

Baptism(s)

In the New Testament we read of four kinds of baptism.

1. The Baptism of John the Baptist (Mt 3:1,6,11; Acts 19:4)
2. The Baptism of Jesus (Mt 3:13-16, Mk 10:38-39, Lk 12:50, Jn 1:31-33)
3. Baptism with/by the Holy Spirit (eg Acts 1:5; 1 Cor 12:13, Titus 3:5)
4. Christian Baptism in Water (eg Acts 8:38, 9:18, 10:47, 16:15)

The aim of this article is to help us distinguish between these 4 different baptisms.

The Baptism of John the Baptist (Mt 3:1,6,11; Mk 1:4-8; Acts 19:4)

The first baptism we read about is that of John the Baptist.

Mark's gospel begins with this description of John's ministry:

Mark 1:4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River... ⁷ And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John called people to repent of their sins and to undergo baptism-- a kind of ceremonial washing-- which was an outward sign of their turning back to God. It was actually a very Old Testament thing to do. The law of Moses had prescriptions for various ceremonial washings for purification from uncleanness, usually for priests serving in the temple. However, by the time of Jesus, the practice had become more wide spread as a symbol of repentance from sin¹. So the key idea of John's baptism was repentance and confession of sin where the water symbolised a cleansing from sins committed.

So we conclude that being baptised by John did not make a person a Christian in the full sense of the word. Although it was a good heart preparation, receiving John's baptism was no more effective in effecting salvation than any other Old Testament religious expression of faith.

In John's preaching we also note that he foretold a different kind of baptism to his washing with water. In Mk 1:8 he says that the one who was to come would baptise people with the Holy Spirit.

The Baptism of Jesus (Mt 3:13-16, Mk 10:38-39, Lk 12:50, Jn 1:31-33)

But before we get to this baptism with the Holy Spirit, Jesus himself comes to John to be baptised.

Jesus baptism is a distinct, and quite unique, baptism. When Jesus arrives at the Jordan, John tried to deter him from baptism, saying, "I need to be baptised by you. Why do you come to me?"² John knew that Jesus didn't need to repent of any sin-- he was sinless. So why did Jesus insist on being baptised by John?

¹ We know the Essene community, which revered John highly, had many kinds of baptisms and ceremonial washings.

² (Mt 3:13-16)

There are two reasons that scripture suggests. The first is revelation. His water baptism serves to reveal Jesus as Israel's Messiah. That's why in John's gospel the Baptist says,

John 1:30 "...This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

And, of course, the voice from heaven affirming Jesus as God's son and the Holy Spirit's coming upon Jesus like a dove when he came up out of the water also served to reveal who he really was (Luke 3:22).

A second explanation for Jesus' insistence on water baptism is as a sign of Jesus identifying himself fully with the human race. In this sense, the symbol of water baptism also carries with it the notion of immersion as a sign of identification and solidarity. In a sense, Jesus is baptised into humanity. He becomes one with them, as he humbles himself in this action³.

So there are two commonly understood reasons why Jesus is baptised in water by John the Baptist, however I submit this action was merely symbolic. It was preparatory for his ministry and actual baptism. You see, Jesus has another baptism. A greater and more significant baptism.

Jesus makes this baptism becomes apparent in Mark 10. He is on his way up to Jerusalem when James and John ask him to grant them to sit at his right and at his left when he comes into his kingdom. That's when Jesus replies,

Mark 10:38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

What is Jesus' baptism that he is referring to here? It becomes very clear when we look at these verses in context. In Mark 10:32-34 Jesus has just foretold his crucifixion and resurrection for the third time. Immediately John and James make their request and Jesus replies, asking them whether they are able to drink his cup of suffering and be baptised with his baptism-- which is, of course, the cross. The baptism of Jesus is his cross and resurrection, which his water baptism by John prefigures.

So what is the significance of baptism for Jesus? It not only means repentance from sins, but it also means suffering and death followed by resurrection. That's why, as he approaches Jerusalem in Luke's gospel he says,

Luke 12:49 "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!

