

# The Development of the Baptismal Rite in the Christian Church

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## I

Before Christ the Jews had the practice of receiving proselytes into the temple through a ceremonial washing. Most scholars agree that this rite influenced the earliest Christian practices in regard to baptism. The Jewish proselyte baptism seems to have developed about a hundred years before Christ. It was in turn taken from the many pagan ceremonial washing rites prevalent at that time. The Christian word βαπτίζομαι is the same word used by the Jews in Greek-speaking lands for their rite.

Instruction preceded the proselyte's reception as a convert to Judaism. This instruction included questions about why the person wanted to change his religion. There were lessons on the Ten Commandments and on the duties, privileges, rewards and penalties of the new faith. Although the first Christian converts were themselves Jews and needed little instruction in Old Testament Scripture before baptism, the earliest Greek converts likely submitted to a procedure of instruction similar to that of the Jewish proselytes. A lengthy instructional period preceding baptism is not mentioned in most Scriptural examples because those about to be baptized usually knew the Old Testament. For all there was the question of intent or the specific request on the part of the convert to be baptized.

The mode of baptism already in the Jewish rite was the application of water by immersion. There was a preference for although no command for running water. Preceding baptism there was to be a confession of sins. The noted scholar Jeremias quotes one of the Jewish oracles: "Bathe the whole body in ever-flowing streams and reach your hands to heaven, praying forgiveness for those things that you have done."<sup>1</sup>

A non-liturgical consideration which nevertheless affects the administration of the liturgical rite of baptism is the question of infant baptism. Although the evidence of Scripture alone is the basis for our understanding of the command, necessity and efficacy of infant baptism, we may for the sake of understanding the liturgical elements of the accompanying rite look at the predecessor of our infant baptism in the Jewish proselyte baptism. Jeremias makes a convincing case<sup>2</sup> for infant washing and even the immersion of infants on the basis of Jewish custom. Ancient sources from Jewish literature mention specifically that children were baptized. The Jewish washing was performed in addition to the circumcision of male children on the eighth day. The Old Testament practice of circumcision and the comparison which St. Paul makes of baptism to it in Colossians 2:11,12, makes it untenable from a historical point of view that children were not baptized.

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<sup>1</sup> *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-40.

## THE JEWISH PROSELYTE BAPTISM

Instruction

Question of intent; or, Request for Baptism

Application of water by immersion (usually running water)

Prayer for forgiveness

From the Holy Scriptures we may piece together a very simple ceremony surrounding Holy Baptism. John the Baptist began preaching in the wilderness before Jesus' public ministry. Although John's baptism did not require formal instruction, his constant preaching of repentance prepared the hearts of those who offered themselves for the washing of forgiveness. The discourse which Jesus had with Nicodemus indicates to us that there is a rebirth which accompanies baptism. This presupposes that the individual who requests baptism has been prepared with instruction both in the law and in the gospel.

The examples of actual baptism in the New Testament offer us other details of what was included in this simple ceremony. The events on Pentecost Day, the baptism of the Jailer at Philippi, and the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch confirm for us that instruction preceded baptism. The amount of instruction no doubt was determined by the candidate's previous knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures: On this foundation was added the preaching of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Scriptures.

Christ's universal command, Peter's inclusion of children in mentioning the recipients of the blessings of baptism in Acts 2, and the examples of the baptisms of households leave no doubt that infants were also baptized. They were included whenever Christian parents brought them. The exact mode of baptism is never specifically mentioned. Volumes have been written on the word βαπτίζω to the end that we can establish nothing more definitely than that it means simply to apply water to wash. We simply trust that if the efficacy of the sacrament depended upon a particular mode, that mode would have been included in the command to baptize. It wasn't. The baptisms in the New Testament which mention where the baptism took place mention the running water of the Jordan river. Neither the baptism of Jesus nor that of the Ethiopian allow us to say definitely that they were immersed, although that was very likely the mode of their baptisms.

