

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday after The Epiphany:
The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ
January 10, 2021

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The New Testament does not give direct and explicit evidence of Christ's directions on Baptism. His institution of the Eucharist is well documented. But in the pages of the gospels, Baptism has no equivalent to the Last Supper. There is also no record of Our Lord having baptized anyone. Scripture just says that He did. Of course we have the Lord's teaching, and His great commission to "Go, teach and baptize." Beyond that, we have to look at the subsequent preaching and ministry of Saint Peter and St Paul, where we find no hint they were creating novelties, but were passing on the directions of the Lord Jesus on the matter. The directions to be baptized caused no surprise to those who heard St Peter's sermon at Pentecost.

In the old Jewish Church the Law provided ritual washings. These were called *lustrations*. These could be repeated, and were always self-administered. Anyone else involved served only as a witness. Nothing in these washings signified ethical purification or anticipated coming judgment. And when 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 not repeated. He administered this baptism personally, presumably after a confession of sin. And it was indeed in preparation for coming judgment. John's baptism inaugurated the recipient into the remnant community of the coming Messiah. It was John's desire the whole nation of Israel, one person at a time, be prepared this way. So John's baptism was unique in its ethical significance, presenting a renewed nation ready for the New Covenant, and preparing for the final judgment by which the elect would be separated out from the ungodly, and gathered into God's storehouse. That is the image John used.

Christ's own baptism by John is only slightly related to what happened to others in the Jordan River. Christ's baptism is *His obedience to the Father*: a perfect offering, in His suffering and death, made necessary by the sins of the world. When Jesus speaks of His Own baptism He is referring to His *Passion*.

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So the great event, which effected the Christian Sacrament of Baptism, was not John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan. Rather, 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. The Lord's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension made Pentecost possible, and the universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God.

When a soul receives Christian Baptism, he is baptized into the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and 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 as they are in the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan) are effectively established and become the common ground whereby Christ dwells in His disciples.

So there are at least *four distinct Biblical concepts* using the word "baptism." It is important to keep them clear. 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 himself recognized this and said, "I need to be baptized by You." On the bank of the river that day the Immaculate Son of God stood in line with sinners desiring a better way. There was no social distancing! And these were not unrepentant or ignorant sinners. Souls in those conditions would not have found their way to the Jordan or fooled John the Baptist! Christ was, and is, God's merciful Presence of love *for penitents*. That is an image you and I need to keep indelibly in our minds. Jesus Christ is very near to us as we kneel today, or any day, sorrowing for our own sins, and seeking to make things right with God.