Baptism with/by the Holy Spirit (eg Acts 1:5; 1 Cor 12:13, Titus 3:5)

So in the New Testament we have John's baptism of repentance and washing from sin, we have Jesus' unique baptism into humanity and death on behalf of mankind, and third, we have Holy Spirit Baptism, which John said that Jesus would bring.

³ The 13th century Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas suggests two reasons for the baptism of Christ: "P(3)- Q(38)- A(1) ...first, it was necessary for Christ to be baptized by John, in order that He might sanctify baptism ...Secondly, that Christ might be manifested . Whence John himself says (John 1:31): "That He," i.e. Christ, "may be made manifest in Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water." For he announced Christ to the crowds that gathered around him; which was thus done much more easily than if he had gone in search of each individual..." (Aquinas, "Summa Theologica")

Christians have over recent times held divergent views on the topic of baptism with/by the Holy Spirit. Traditional Pentecostalism holds that it is second experience of empowerment for ministry, however this has been confused with Luke's language of 'Filling with the Holy Spirit'⁴.

As we have previously noted, John the Baptist introduces the language of Baptism with/by the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1:8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The book of Acts tells us that this 'baptism' begins at Pentecost. This is the obvious implication of Jesus words in Acts 1:

Acts 1:4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but ***in a few days*** you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

In just a few days, on the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, all genuine Christian believers personally become the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. Both corporately and individually, the Holy Spirit of God makes his home with Jesus' disciples. This fulfils Jesus' promise and the promise of the Old Testament (eg Joel 2:28-32). This indwelling of the Spirit continues to mark the regeneration of new believers throughout the Book of Acts.

And so what exactly does this Baptism with the Holy Spirit mean for the Christian? Paul makes it clear in his letter to Titus:

Titus 3:3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us ***through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit***, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

So, first and foremost, the Baptism by the Holy Spirit means salvation. The Spirit's activity here is what brings the Christian new life. Once we were dead in our sins and utterly unable to do anything about it, but the Christian is saved through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit-- Holy Spirit Baptism. The Spirit effectively joins us to the life of the risen Jesus, which becomes our life.

What we see here is that the Baptism by the Holy Spirit is another way of talking about becoming a Christian. The kind of Holy Spirit Baptism that the Bible refers to does not *demand* that you fall over, speak in tongues or have some ecstatic experience-- this is experience of some but not all. What the Bible *does* teach universally is that to really be a Christian, the Holy Spirit has baptised you into Jesus.

It is the way in which the Believer actually gains everything Jesus achieved on the cross. Spiritually, this is how God actually joins us to Jesus; joins us to Jesus in his death and his resurrection. This is Paul's teaching in Romans 6.

⁴ See my article "Filling(s) with the Holy Spirit", which explores the use of this phrase throughout the Bible".

Rom. 6:3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. 5 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection

The Spirit immerses the Christian into Jesus such that we become sharers in his death and resurrection. When we are baptised by the Holy Spirit, we become one with Jesus in his death-- his death becomes effective for each and every one of our sins-- yesterday, today and tomorrow. We are spiritually joined to Jesus in his death and burial and so also in his resurrection. This is how the spiritually dead live again (see Eph 2:1-5).

That's why the Spirit is also the seal of our salvation-- he kind of stamps us with the official mark of Jesus before God, That's what Paul was saying to the Ephesians:

Eph 1:13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession — to the praise of his glory.

Christian Baptism in Water (eg Acts 8:38, 9:18, 10:47, 16:15)

And to help us really grasp what this Baptism with the Holy Spirit is all about, Jesus has given us a special illustration-- water baptism. Baptising someone with water does not *do* anything itself-- it does not make anything else happen. Instead it is a symbol or a sign pointing to the unseen and spiritual reality that is true of the person being baptised. In the same way that wearing a wedding ring does not necessarily make a person married, the sign of baptism does not automatically effect baptism with the Holy Spirit (ie salvation).

When a person becomes a Christian, it is appropriate to publicly explain what has happened through water baptism. This person has died with Christ. And so, as they go under the water, we picture their joining Jesus in his death on the cross and burial in the tomb. As they come up out of the water, we picture their sharing in the resurrected life of Jesus. They share his new ascended and glorious life with God the Father in the heavenly places.