What happened immediately after the baptism? The Bible does not give us an answer that we can apply to a ceremonial form. It is significant however that the practice of the Pentecost Christians after baptism and the mention by Paul of the significance of baptism in Romans 6 both indicate consequent devotion to prayer, Scripture study, participation at the Lord's Supper, and a life of good works.

## THE APOSTOLIC BAPTISMAL RITE

Instruction in the Old Testament Scriptures and of Christ

Indication of repentance; Request for baptism

Baptism in the name of Jesus by immersion or pouring in running water

Early if not immediate participation at Lord's Supper

### III

From the history immediately after the Apostolic Age we receive witness from the earliest extant Christian writings that baptism was an established practice in the church. From Tertullian (who wrote about the year 200) we learn that the baptism of infants was also a regular practice of the church. Children were being brought to church by their believing parents.

Some considerable changes in the administration of the sacrament of baptism were made in the early church. The changes were additions to the simple rite of the apostles. From the *Didache* we get some idea of the earliest known sub-apostolic ceremony: "Concerning baptism, baptize in this way. Having first rehearsed all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, in living water. But if you

have not living water, baptize into other water; and, if thou canst not in cold, in warm. If you have neither, pour water thrice on the head in the name, etc... Before the baptism let the baptizer and the baptized fast, and others if they can. And order the baptized to fast one or two days before..."<sup>3</sup>

The writings of the *Didache* cannot be dated, but a very early writer, Justin, gives this account of what happens after baptism about 150 A.D.: "After thus washing him who has been persuaded and has given his assent, we bring him to those that are called the brethren, where they are assembled to offer prayers in common, both for ourselves and for him who has been illuminated for all men everywhere... We salute one another with a kiss when we have ended the prayers. Then is brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of water and wine."<sup>4</sup>

The significant additions to the first simple rite are many. We sense more formality in the ceremony. Instead of the one-to-one contact of the apostles in their missionary work we are now speaking in terms of congregations, officiants, and applicants for baptism. The additions in the service itself include the more formalized instruction which preceded baptism for adults. Candidates had to be able to recite basic formulas of belief, simple creeds. Baptisms are performed according to the formula of the Triune God given in the Savior's words of institution in Matthew. Allowances are made for circumstances in which there is no running water and no cold water. We are led to believe then that the earliest practices in regard to the mode were either symbolic or practical and had no real bearing on the essential purpose and working of the sacrament. Pouring water over the head three times was the custom.

After the ceremony the newly-baptized would be welcomed into the congregation of brethren and be invited to participate in the Lord's Supper. Prayers said by him and the brethren and for him and the brethren and for all men. were said immediately after the washing.

### THE SUB-APOSTOLIC BAPTISMAL RITE

Formal instruction  
 Repentance exhibited in fasting  
 Application of water three times by pouring  
 Baptism in the name of the Triune God  
 Prayers  
 Kiss of Peace  
 (Participation with congregations in Lord's Supper)

### IV

Hippolytus provides us with a somewhat later view close to the beginning of the third century. His requirements of the candidate for baptism are stricter. He includes a list of occupations which are forbidden those who request baptism. He forbade ladies having affairs with their slaves and showed skepticism about the vocation of a public school teacher. Catechumens were separated from the believers in the worship service and, were not to participate in the kiss of peace. The catechumens took lengthy instruction which culminated in testimonies of their faith, daily exorcisms, and finally examination before the bishop.

Catechumens were usually received at Easter or Pentecost. The night before their baptism they were exorcised once more by the priest who sealed them. "The night is spent in vigil. They gather by the water, wherever it is, when the cock crows. The little children will be first undressed, and if they are too young to answer questions, their parents or relations must be ready to answer for them."<sup>5</sup>

The officiant next prays for the entrance of the Holy Spirit into the water. He gives thanks over the oil of thanksgiving and over the oil of exorcism. A presbyter and deacon are involved in receiving the confession of

<sup>3</sup> *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> George Every, *The Baptismal Sacrifice*, pp. 36, 37.

faith. “The candidate was required to ... confess the sum of the apostolic faith in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Apostles’ Creed, therefore, is properly the baptismal symbol, as it grew, in fact, out of the baptismal formula.”<sup>6</sup> After baptism the oil of thanksgiving is given to those who come out of the water. They put on their clothing, receive a blessing from the bishop, and have their heads sealed with oil. All then join in a common prayer; the kiss of peace, and proceed to the Eucharist.

