Recall your own baptism and significant events on your faith journey that may have brought you to make the decision to be part of this baptism.

Water can be life giving or destructive, it is also a necessity. In baptism water is a symbol of transformation. In the Old Testament, water is used for "repentance and forgiveness." Why would a baby need cleansing and forgiveness? Why would an adult?

Water and the Holy Spirit in baptism are symbols of change and transformation in our lives as children of God. Create your own metaphor statement for what happened to you at your baptism.

Holy Baptism

SESSION II: From one Generation to another Baptism in the History of the Church

Early History

The history of Baptism is deeply woven into the history of Judaism and Christianity. Christian Baptism has much in common with ancient Jewish rites of initiation, which, like Baptism, included a time of intensive study and examination, renunciation of former ways of life, a ritual water bath, and marking with the sign of the tau. Certainly, Christianity took over much of this ancient practice and reinterpreted it in light of our belief in the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, our incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus, and our becoming a part of his body by being signed with his cross.

By the third century, preparation for Baptism had, in many places, developed into an extensive period of preparation often as long as three years, culminating in powerful rites of initiation at the end of Holy Week. After a night spent in vigil and prayer, the candidate came to the dawn of the first day of the week at which time water was blessed and he or she was submerged or immersed in Baptism. The candidate was anointed, baptized with water, confessed faith, clad in a white garment and then brought to the bishop, who signed the candidate with the sign of the cross. The newly baptized normally made their first communion at this occasion.

After Christianity became a public religion, and eventually the religion of the whole culture, the increase in the number of baptisms made this kind of preparation more difficult to undertake. As Christian theology began to emphasize original sin, and as people became more enthralled with proper piety about it, Baptism became more and more the sacrament of infancy. By the early middle ages, Baptism was, in most places, no longer preceded by a time of repentance, nor did it involve a confession of faith, or participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, conferring of the Holy Spirit and binding together of the Christian community. Baptism had become the cure for original sin. Too, the increase in the number of infant baptisms, the development of new understandings about ordained ministry, and the change in Eucharistic piety tended to separate Holy Communion from Baptism. As early as the thirteenth century, the Western Church in some places, such as England, required postponing Holy Communion until Confirmation, and waiting for Confirmation until the age of discretion.

Baptism & Confirmation

The development of the rite of Confirmation, a complicated issue in its own right, probably has its origin in the custom of post-baptismal anointing. From at least the third century, anointing in some form was a part of the baptismal rite. While practices varied with location, those places under Roman influence tended to observe a second anointing by the bishop after the Baptism. This practice tended to solidify the authority of the Bishop and to establish and extend the dominance of Roman practice. These post-baptismal anointings were also the rites by which persons were restored from excommunication and welcomed to the church from heretical bodies. In form, these post-baptismal anointings were Episcopal blessings, and as early as the fifth century, these rites were called Confirmations.

Even before the Reformation, some were taking advantage of the time between Baptism and the post-baptismal anointings to encourage Christian learning and piety. In some places, Confirmation was postponed until the child learned certain texts such as the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Apostles' Creed. Sometimes, Holy Communion was postponed until Confirmation.

At the time of the Reformation, the Bohemian Brethren retained post baptismal anointing, insisting that it be preceded by instruction, examination, and renewal of the baptismal covenant. Wycliff disavowed the rite of Confirmation developed in the middle ages, and the Anabaptists asserted the primacy of adult baptisms. The Lutheran Reformers tried to reassert the ancient understanding of Baptism, emphasizing the death and resurrection of Jesus, and incorporating Old Testament types such as the Flood and the Exodus. They made Baptism a public rite and revived a form of the catechumenate.

A Public Rite

The English Book of Common Prayer of 1549 attempted to establish Baptism as a public rite, to be celebrated on Sundays or Holy Days. The Book of Common Prayer retained some of the rites of the medieval church including the clothing in a white garment and anointing of the newly baptized in the manner of medieval Confirmation rites--that is anointing upon the forehead. In this way, the first Book of Common Prayer began the process of restoring the unity of the initiatory rite. Some aspects of Confirmation were conflated into Baptism. However, a Confirmation rite was also included in the book for children who had learned the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Our Father, the Catechism, and who could answer for themselves. Those being confirmed were not anointed, they received laying on of hands. The Book of Common Prayer of 1552 dropped the Apostles' Creed and the Our Father from Baptism, as well as the vesting of the newly baptized. There was to be no anointing but there was a signing with the sign of the cross.

In 1662, a question was added to the baptismal rite about living the Christian life and a prayer

was likewise added which sanctified the water. A form for adult Baptism was also added to the Book of Common Prayer.

The first American Book of Common Prayer, 1789, dropped the requirement that the newly baptized be signed with the sign of the cross, which was a vestige of the medieval Confirmation rite. Through the nineteenth century, private Baptisms became more and more the norm in the United States, and a new theological trend emerged which asserted that in some fashion Confirmation completed the deficiencies in Baptism. To bolster the theological position of Confirmation, the 1892 Book of Common Prayer added the reading from Acts (8:14-17) to the Confirmation service in order to seek a scriptural justification for the Confirmation rite. The 1928 Book of Common Prayer restored the requirement that the newly baptized be signed with the sign of the cross.

