***RELIGION***

***HISTORY OF BAPTISM***

**Pre-Christian History of Baptism**

Before the introduction of the Christian baptism through John the Baptist, water was used for cleansing. It was used for ritual cleansing as it was associated with spiritual cleanliness since the first civilization in Mesopotamia onwards.

In Mesopotamia, water was first sanctified and then sprinkled upon a person. It was a purification ritual to prepare for the main rite. The purification would be done outside or away from the sanctified place, or temple. One would only enter the temple after purification.

In Egyptian civilizations, babies were washed (it’s not clear if they were immersed or just sprinkled) in water, to clean impurities of the womb from them. In the Greek world, there is some evidence that bathing in a certain sanctuary would grant immortality. However, more commonly, water was used for purification in preparation for a larger and more specific ritual.

In Mosaic law, which is the starting point of Judaism, ritual cleansing was also a practice. Water was used to cleanse both people and things. Other stories, like that of a prophet telling a soldier to dip seven times to clean himself of leprosy, are also part of Mosaic tradition.

**The Christian History of Baptism**

How is Christian baptism different? When we study the different water-related rituals before the gospel accounts of John the Baptist, they are usually purification or initiation rites. While others have more significance to the belief system, none are the central rite of a system of religious belief.

**John the Baptist**

John the Baptist is mentioned in the gospels, the accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to biblical baptism he was sent to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. John called for the Jewish community to repent of their sins (possibly disobedience to the Mosaic Law), and be baptized to show that repentance.

Before Jesus Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, baptism was more of a preparation for the heart. John the Baptist was declaring the coming of Christ, and calling for repentance before Christ would come to baptize them “with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” It was not a cleansing or initiation, but an outward sign of a personal decision.

However, baptism was not any kind of required rite for the apostles of Christ. When Jesus Christ calls his disciples, he literally calls them, and they follow him. No baptism is described as part of the process.

At this time, baptism had a specific meaning. It came from the Greek *baptisma* or *baptismos*, which meant to dip or to immerse. When John the Baptist started calling for people to repent and be baptized, there was no confusion about the meaning. Anyone who went to John the Baptist was literally immersed into water, and that was baptism. Eventually, this would lead to controversy.

Baptism entered the Christian tradition through what is sometimes called the Great Commission.

### The Great Commission

According to the gospel accounts, particularly the gospel according to Matthew, Christ told his disciples to “go” and “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This is why baptism is a central part of the Christian faith. In later times, in the 1600s, this instruction was called the Great Commission by the Protestant side.

After Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, baptism took on a more specific role. In the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome, he explains baptism as the rite by which a Christian participates in the death and resurrection of Christ. It is not purification or initiation, but a central rite in itself. It is the only rite mentioned in the Great Commission.

### The 1st century and Gnosticism

In the first 100 years of the church, the method of baptism was straightforward. Jesus Christ had been baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Therefore, immersion in flowing water was generally accepted. However, from this time onwards, Christians already were discussing if baptism was necessary for salvation from sins, or if it was simply a public display of conversion to Christianity.

An anonymous writing dating from 65 CE at the earliest, called the Didache, shows how the rite had evolved even in that first century. Immersion was the main means to baptize, if possible. If not possible, water could be poured three times over the head. The name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were to be invoked. By this time, church leaders had instituted ritual preparations such as fasting. But the immersion itself was the central rite.

Besides the lasting controversy about how necessary baptism was, the Gnostic Christians and their adoption of baptism also emerged in the first century. The Gnostics saw the material or earthly life as accidental and sinful, and separated the Father from Jesus Christ. However, they accepted Christ as a savior, and baptism as an initiation into Gnosticism. Both Christianity and Gnosticism grew side by side, both baptizing their believers.

### The 2nd century, Mithraism, and infant baptism

By the second century, the rite of baptism was generally accepted. In the same century, a non-Christian religion developed writings on baptism as purification.

Mithraism was a religion that worshiped a god called Mithras. They had an inner circle and initiation rites that had to do with water. Water for purification was so important to them that some would carry water to purify anything they touched in daily and public life. However, it was not a central rite.

While later dissidents of Christianity tried to discredit it as an offshoot of Mithraism, there is no evidence that Mithraic baptism existed before the 2nd century AD. Practitioners of Mithraism were in the same areas of the growing church, making the influence of one on the other fully possible.