In addition to what we receive from the writings of Hippolytus, two other church fathers of the latter years before Nicea provide many details for the rite of baptism. Tertullian adds that in connection with the exorcism the candidate was required to renounce the devil and all evil and give himself to Christ. “This act of turning from sin and turning to God, or of repentance and faith, on the part of the candidate, was followed by an appropriate prayer of the minister, and then by the baptism itself into the triune name, with three successive immersions in which the deacons and deaconesses assisted. The immersions consisted in thrice dipping the head of the candidate who stood nude in the water.”<sup>7</sup> It appears as though the pouring referred to in the *Didache* was common practice in many parts of the church during Tertullian’s time, even though immersion remained popular in the warmer climates. The baptistries of churches in this era reflect the fact that every baptism, whether by immersion or pouring, was a “walk-in” occasion. Cyprian, writing in the third century, defended baptism by different modes, stating that it was the faith of the recipient and the power of God that made baptism valid.

If the above ceremony of baptism already seems more elaborate than the simple rite of the sub-apostolic age, it must also be mentioned that before the Council of Nicea many other appendages had been attached to the services. Such signs as the crossing of the forehead and breast, the giving of milk and honey, the placing of salt in the mouth or ears of the child; and the lighted candle faith the white robe all had their origins in this early period of history. The first mention of sponsors comes in the writings of a church father of this period, Tertullian. It was evidently an outgrowth of the long practice of infant baptism, the use of witnesses at the ceremony, and the desire to secure Christian training for the child subject to the scope of parental duty.

### **THE PRE-NICENE BAPTISM RITE**

Instruction of the Catechumens

Fastings, exorcisms, confessions

Final examination and night of vigil

Gathering at pool, baptistry, or running water

Invocation of Holy Spirit

Thanksgiving and Exorcism

Presbyters and deacons hear confessions of faith, ask questions

Parents or sponsors answer for infants, Adults recite creed

Renouncing of devil and all evil

Prayer by the bishop and anointing

Baptism by triple immersion in the name of the Triune God

Benediction

Common Prayer and laying on of hands

Kiss of peace

(Eucharistic prayer and Lord’s Supper)

### **V**

<sup>6</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. II, “Ante-Nicene Christianity,” p. 248.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Schaff, *Loc. Cit.*

The practice of the rite surrounding baptism was fairly uniform before the fourth century. The ceremony which Tertullian outlined in *De Baptismo* was used widely. Already then however the Eastern church had a somewhat richer ceremony. The East first began the practice of holding the renunciation and the profession of faith in the outside court or vestibule and coming to the baptistry proper for the baptism. The Trinitarian formula in baptism began in the east, whereas in Rome baptism in the name of Jesus was still used after Nicea. In general the Eastern rite could be characterized as being more ornate than its Western equivalent. Doctrinal differences between East and West about the efficacy of baptism, its mode, and its proper officiants marked the beginning of a greater rift which was to follow. These same differences over baptism were a part of the controversy and struggle which resulted in greater power for the bishop of Rome.

After Nicea a wide disparity in all practices including baptism arose in the new far-flung borders of the church's influence. A scholarly study<sup>8</sup> outlines six major and distinct baptismal rites in the two centuries following Nicea. The Syrian baptism rite is derived from the *Acts of Thomas*. Basil the Great, who lived between 340 and 450 A.D., provides us with enough information to set together the baptism ceremony in use in Asia Minor and in Constantinople. The rite used in Egypt and Ethiopia is found in the prayer book of the Bishop of Serapion (c. 350).

