

BAPTISM

The word 'baptism' comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, meaning to dip, plunge or cleanse in water. The word was commonly used to describe the process of dyeing cloth. The word in the New Testament is used to describe cleansing things as well as baptising persons. (See Mark 7:4.) In Christian teaching and practice, baptism involves testifying before others to faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and is the sign of cleansing from sin.

In the Old Testament period there were some ceremonial practices of ritual washing and purification. (See Exodus 29:4, Numbers 19:13.) The New Testament records, firstly, the kind of baptism administered by John the Baptist. He baptised and he heard God's command (John 1:33). John was calling out to a largely disobedient people to repent and to prepare for the coming Messiah (the Messiah who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire; see Luke 3:16.)

The exact relationship between Jewish ritual washing (a practice which continues today in rabbinical Judaism and is referred to as the practice of *Mikveh*), the baptism of John and Christian baptism, is an area of much debate.

At the heart of Christian baptism is the fact that it is carried out in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (as part of the great commission; see Matthew 28:19b). Baptism involves public testimony of the decision that has been made to **repent** and **believe** in Jesus Christ. (Recall the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost; Acts 2:28). It is an outward sign of an inner reality. Baptism also marks entry into the life of the church community. It is described in terms of a death to sin and there is a very important link with the death of Jesus. (See Romans 6:4; we were buried with him through baptism so that as he was raised from the dead we may live a new life.) There is a celebration of the new life and hope Jesus brings to his people through his death, resurrection and ascension. The act of baptism is often referred to as a Christian sacrament (along with Holy Communion/The Lord's Supper). A sacrament is understood to be an outward sign which points to what is happening through the grace of God.

Most Christians agree that Jesus himself ordained baptism as a sign of the new covenant (again, see Matthew 28:19f), and that it is therefore a central part of becoming a Christian, along with faith, repentance, and baptism in the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 2:38; 8:6–38; 10:44–48; Colossians 2:12). Clearly there are exceptions when baptism is not possible (consider the thief dying on a cross; Luke 23:43) but baptism should be part of the 'normal process' of Christian initiation, as it clearly was in New Testament times. [It must be recorded that a very small minority of Christians do not consider baptism essential.]

Nowadays, baptism is usually carried out by recognised leaders of the church, though there is no New Testament rule laid down as to who administers it. The method of baptism varies in different church traditions, yet from the point of view of adherence to what was normative in the early church, it is suggested that total immersion in the water is implied by the Greek term.

There is debate within the church about the appropriateness of baptising infants. Many churches practise infant baptism, believing that the children of Christians should be baptised with the expectation that later they will own and accept for themselves what that baptism claims (on coming to personal repentance/faith/trust in Jesus). However, other churches believe that the weight of the biblical teaching on baptism clearly shows that baptism demands the repentance and faith of the candidate *before* their baptism. It is therefore taught that baptism should only be for believers (although there is debate about what is the youngest possible age a person can freely confess their own faith), while infants should be welcomed into the church community by a ceremony of blessing/dedication but not by way of the (once-only) act of baptism.