



to think about . . .

Who are you when you are in Christ?

Part of a community—or an individual believer only?

baptism

into Christ and/or into the Church?

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Is baptism into Christ is the same as baptism into the church, or is there reason to believe that baptism is into Christ alone and is a separate issue to the question of church membership? These questions have considerable practical importance for both the individual believer and the Christian communities. If baptism is baptism into the church, then, for new believers, their baptism is their incorporation into a specific community of faith. In other words, their decision for baptism is also a decision to join a specific church. If baptism is without reference to church membership, then new Christians need not make a choice of which group to join before they are baptised.

This issue also has importance for the Christian churches. Should they refuse to baptise those who are not prepared to join their ranks? If baptism into Christ is the same as baptism into the church, then a refusal to join the church indicates a lack of readiness for baptism and a failure to understand its true nature. If not, then the church is acting in a reprehensible manner to refuse baptism to those who are wishing to take the name of Christ, but who show no particular inclination to join a specific Christian group.

This article will examine what the Bible has to say about this important issue. It will begin by looking at the meaning that was attached to baptism when Christianity first adopted the practice, and then at some key biblical passages which show that in the New Testament baptism is baptism into Christ, it is the doorway into the Christian community, and that the new member receives gifts of the Spirit at baptism which are to be exercised within the community.

Baptism and Becoming a Jew

The background of Christian baptism is to be found in the process whereby a Gentile became a Jew in the first century. There were several parts in the process of a Gentile becoming a proselyte—a convert to Judaism. First, they would undertake instruction in the Law, and take a solemn vow to live their life in obedience to the Law. As part of this process, if they were male, they became circumcised. They then underwent baptism. This symbolised their cleansing—the process of declaring that they were leaving an unclean lifestyle, and adopting a clean one.¹ Finally, the convert to Judaism had to offer a sacrifice at Jerusalem.

John the Baptist used baptism not just for Gentiles, but also for Jews who wished to declare that they wished to turn their lives to God—to repent (Matt 3:1-12). Jesus himself received John's baptism (Matt 3:13-17), and Jesus' disciples continued the practice of baptising while Jesus was still with them (John 4:1-2). In adopting this practice they were adopting some of the ideas about and practices of baptism which already existed with Judaism.

One can see several of these elements of Jewish proselyte baptism in Christianity. Potential converts to Christianity devoted themselves to instruction in the teachings of Jesus (Acts 2:42-43). Paul several times refers back to the teaching that he gave his own converts (e.g. 1 Cor 11:23; Gal 3:1). Indeed, although the matter is still debated vigorously, one of the reasons put forward for writing the four Gospels is that one or other Gospel was the instruction given to new converts to Christianity.² By their baptism, early

Christians declared their repentance, the turning around of their lives. Nor should it be overlooked, that in so doing, they became incorporated into the body of believers. They were baptised into the "body of Christ."

Baptism Into Christ

According to Gal 3:27-28, "As many as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer

"For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into the one body"

male and female; for all of you are one in Christ". In this passage, Paul underlines the essential unity of all believers, because they were baptised into Christ. Therefore, fundamental distinctions of human existence have ceased to have meaning: there is no longer any difference between Jew and Gentile, male and female. Also prominent is the concept of community. We are one, but that is because we are "in Christ." 1 Cor 12:13 speaks of our baptism into the one body. Thus baptism is baptism into a community. Christians are not baptised as individuals to stand alone.

Baptism the Doorway into the Church

Throughout the New Testament, baptism was the doorway into the Church. Take for example the story of the first

large group of believers to join the Church, as it is recorded in book of Acts. Acts 2:1-47 recounts the miraculous giving of the Spirit to the first believers, and the results of their ability to preach in other languages. Many were convicted of the truth of their message, and asked the appropriate way in which to respond (v. 37). Peter told them to repent and become baptised (v. 38). The repentance spoken of by Peter was rather like that spoken of by John the Baptist: a complete reorientation of their life.

It is noteworthy that Luke describes the resultant baptisms in the following terms: “that day about three thousand persons were added” (v. 41). The question naturally arises, to what were they added? They were added to the community of believers, with whom they joined in breaking bread, and from whom they received instruction (v. 42). In the thought world of the New Testament, baptism was the doorway into the church. In the normal course of events, there is no possibility of baptism without fellowship with fellow followers of Jesus.³ Throughout Acts we note that whenever Christians are approached with requests to join their movement, the response is invariably “become baptised” (e.g. Acts 2:38; 22:16).

Baptism, the Gifts of the Spirit, and the Community of Believers

Immediately upon Jesus’s baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). Throughout the rest of the New Testament there is the expectation that a close link exist between baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit. The apparent exceptions in Acts are presented in such a way as to underline the fact that they are exceptions to the regularly expected pattern of events.⁴ When Paul discovers disciples who had not received the Holy Spirit when they became disciples, he immediately lays his hands upon them so that they might receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-6). Water baptism without Spirit baptism lacked an essential component of Christian baptism. But so did Spirit baptism without water baptism. When the gifts of the Holy Spirit were poured out on

Cornelius and his family, Peter naturally thinks that they should also be baptised in water (Acts 11:34-47). This link between Baptism and the Spirit is made elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, Paul can say, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into the one body” (1 Cor 12:13).

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What makes this important for the discussion here is that the gifts of the spirit were given, not to the individual, but to the community of believers. In 1 Cor 12:4-26, Paul shows that the different gifts work together in the body of the Church, just as the different parts of the human body, though different, work together. “The gifts he gave were ... to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11-12).

Conclusions

Within the New Testament, baptism is marked by its association with the concepts of cleansing, conversion, the reception of the Spirit, and initiation into the community of faith.⁵ Baptism takes its prominence from both the example and command of Jesus. Jesus was baptised “to fulfil all righteousness,” and he

told his disciples to go throughout the entire world, and after making disciples, to baptise them, and to teach them. The book of Acts shows this taking place, while in Paul’s letters we find the concept of baptism used as the basis for how a Christian should live.

What, then, has baptism to do with the Christian church? Is baptism into Christ the same as baptism into the Church? If we were to give a biblical answer to this question, we would have to say that in the New Testament baptism is the doorway into the church. By baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ. This body is visibly expressed in the church. Baptism into Christ is indeed the same as baptism into the church. ■

Bible quotations from NRSV.

1 This aspect of Christian baptism is particularly highlighted in William G. Johnsson’s book, *Clean: The Meaning of Christian Baptism* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1980).

2 E.g. Harald Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings: A Study in the Limits of “Formgeschichte”* (London: Mowbray, 1957), passim, esp. pp. 10-24; E. von Dobschütz, “Matthew as Rabbi and Catechist,” in *The Interpretation of Matthew* ed. Graham Stanton (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 19-29.

3 “In the Church of NT times the ceremony of baptism was the only and the indispensable means of becoming a member of the Christian *ekklesia* [church].” So Aland Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1958), 337.

4 James D. G. Dunn argues this case in detail in the published version of his PhD dissertation, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970).

5 See also Robert K. McIver, “Joyful Commitment: Reflections on the Meaning of Baptism,” *Adventist Review* Jan 23, 1997, pp. 16-19 [112-115] and “Baptism,” in section 5 of R McIver & R Roennfeldt, *Meaning for the New Millennium* (Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 2000).

For reflection . . .

- List some similarities and differences between the process of being baptised as a Jew or as a Christian.
- What evidence does the article give to support the idea that early Christians were baptised into a community?
- What aspects of the believer’s faith journey are symbolised in the act of being baptised?
- Is baptism into Christ the same as baptism into the Church? Support your answer with some evidence.