

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord  
Jesus Christ  
January 11, 2015  
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The New Testament does not give direct and explicit evidence of Christ's institution of Baptism. Of course we have His detailed instructions for the Eucharist. But in the pages of the gospel Baptism has no equivalent to the Last Supper. There is also no record of Our Lord having baptized anyone. The Scriptures just say that He did. And of course we have His teaching! In the Great Commission Christ says, "Go, teach, and baptize." The Scriptures record the subsequent preaching and ministry of Saints Peter and Paul about baptism. In it there is not the slightest hint the apostles were creating *novelties*. And their directions about baptism caused no surprise to those who heard them.

In the Jewish Church the Law provided ritual washings. These were called *lustrations*. These were always self-administered and could be repeated. Any one else involved in a lustration was only serving as a witness. Nothing in these washings signified ethical purification anticipating a coming judgment. And as used for those *converting* to Judaism, these washings were simply a ceremonial cleansing.

John the Baptist offered something different! His was a baptism of *repentance*, and it was *one time only*. John administered this baptism personally, presumably after hearing a confession of sin, and as preparation for a coming judgment. The recipient of John's baptism was inaugurated into the remnant community of those expecting the coming Messiah. It was John's desire that the whole nation of Israel be prepared this way, one person at a time. What made John's baptism unique was this *ethical significance*. It aimed to present a renewed nation ready for the New Covenant. It prepared souls for the time the elect would be separated out from the ungodly and gathered into God's storehouse. That is the very image John himself used. So when Our Lord Jesus went to the Jordan River He was preparing to go down into the water to receive a baptism of repentance. It was *not* a rite of initiation. Jesus did not become the first Christian! He was not "joining the Church!"

Christ's Own baptism in the Jordan River is only slightly related to what happened to others. Christ's baptism is His obedience to the Father. It was a sign of the

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perfect offering made by the Perfect Son and made necessary by the sins of the world. When Christ spoke of His Own baptism He was referring to His *Passion*.

So the great event which changed John's baptism into the Christian Sacrament of Baptism was not John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit awaited the Death and Resurrection of Christ. All four evangelists imply what happened in the Jordan River *foreshadowed* and *summed up in advance* Christ's mission as Son and Servant of God. His Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, made Pentecost possible with its universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God. When a child receives Christian baptism he is baptized into the *Death* and *Resurrection* of Jesus Christ. He becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit Whose indwelling was made possible by the once-for-all perfect sacrifice of the God-made-man. In the atoning work of Christ the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist (prefigured in the Jordan and at the Last Supper) are effectively established and become the common meeting place whereby the Lord Jesus, seated at the Right Hand of the Father, also dwells in His disciples.

To recap then: there are at least *four distinct Biblical concepts* using the word baptism. Jewish cleansing, John's baptism of repentance, Christ's baptism (which is His *Passion*) and the Christian sacrament whereby the effects of Christ's atonement are applied to a soul initiated into the community of faith.

At the Jordan Jesus received John's baptism of repentance, not that He needed to repent! John recognized this and said, "I need to be baptized by You." On the bank of the river that day the Immaculate Son of God queued up amid sinners desiring a better way. Do not sentimentalize the scene to think Christ stood among ignorant sinners. Unrepentant souls would not have found their way to the Jordan or dared to present themselves to John the Baptist! Christ was and is God's merciful presence of love for *penitents*. The people queued up with Jesus were *penitent sinners*. It was in this way Isaiah's lovely prediction has its fulfillment, "That He was numbered among the transgressors."

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In every way Jesus has shown us *the way*. At the Jordan He did everything we must do except He did not say, “Bless me, father, for I have sinned.” For Him that would have been untrue. So here is a powerful image you and I must keep indelibly in our minds. Christ Jesus is very near to you and me as we kneel today or any day, sorrowing for our own sins, and seeking to make things right with God. The Lord is standing quietly and patiently right next to all penitents.