Present thinking

Our current Book of Common Prayer keeps the traditional pattern of water Baptism followed by a post-baptismal signation and chrismation. The rite is understood to be public and congregational. While priests may baptize, the normative minister is to be the Bishop, and Baptism is meant to have an integral relation to the church year, especially to Easter, Pentecost, the Baptism of the Lord, and All Saints' Day. Admission to the Eucharist stands at the climax of the rite. While children and infants are provided for, adult Baptism is presented as the way in which the fullness of the sacrament is best understood. The Apostles' Creed is restored to the rite, and provision is made for all present to renew the covenant of their Baptism. The powerful Thanksgiving over the Water cites the ancient types of Baptism, such as creation; the exodus; and the baptism, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

BAPTISM EXERCISE

Describe a baptism you have attended that was memorable. What elements made it memorable for you?

Why do you think that it is important to know the history of baptism in the church?

Historically there have been a number of reasons given for infant baptism; as a cure for original sin, or to save a dying infant from an eternity in Hell. What is your understanding of why infants are baptized?

Looking at the history of baptism in the church, do you think anything has been lost in the translation from the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist until recent history?

What has been the baptism history of your family?

Holy Baptism

SESSION III: A sacrament from which all others flow

A contemporary view of Baptism

A gift from God

Today, the rite for Holy Baptism as expressed in the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church provides guidance to the Church to understand Holy Baptism as an action of celebration along one's spiritual journey which signifies:

- transformation of life
- identification with God and the purposes of God through Jesus Christ
- incorporation into the Church
- the gift of Holy Spirit to direct and inform one's mission in the world.

It is for us the chief outward sign of God's inner action--the sacrament from which all others flow.

Gift is the word most associated with God's graciousness and is central to our understanding of what happens in baptism--God's gifts of the Holy Spirit are freely given. One needs only to receive and appropriate them. Thus, infant Baptism is practiced in the Episcopal Church with the understanding that God's gifts are extended to all, regardless of state or age. However, it is expected that the parents, sponsors, and the Church take responsibility for the spiritual formation of the child that he or she may grow toward spiritual maturity, develop the relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and learn to appropriate the gifts of God within and through themselves. It is expected that the child, when older, reaffirm the baptismal commitment.

As for adults, it has been the practice of the Church at its best, to administer Holy Baptism to those who, in response to having heard the Good News of Jesus Christ and having been made aware of God's love, were ready to renounce the way of sin and death, declare their allegiance to God, and become disciples of Jesus Christ. The rite for Holy Baptism of the Book of Common Prayer is faithful to that task.

Baptismal Covenant

Vital to the contemporary Baptismal rite are the renunciations (Book of Common Prayer pp. 302-3) and the Baptismal Covenant (Book of Common Prayer pp. 304-5). Conversion of life is at the center of both. Here, the substance of the ceremonial action (Baptism in water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) and its intent are delineated. The renunciations provide the candidate an opportunity to publicly declare rejection of evil in all its forms and to pledge allegiance to Christ as Lord and Savior--at once, a statement of repentance of sin and dedication to God. In essence, one agrees to die to the past life of sin in order to be raised to the new life in Christ. The renunciations are fundamental to the journey of conversion. The Baptismal Covenant becomes more explicit about the implications of conversion.

The Baptismal Covenant lays out what could be termed, "a rule of life for the Church"--those practices that are normative for its members. The topics outlined in it are fundamental for all the baptized. Upon Baptism, one accepts the challenge:

- to persevere in the apostolic teaching and fellowship
- to persevere in relationship with God and the community through fellowship, worship, and prayer, and
- to be a witness of the liberating, redemptive work of Christ in the world, in thought word, and deed.

The Baptismal Covenant formulates, then, the content of the risen life in Christ. Together, the renunciations and the Baptismal Covenant express in words, what the baptismal action expresses ceremonially.

In summary we can say, that just as Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as the Spirit-filled Son of God going forth to do the work of God in the world, so also, those who believe in him and respond to his life and message are

- Made the present-day children of God through Baptism,
- Filled with that same Holy Spirit, and
- Sent forth into the world to do the work God gives them to do.

Baptism and the Community

Baptism involves the individual as well as the community. Both the individual and the community bear significant responsibility toward each other. The individual promises to renounce Satan; turn to Christ; and be faithful to the apostolic fellowship, teaching, breaking of bread and prayers. The community promises to do all in its power to support the individual in the new life in Christ. Parishes who desire to celebrate this sacrament with integrity and conviction must show a strong commitment to nurturing individuals and families through the initiation process into full membership and growth in Christ.