Those orders of baptism more influenced by the Western tendencies evident already before Nicea were the ones in Rome, Milan and Northern Italy, and Spain and Africa. The Roman order is that which Hippolytus gives us, from which we have already pieced together a part of the pre-Nicene rite. The orders in northern Italy exhibit a tendency to accept the more ornate ceremonies of the Eastern churches. The rites of Spain and Africa reflect the influence of Rome.

In tracing the precursors of the baptismal rite in use among us today our interest is primarily in the rite used by Rome. The order given by Hippolytus for baptism was reinforced in its basically simple form by two later Roman bishops, Innocent I (402-419) and Leo I (440-461). It may be represented by the example which follows. It is surprising for its simplicity. It indicates that the West more than the East was a pioneer church. Many of its outposts were not established, large churches, with impressive basilicas in which to carry out an elaborate ceremony. This simplicity in the West however was short-lived.

## THE BASIC WESTERN BAPTISMAL RITE

Instruction  
 Renunciation  
 Profession of faith  
 Blessing of the water  
 Three-fold immersion  
 Anointing with chrism  
 Signing with the cross

## VI

In the sixth century a rite known as the *Scrutinies* developed. It took place before baptism. The *Scrutinies* occurred in seven special masses in the last weeks before Easter. Except for this development in the instruction before the rite of baptism there was no essential change in the ceremony. Two liturgical writings of this era, *The Sacramentary of Gelasius* and the *First Roman Order* indicate that there were no significant additions to the Baptism rite of Leo I.

The present Roman rite is a combination of the *Ordo ad Catechumenorum faciendum* and the actual baptismal ceremony. The final form of this ceremony did not take place until Pope Paul V in 1624. The Roman

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<sup>8</sup> "Baptism," *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. I.

church had two different rites for baptism, one for infants, and one for adults. The present Roman rite for the baptism of adults follows the ancient rite most closely. There are many variations to this formula which developed at different times during the middle ages. Variations appeared also in different geographical locations within the Roman church. Yet we may say that the form which follows is the ceremony of the Roman church at the time of the Reformation.

### **THE ROMAN BAPTISMAL RITE**

#### At the door

Preparation by the clergy (Candidates wait outside)  
 Reading of Psalm 16  
 Name of candidate read at church door  
 Renunciation of the devil  
 Confession of faith  
 The Three-Fold Blessing (Breathing in face)  
 Signing of the cross on the forehead and breast  
 Prayer (Accompanied by signature of the cross)  
 Laying on of hands  
 Blessing (Accompanied by the administration of salt)  
 Another laying on of hands  
 Exorcism

#### In the Church

Confession of faith  
 Laying on of hands  
 Exorcism  
 Symbolic opening of the ears  
 Renunciation  
 Anointing

#### In the baptistry

Baptism proper with pouring in the name of the Triune God  
 Confirmation

## **VII**

Almost all of the reformers made drastic changes in the Roman baptism liturgy. Luther was an exception. In spite of the fact that he knew it would cause great dissatisfaction among those who sought a more dramatic break with Roman practice, Luther left the Roman baptismal rite basically unchanged. "His *Taufbüchlein, Verdeutscht*, of 1523 was practically a translation of the Liturgy of Baptism then in use in Wittenberg."<sup>9</sup> More of a surprise than Luther's moderate approach to writing his own baptism ceremony was his strong preference for the mode of immersion in these early years. "Although Luther touched upon the subject of Baptism frequently, the first detailed treatment of this sacrament appeared in the sermon of 1519. Luther concluded that the word "baptism" meant to immerse completely and became, therefore, a perfect

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<sup>9</sup> P. E. Kretzmann, "Our Formula for Infant Baptism," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, February 1933, p. 121.

symbol of the drowning of sin. As he matured, he realized that the outward form was not essential since baptism simply symbolized the washing away of the sins of the sinner.”<sup>10</sup>

