

# BAPTISM THEOLOGY

A QUICK ROMP THROUGH WHAT WE ALL 'KIND OF KNOW'  
ALREADY

# WHY DO CHRISTIANS BAPTIZE?

## SOURCES OF A PRACTICE

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- OLD TESTAMENT: RITUAL PURIFICATION
- INTERTESTAMENTAL - ESSENES, PROSELYTE BAPTISM (DUBIOUS OR CONTESTED SOURCES)
- JOHN THE BAPTIST: ALL FOUR GOSPELS, BOOK OF ACTS - 'BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE' VS 'BAPTISM WITH THE SPIRIT' - DOMINANT THEME: REPENTANCE FROM SIN, PREPARATION FOR GOD'S COMING AMONG US
- JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES ASSOCIATED WITH THIS MOVEMENT BEFORE HIS MINISTRY

# EARLY N.T. THEOLOGY - PAUL

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- FOR PAUL, THE SOURCE OF CHRISTIAN HOPE AND SALVATION IS OUR LIFE "IN CHRIST" - OUR STORIES ARE GRAFTED INTO HIS STORY - WHICH ENDS IN RESURRECTION
- BAPTISM IS THE OCCASION AND SYMBOLIC MOMENT WHEN A PERSON BECOMES 'IN CHRIST' SO JOINS THE BODY OF CHRIST AND TAKES A SHARE IN HIS FUTURE
- THIS OCCURS WHEN A PERSON PUTS THEIR FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST AND IT IS TRULY WORLD-TRANSFORMING
- PAUL USES IMAGES OF DEATH / RESURRECTION TO DESCRIBE THIS CHANGE SYMBOLIZED IN BAPTISM

# BAPTISM IN THE GOSPELS

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- JOHANNINE THEME: 'BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT' - DISTINCT FROM, BUT ADJACENT TO PAULINE DEATH/ RESURRECTION THEME - HAS MORE TO DO WITH JEWISH/ CHRISTIAN POLEMIC THAN GRAND THEOLOGY, BUT IT PLACES GOD IN CHARGE OF THE PROCESS
- BAPTISM/SUFFERING THEME: 'I HAVE A BAPTISM WITH WHICH TO BE BAPTIZED' - BAPTISM AS SALVIFIC SUFFERING BY JESUS - LINK TO PAULINE THEOLOGY (MARK 10:35-45: 'ARE YOU ABLE TO BE ... BAPTISED')
- MATTHEW'S ACCOUNT OF JESUS' COMMAND TO BAPTISE 'IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT' - PROBABLY HAS THE LONGEST IMPACT OF ANY TEXT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT!

# BAPTISM IN ACTS

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- BAPTISM IS THE KEY INITIATION EVENT IN ACTS - IT'S HOW PEOPLE ENTER THE COMMUNITY OF CHRIST
- BAPTISM IS A SPIRIT-FILLED EXPERIENCE LINKED TO COMING TO FAITH IN CHRIST
- BAPTISM CAN, ON OCCASION, GO 'WRONG' - USUALLY WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT SEEMS TO BE ABSENT (ACTS 8, ACTS 19) WHEN SOME KIND OF INTERVENTION INVOLVING LAYING ON HANDS IS REQUIRED
- HOUSEHOLDS, NOT JUST INDIVIDUALS, ARE BAPTIZED
- BAPTISM IS 'IN THE NAME OF JESUS' (CF. PAUL 'IN CHRIST')

# BAPTISM IN LATER NEW TESTAMENT WRITING

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- TENDENCY TO FUSE EARLIER THEMES (EG. 'THE WASHING OF REGENERATION' - TITUS 3:5)
- THE GROWTH OF TYPOLOGY (EG. 1PET 3:21 - 'BAPTISM, WHICH [THE ARK] PREFIGURED, NOW SAVES YOU...' AND THE LINK TO CIRCUMCISION IN COLOSSIANS 2:11-13)

# SHIFTS OF CONTEXT SHIFTS OF MEANING

HOW BAPTISM CHANGED WITH THE EXPANSION OF THE  
ANCIENT CHURCH

# NEW TESTAMENT TO THE THIRD CENTURY

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- THE NEW TESTAMENT PAINTS A PICTURE OF CONVERSION LEADING ALMOST IMMEDIATELY TO BAPTISM
- BY HIPPOLYTUS (AD 215) THIS HAS BECOME PRECEDED BY LONG PREPARATION (CATECHUMENATE) - EMPHASIS ON 'WORTHINESS' OF THE CANDIDATE, PREPARATION AND EXORCISM

# THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURIES

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- EXPANSION OF THE CATECHUMENATE: RE-CAST AS A MYSTERY INITIATION RITE DESIGNED TO PROVOKE FEAR AND AWE (DARKNESS, SACKCLOTH, GOAT-SKIN, SEVERE FASTING, ETC.) - BAPTISM IS AN ORDEAL WHICH SORTS OUT THOSE WHO ARE READY FROM THOSE WHO ARE NOT
- DELAYING BAPTISM DUE TO FEAR OVER POST-BAPTISMAL SIN - DEATH-BED BAPTISMS (EG. CONSTANTINE)
- THE 'RUSH FOR THE FONTS' AS CHRISTIANITY BECOMES STATE-APPROVED

# THE PERIOD OF STABILITY

BAPTISM IN THE WEST AFTER CONSTANTINE

# FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY

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- INFLUENCE OF AUGUSTINE'S THEOLOGY IN THE WEST: BAPTISM REMOVES ORIGINAL SIN WHICH WE ALL INHERIT FROM ADAM THROUGH CONCEPTION
- THE EFFECTS OF CHRISTENDOM: HOUSEHOLDS UNIFORMLY BAPTIZED, SO ONLY BABIES ARE CANDIDATES (GELASIAN SACRAMENTARY, 8TH C.)
- CONTRACTION (AND EVENTUAL REMOVAL) OF THE CATECHUMENATE
- BAPTISM NOW MORE A SACRAMENT OF GRACE THAN A SACRAMENT OF WORTHINESS
- FEAR OF DYING UNBAPTISED MADE IT UNIVERSAL

# AROUND THE REFORMATION

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- BAPTISMAL PRACTICE WAS NOT A POINT OF CONTENTION BETWEEN CATHOLIC AND MAINSTREAM PROTESTANT (THE AUGUSTINIAN INHERITANCE UNITED, RATHER THAN DIVIDED THE TWO)
- ANABAPTISTS - PRIMARILY USING A DIFFERENT ECCLESIOLOGY - ARTICULATED FAITH CONSTITUTED THE CHURCH OF GOD, SO BAPTISM SHOULD MARK THIS
- AFTER THE REFORMATION: BAPTIST TRADITION MARKED A THEOLOGICAL DEPARTURE, NOT A RESPONSE TO CULTURAL CHANGE - CHRISTENDOM STILL (MOSTLY) RULES O.K. (ALTHOUGH REVIVALS AMONG GROUPS ALIENATED FROM CHURCH CHALLENGES THIS)

# THE GRADUAL BREAKING-DOWN

BAPTISM IN POST-CHRISTENDOM

# THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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- UNTIL 1900, THE PICTURE HAD NOT SIGNIFICANTLY CHANGED FOR 1500 YEARS! CHRISTENDOM MODEL: EVERYONE SOCIALLY STRUCTURED INTO THE CHURCH
- BY MID-20TH CENTURY, SIGNIFICANT ABSENTEEISM
- BY 1970S, PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH A MINORITY INTEREST (IN CHURCH ATTENDANCE TERMS)
- INDIVIDUALISM - MASSIVE IMPACT ON CHRISTIAN INITIATION...
- IGNORANCE - LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF CHRISTIANITY SO NO CONTEXT TO FIT TEACHING ABOUT BAPTISM

# INITIATION TODAY

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- BAPTISM: OUTWARD VISIBLE SIGN OF INWARD SPIRITUAL GRACE
- GRACE - HOW DO WE PERCEIVE IT? -- FEELINGS AND CHOICE (INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY)
- WITHOUT A LINK TO THE PERSONAL/INDIVIDUAL, RITES ARE REGARDED AS INAUTHENTIC OR MEANINGLESS
- SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND SOCIALLY-DETERMINED IDENTITY VERY WEAK - ALMOST NO EFFECT SOMETIMES
- SOCIAL CELEBRATION - 'OLDE-WORLDE' TRADITIONALISM - NOSTALGIA WITHOUT MUCH MEANING, PRESERVING LINK WITH THE PAST OR FOLLOWING A FASHION

# QUOTE

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"TAKING OUR KIDS ALONG TO CHURCH TO BE  
CHRISTENED WOULD HAVE BEEN A STEP OF SUCH  
MASSIVE HYPOCRISY THAT EVEN I WAS NOT PREPARED  
TO TAKE IT"

JOHN PEEL, FAMILY TIES RADIO 4, 1997.