Infant baptism also appeared in the 2nd century. Irenaeus, a Gaulish theologian, writes about infants being saved in Christ, along with every other age group. His contemporary Tertullian, a theologian in Northern Africa, explicitly supports allowing children and young people to voluntarily ask to become Christians. In this case, infant baptism would not apply because their decisions would not be voluntary.

### The 4th century and the sacrament of baptism

In the early 4th century (301 to 400 AD), the Emperor of Rome, Constantine, was converted to Christianity. Supposedly it was because Constantine and all his army saw a cross in the sky while on their way to attack Gaul. Below it, roughly translated, were the words, “conquer by this sign.”

With such a prominent and powerful political leader as part of the church, formal agreements on sacraments (like baptism) were easier to lay out and enforce. Heresies such as Donatism, Arianism, and Peliagianism were also easier to identify, condemn, and ban. Baptism also became a political tool by which Constantine could offer Roman rule and justice to those of other religions.

### The 5th century, Saint Augustine, and original sin

Infant baptism came back to the forefront with the writings of Saint Augustine. Saint Augustine wrote that every human being on earth was born with the sin of the first man Adam, called original sin. In this sense, even infants and newborns were sinful.

Because of this teaching, infant baptism was continued by many Christians. Those who believed that baptism was a requirement for salvation hoped to save the infants’ souls by baptizing them as soon as possible. Infant mortality rates at the time were very high.

From then on until the Protestant Reformation, there were no major controversies over baptism, in general. The detractors from infant baptism were the declared heretic Walden and Albigensian sects in the 12th and 13th centuries. While the Albigensian sect was so large it called forth a holy crusade and years of inquisition, it was no longer an issue by the 16th century (1501-1600).

### The 16th century, the Protestant Reformation, and the Anabaptists

In 1517, German priest Martin Luther put up his “95 Theses” protesting the sale of indulgences, issuances from the Pope that would lessen one’s stay in Purgatory. In 1521, instead of achieving changes in the Catholic Church, Martin Luther was excommunicated.

The Protestant Reformation, which grew out of Martin Luther’s “reformer” mindset and attitude, began to develop its own doctrine. Contrary to what some may think, Martin Luther supported infant baptism. He believed in the doctrine of original sin, and that baptism was necessary to cleanse them of that sin.

Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss theologian and priest, led the Reformed movement in Switzerland. He was a contemporary of Martin Luther and also believed in infant baptism. However, rather than focusing on original sin, he focused on the “future faith” of an infant born into a Christian community. He believed that with the parents and godparents present to teach the child about faith, the child’s Christianity would be inevitable.

However, Zwingli’s Swiss contemporary, John Calvin, did not believe in infant baptism. Calvin believed that children born in a Christian family did not need to be baptized. They only needed to be initiated, since they were already technically born into the family of God.

The Anabaptists, or “Rebaptizers,” were a group within the Reformers. They specifically stood for adult baptism only. Since they were currently in the Catholic Church, all the Anabaptists had been baptized as infants. They all voluntarily got baptized again. This was considered sacrilegious, because it meant they were going against their first baptism.

While the term “Anabaptists” no longer applies, since its followers are no longer being “rebaptized,” it was a big enough movement that a number of Christian sects trace their origins to the movement. The Mennonites, certain Baptist congregations, and the Amish all derive their doctrine from the Anabaptist movement.

### The 17th century and the Baptist movement

In the 17th century (1601-1700), the Reformation reached the Church of England, which had broken away from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534. However, until the Reformation, the Church of England still generally followed the sacraments and doctrine of Roman Catholicism, with the exception of its teachings on divorce.

The “reformers” in the Church of England were two kinds: Puritans and Separatists. Puritans sought to clean the Church of England of corruption. Separatists, on the other hand, wanted to create completely new congregations.

One group of Separatists left England for Amsterdam in the Netherlands. While they set up their own church, they connected with a Mennonite movement. The Mennonites, who were Anabaptists, could very well have shared their doctrine with the Separatists. The leader of the Separatists movement, John Smyth, eventually preached the doctrine of adult baptism for believers who made a “confession of faith.”

## Modern Debates on Baptism

Until today, baptism is a church sacrament that different religious groups disagree on. Infant baptism is practiced in some, while only adult baptism is practiced in others. The question of whether or not baptism is necessary to salvation is part of a continuing debate since the first century after the life of Christ. The long and detailed history of baptism shows how baptism continues to be an important point of discussion in the present-day Christian religious groups.