It was Luther’s study of history as well as his thorough involvement with the Scriptures that made him in God’s hands the greatest of the reformers. As Luther began to de-emphasize the necessity of the mode, he gained also an appreciation from earliest Christian history for simplicity in the formula of baptism. In 1526 Luther came out with a slightly revised form of his 1523 baptism rite. It contained omissions of parts of the Roman rite which were obviously not integral to the symbolism or the sacred nature of the sacrament. He omitted completely the Roman practices of the exorcism of salt and of the opening of the ears. He modified and shortened the exorcisms at the beginning, and he placed the reading of the Lord’s Prayer into the service proper. The Lord’s Prayer was read to the baptized person in the Roman ceremony after the completion of the rite.

Luther’s order of baptism was widely copied and imitated. “Its influence was immeasurable. The numerous independent *Kirchenordnungen* of the sixteenth century, almost without exception and with but the slightest changes, give it as their form for the administration of the Sacrament: The same is true of practically every agenda that makes any claim to Lutheranism. Even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the disposition was just as strong to cling to the form which Luther had adapted from an order depending upon the most ancient sources.”<sup>11</sup>

## LUTHER’S BAPTISMAL RITE

### Outside the church

Exorcism  
 Sign of the cross on the forehead and breast  
 Prayers  
 Second Exorcism  
 Reading of Mark 10:13-16  
 The Laying on of Hands  
 The Lord’s Prayer

### At the Font

Salutation  
 Renunciation  
 Profession of faith (Questions to sponsors)  
 Request for baptism by sponsors  
 Baptism by thee-fold immersion  
 Giving of the Chrisom-cloth

## VII

There was an almost immediate response to Luther’s first baptismal rite in 1523. In Straßburg Bucer published a radically simplified order for baptism. All of the exorcisms were omitted. Luther’s 1523 order included the giving of the chrisom-cloth and the lighted taper at the close of the service. Bucer’s did not. The Straßburg service included the reading of Matthew 16 instead of Mark 10. There was baptism by pouring instead of the Luther-preferred immersion. Sponsors were merely instructed to pledge themselves to bring up the child to be Christian. The questions to the sponsors in the name of the child were omitted. His order began

<sup>10</sup> E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, pp. 447-448.

<sup>11</sup> P. E. Kretzmann, *Op. Cit.*, p. 122.

with an exhortation closing with prayer and included the Apostles' Creed. As radical as it was however, Bucer's form for baptism contains some elements of the baptismal form we have in our Lutheran Agenda today.

Bucer's formula for baptism influenced Hedio and Melanchthon. It was imitated by the Reformation at Cologne in 1543. Next to Luther's the Straßburg service was the most influential form for the rite of the administration of baptism. All of the Reformed church except that in Switzerland itself was influenced by it. Most significantly it was the form adapted by the Anglican church for their ceremony. Through the Anglicans Bucer's rite has made somewhat of an effect felt also on American Lutheranism.

### **BUCER'S STRABBURG BAPTISMAL RITE**

Exhortation ending with prayer  
 The Lord's Prayer  
 The Apostle's Creed  
 Reading of Matthew 16  
 Pledge of sponsors to raise children Christian  
 Baptism by pouring  
 Prayers

Another Reformation era rite which deserves attention is Zwingli's. Zwingli's baptism formula, like Bucer's, was a thorough recasting of the ancient rite as it had been passed down by Rome. Zwingli's order is even more simple and bare than the 1525 Straßburg form. It omits the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. Zwingli's order is important because it gives us a preview of the kind of influence that rationalism exerted on the Lutheran order in later years.

### **ZWINGLI'S BAPTISMAL RITE**

Introductory formula  
 Questions to sponsors  
 Prayer  
 Reading of Mark 10:13-16  
 Request for Baptism  
 Baptism by Pouring or Sprinkling  
 Giving of the chrisom-cloth

## **IX**

Luther's order for baptism has had a lasting influence on the church which bears his name. All of the old Lutherans, the evangelicals, held very closely to it. There was a time when rationalism and reformed tendencies removed the exorcisms from the service. There were even instances of the removal of the questions to the child which were answered by the sponsors and the omission of the renunciation. The reform which took place from 1810-1820 however restored Luther's old forms with the exception of the exorcisms.