So water baptism is a picture or symbol of dying and rising with Christ, and only then as a consequence of that, we picture their cleansing from their sins. The water doesn't wash them clean-- being counted as dead with Christ does. The water doesn't give them a new life-- being joined to the risen Jesus does⁵.

Life is different today because of this baptism:

So now that we've got a handle on the four baptisms of the New Testament, it's worth considering how we live a baptised life. If you are a Christian, your life is different today because of your baptism with the Holy Spirit. Things don't just remain the same-- they can't.

The first bit of good news is that we are no longer slaves to sin. Let's look again at Romans 6, verses 6-7.

⁵ This article does not deal with the practice of infant baptism. See my article, "Why should I baptise my child?"

6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — 7 because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

So we see here that our old self was crucified so that we are no longer slaves to sin. That means that we are free NOT to sin. Before we were baptised into Jesus by the Holy Spirit, before we became Christians, we had no choice *but* to sin. We were powerless to do otherwise because we were slaves to sin. But no longer. We are free from the power, the guilt and the condemnation of sin. We have moved from death to life.

The second implication of our baptism right now is that we live the risen life of Jesus Christ. Have a look at verses 8-10:

Rom. 6:8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

So, just as Jesus does, seated at the right hand of the Father, we also live *to* God. The preposition could also be translated *unto* God. That is to say that we live *for* God, *before* God, and *to the glory of* God. Our life is an offering to God because we only live on his account. Without him we have no life.

The third implication of our Baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus starts to get very practical. The key to living this new life is to count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. Have a look again at verses 11-14 with me:

Rom. 6:11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. 13 Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. 14 For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

This is the practical bit. How do we live this new life? We do it by counting ourselves dead to sin but alive to God. It doesn't happen automatically. With the Holy Spirit's help we train ourselves to live our new reality, even while we still live this earthly life, dragging our old nature along behind us.

Let's illustrate this with a story from the 18th century, where sailing boats spent months at sea under the protective leadership of their Captain. But on one tall ship the First Mate leads a mutiny, seeking to take over the ship for his own. But this First Mate is overpowered by the Captain, tied up and consigned to the dinghy on a long rope until final justice back on shore.

In our story, God is the Captain. Satan is in the dinghy, bound, but still trying to yell instructions to the crew. He's tied up and he rants and raves from time to time, yelling instructions to the crew. But the crew-- us; we need to keep counting ourselves as deaf to his call. Instead, we listen intently for the commands of our true Captain.

That's how we treat temptation when it comes our way. Temptation still comes, but we need to count ourselves dead to it. When that urge to dishonour God by boasting or gossiping or ignoring someone comes along, we say 'No'. It actually has no power over us. We are dead-- unresponsive, completely unmoved, utterly numb-- to temptation's call. That's what we tell ourselves, that's the calculation we make, because by the power of God's Spirit within us, that's what we are.

And this is something we practice until it is a habit. As I said before, while ever we are in this life, dragging our old nature behind us in the dinghy, we continue in this spiritual conflict. But Sin is no longer our master; God is our master by grace.

And so we make progress in this new life of Christ by living a life of continual repentance, founded only on the grace of God.

Let's be clear on repentance. Repentance doesn't come by flogging ourselves until we feel bad enough and guilty enough for God to forgive us. That is trying earn salvation by the work of 'self-flagellation'. Repentance, true repentance, grows by reflecting upon, drawing upon, God's kindness towards us in Jesus.

God doesn't forgive us because we made ourselves feel guilty, because we beat ourselves up for all our failures and faults. God forgives us on account of Jesus and his death on the cross. So repentance brings a life of godliness only through grace, and not by the works of self-pity.

So here's something very important which will help us 'count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus': grace! God loves you with an everlasting love and gave Jesus' life for yours. He did that long ago. So, count yourself, reckon yourself, calculate your life now according to the reality of your baptism-- the terms of God's grace. You died with Christ and you now live his risen life with him. This is your spiritual reality so put it in to practice in every part of your life.