Baptism is best understood when we examine the way in which an adult is prepared for the sacrament. Baptism of infants and young children is but an interpretation and adaptation of that fuller rite used for adults. The Book of Occasional Services: 1991, pages 112-125, outlines the steps in preparing an adult for Baptism, and we commend its careful study. Baptism involves inquiry, self-examination, preparation and prayer, all supported by the whole community, leading up to the administration of the sacrament. Baptism is followed by participation in the Eucharist, further support, instruction, spiritual growth, and renewal--all in the context of a continued commitment to and participation in a congregational community.

Baptism Exercise

Read through the Renunciations and the Baptismal Covenant found in the Book of Common Prayer pages 302-305. Describe your understanding of these questions and covenants.

In an infant baptism parents and godparents are asked to speak for the infant child, entering into the covenant for them. Describe your understanding of that covenant.

Infants aren't responsible for their own faith lives, so as adults parents and godparents take on the responsibility of the "outward sign of God's inner action." How is your own life of faith a reflection of God's inner action? How will you model that in daily life and in taking on this responsibility for an infant?

Baptism has a transformative effect on the person receiving the sacrament. How do you think an infant can be affected if it doesn't realize it is receiving the gift? How can you foster the transformation?

Holy Baptism

SESSION IV: Marked as Christ's on forever

The Baptismal Covenant

The Heart of Christianity

Christianity is fundamentally neither a rational acceptance of particular doctrinal statements nor a set of particular religious experiences: It is a way of life. Our pledge of allegiance to God at the beginning of our baptismal covenant initiates a relationship with express behavioral implications. Our life with God is one of making promises to live in a certain way, of breaking those promises and being forgiven, and then remaking them.

We are to love God and our neighbors as ourselves; we are to keep God's holy will and walk in God's holy ways. However, because we are not always clear about what this implies, the Church in its wisdom includes in the baptismal rite five promises in the form of questions (The BCP, pp. 304-305), to which we are to reply, "I will, with God's help."

The first promise is to take our place in our congregation's communal life, to take seriously our continuing need for learning, to develop a personal spiritual discipline, and to participate in the Eucharist.

The second promise is to resist evil and, when we fail, to seek reconciliation with God. That is, to repent-to change the way we perceive life and our lives-and to return again to modeling our lives after Jesus'.

The third promise is to make known to others, by what we say, what we do, and how we act, that there is an alternative for human life and history-namely, our acknowledging that all human beings are made in the image of God and that God's reign of peace and justice is already among us.

The fourth promise is to seek out the needy, neglected, and unlovable-to embrace their suffering and be present to them in ways through which they may experience God's transforming love or grace.

The last promise is to respect the uniqueness of all persons. It is a promise to show forth in gestures large or small what it means to abide in God's reign-where all people live in unity with God and each other and where the human needs of all people are met with equity.

For each of the questions of the baptismal covenant there now follow several questions for you to use, either individually or in a group, in order to explore the implications of the promise for yourself and your ministry in the world as a follower of Christ.

Baptismal Covenant Exercise

Each person answers the question related to each vow individually.

- What does this promise mean to you?
 - How might keeping this promise change your life?
 - What would you like to do concretely about this promise in the next six to twelve months?
 - What help will you need in living out this promise? Where might such help be available?
1. *Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?*
 2. *Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?*
 3. *Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?*
 4. *Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as Yourself?*
 5. *Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?*

Summarize lessons and insights individually or in a group.

Decide which vow you will begin to act on.

Marked as Christ's own forever

Baptism marks the beginning of a journey with God which continues for the rest of our lives, the first step in response to God's love. For all involved, particularly the candidates, but also parents, godparents and sponsors, it is a joyful moment when we rejoice in what God has done for us in Christ, making serious promises and declaring faith. The wider community of the church and friends welcome the new Christian, promising support and prayer for the future. Hearing and doing these things provides an opportunity to remember our own baptism and reflect on the progress made on that journey, which is now to be shared with this new member of the Church. In that sense of shared faith please answer as thoroughly as possible the following questions:

It is God who is the prior actor in Baptism, an action to which we can only respond. In other words, no matter what other reasons you may name, one reason that you have engaged in this preparatory process is that God invited you and on behalf of the child you said yes. With that thought in mind, what stands out as specific moments or significant events in which you sensed God's presence or God's action in your life, moving you toward this place in your journey, this choice for your child or godchild?

Besides being the source of life and providing restoration and renewal for the human spirit, water can also serve as a boundary. Rivers separate states and even countries. In our salvation history, crossing the Jordan River into the promised land holds powerful associations of achieving freedom and peace. Just so is baptism a crossing over into the promises of Christ, into the household of God. What are times in your life when you can recognize having made a transition, crossed over a boundary, gained a new freedom (and with it perhaps new responsibilities)?

It is always appropriate to wrestle with God, with doubt, with faith, with honest feelings. Your willingness to confront hard questions will make you an important role model for your child or godchild. Scripture is filled with stories of men and women who questioned -even argued with- God, and remember that even in the immediate presence of Jesus one of his followers cried out "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." Have you experienced times in your life when you have either felt -or questioned- God's faithful concern for humanity or for your own well being? How did you deal with those times in your life? How do/can you help others deal with those moments in their lives?