The objection to the questions to the child was raised again in a major liturgical forum in the nineteenth century. "The Dresden Liturgical Convention of 1854, composed of representatives from Bavaria, Hanover, Wurttemberg, and both Mecklenburgs, unanimously adopted Luther's form. Even the Prussian Union Church in 1894 adopted this as its first form. In only one major point do we find a divergence, namely, concerning the questions addressed to the sponsors. Some few church orders omitted these questions entirely, the formula



addressing itself to the child, while in a number of cases there was some uncertainty as to whether the questions as used ought to be addressed to the sponsors or to the child.”<sup>12</sup>

The heritage of the English order of baptism in use in our Lutheran churches has its roots in Saxon Germany. The *Old Saxon Agenda*'s rendition of Luther's baptismal formula was the basis for the rite used by the Saxon immigrants in this country. Although the Reformed influence can be seen in this service, it is basically Luther's. The *Kirchen-Agende* published by St. Louis in 1902 allows its source in the words, "Zusammengestellt aus den alten rechtgläubigen Sächsischen Kirchen-Agenden."<sup>13</sup>

Our present English formula is only very slightly revised from this 1902 German ceremony. The English service allows for a choice of three prayers instead of the two in the *Kirchen-Agende*. The exhortation to the sponsors has been simplified in English and the long introduction to the Lord's Prayer omitted. Our present service has a prayer at the end, whereas the German service ended with the blessing and *Pax*.

### OUR PRESENT BAPTISMAL RITE AND ITS SOURCES

Exhortation	(Reformed in place of Luther's Exorcism)
Signature of the cross on the forehead and breast	(Luther)
Prayer	(Luther)
Reading of Mark 10:13-16	(Luther's, but his preceding exorcism omitted)
Exhortation to Sponsors	(Reformed)
Lord's Prayer	(Luther's, though his preceded by laying on of hands)
Questions to sponsors, Confession, Renunciation Request for baptism	(Luther's, though his included salutation in coming to the font)
Baptism by Pouring	(Luther preferred immersion)
Blessing and <i>Pax</i>	(Reformed)
Prayer	(Reformed: Luther had giving of chrisom-cloth here)

It is remarkable when reviewing our present baptismal formula to notice that it is almost point for point that which Luther published in 1526. The only really significant change is the omission of the exorcisms. It is more impressive to remember that Luther arrived at his order for the rite of baptism by studying ancient practices, and removing only that which did not find its root in the early church, such as the use of salt and the opening of the ears. How little Luther's rite and ours today embellish the basic Western rite for baptism in wide use after Nicea.

These considerations have to be important when we look to the future anticipating and even planning for change in our liturgical formula for baptism. P. E. Kretzmann made a comment a generation ago that might give some guidance to the direction we take: "There is no denying the fact that constructive criticism ought to be given a hearing; for there is no justification for stubbornly adhering to a traditional formula just because it is

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<sup>12</sup> P. E. Kretzmann, *Loc. Cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *Kirchen-Agende*, Title Page.

ancient and contains no outright false statements. Hence we ask, What must a formula, such as that used for the Sacrament of Baptism for children, include in order to be liturgically acceptable? The following points may be considered requisites for a complete formula: Motivation, or reasons, for administering the Sacrament, specific doctrinal basis for Baptism in general and for infant baptism in particular, the act itself in full conformity with the words of Christ's institution, acceptance of the baptized infant into the Church."<sup>14</sup>

My personal opinion is that present concern for the revision of the rite for baptism is motivated on the parish level by a legitimate wish for brevity in formal worship services, more than by a real dislike for the formula in common use. After studying the origin and the development of the rite, I hope that our ceremony for baptism in its present form will continue to find frequent use.

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<sup>14</sup> "Our Formula for Infant Baptism," *Loc. Cit.*

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