

Baptism and Chrismation

By **Fr. Lawrence Farley** in **Sacraments and Rituals**

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We have noted that the service of baptism has undergone a long and profound development. In the early days of the Church's history, those desiring to become Christians were first enrolled as catechumens, and continued in that state for some months or even years. Their baptism came as the culmination of a lengthy preparation. In the Christian east, the children of Christians were often enrolled as catechumens in infancy and later baptized as children. Eventually, however, the practice of baptizing children of Christians during their infancy came to prevail in the east as it had in the west, and our current baptismal service reflects this practice of infant baptism. We have already examined the rites of [churching](#) and of the [making of a catechumen](#) (which latter contained elements more properly associated with baptism). Here we will examine the rite of baptism itself.

From the days of the apostles, the rite of baptism was liturgically two-fold, consisting of a triple immersion in water and an anointing with oil, often accompanied by a laying on of hands. In the west, the immersion became separated from the latter rite, which took on a liturgical life of its own as "the Sacrament of Confirmation." In the east, the original integrity of the total rite has been preserved, with the immersion and the anointing remaining part of a single service. We can distinguish the baptismal immersion from the anointing (and call the latter "chrismation"), but the baptismal service consists of both elements.

This baptismal service is the way that people have always become Christians, ever since the days of the apostles. Evangelical Protestants later developed a ritual of "asking Jesus into your heart" or "saying 'the Sinner's Prayer,'" (though they are unlikely to refer to it as a ritual). For them, baptism comes as a later ceremony, the purpose of which is to witness to this prior act of conversion. One becomes born again, they would say, by asking Jesus into one's heart; baptism (sometimes called "water baptism") is merely a public proclamation that this conversion has in fact occurred. Baptism thus simply makes an announcement; it is like putting an ad in the paper, except that one uses water and not newsprint. In this understanding, baptism is not sacramental, in the sense that it does not "do" anything itself or change the person being baptized, but rather simply witnesses that the baptized person has already asked Jesus into his heart. Because infants cannot ask Jesus into their hearts, infants of course should not be baptized. Baptism is thus only for adults who have been converted, and is sometimes referred to as "believer's baptism."

The New Testament has a rather different understanding of baptism than this Evangelical Protestant one. For the writers of the New Testament, baptism is the way that God bestows the new birth and the forgiveness of sins, and the new birth, in the few times it is mentioned in the New Testament, is always linked with baptism. Thus, the Lord says to Nicodemus that to enter the Kingdom of God, one must be born again through water and the Spirit (John 3:3-5). The water is clearly the water of baptism, given that the context refers to John and the Lord's disciples baptizing (see v. 22f). On the Day of Pentecost, when asked by the crowd how they can be saved, Peter replies, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). When Paul wants to convert, Ananias says to him, "Why do you wait? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His Name" (Acts 22:16). Paul himself writes that baptism means being "buried with Him into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the

glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). He writes that in baptism we “put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27), and that God saved us “through a bath of rebirth” (Titus 3:5). He writes that the Church has been “cleansed by the washing of the water in the Word” (Ephesians 5:26). Not surprisingly therefore, Peter writes that “baptism now saves you” (1 Peter 3:21)—not by the mere water alone, but because through this water the Church makes its sacramental appeal to God for a good conscience.

The teaching of the Lord and His apostles is clear: through baptism, one is offered forgiveness of sins, rebirth, newness of life, and Christ Himself. Baptism is not a later witness that we have been saved; it is how we become saved. This inseparability of baptism with salvation is presupposed in the phrase found at the end of Mark’s Gospel: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16).

Through triple immersion in water in the Name of the Trinity, God gives the candidate a new birth to eternal life and the cleansing forgiveness of sins. Through the anointing with chrism (i.e. with fragrant and perfumed oil), God gives the candidate the Holy Spirit with His gifts. The single service of baptism contains both of these moments and realities. In the early third century, Tertullian witnesses to this understanding of the two parts of the single initiation. In his little book *On Baptism*, he writes about the sequence of immersion and anointing: “Not that in the waters we obtain the Holy Spirit, but in the water we are cleansed and prepared for the Holy Spirit” (chapter 6). This distinguishing of function between the immersions and the anointing is why the anointing can be detached from the service if pastoral necessity demands and administered by itself as the Sacrament of Chrismation.

We see, therefore, that the sacramental mystery of baptism is the instrument which Christ uses to bestow new life upon the candidate who comes seeking to become His disciple. But is Christ willing to bestow this new life and give His Spirit to infants also? The norm, of course, is for candidates to come on their own. But what if they do not come on their own as adults, but are brought as infants? Does one have to ask for oneself in order to enjoy the grace of God, or can others, such as faithful and devout parents, ask on behalf of their children? Though baptism is essentially the sacrament of conversion, the Church has always said that Christ is always willing to give new life and the Holy Spirit to infants also.

Christian baptism has its historical roots in John the Forerunner’s baptism, and John’s baptism is rooted (many say) in Jewish proselyte baptism. This latter baptism was often given to all the members of a household. When the head of a Gentile household wanted to convert to Judaism, his entire household would usually follow his lead. The males of the household would be circumcised, and then after a bit, all in the entire household—men, women, children and even infants—would be baptized to wash away the stain of the Gentile world. They were then considered to be Jews. The point is that such baptism was given even to infants, and it is this baptism which John used as his model, and which Christ in turn used as His. Not surprisingly then, the apostles were prepared to practice household baptism (see Acts 11:14, 16:15, 16:33), which would have included infants. Origen, writing in the early third century, records that the Church received from the apostles a tradition of baptizing even infants.

Is it really so hard to believe that Christ’s grace extends even to the youngest? He who said that the Kingdom of God belonged to such as children and who blessed even infants (Luke 18:15-16) is willing to pour His grace into the hearts of the youngest who are brought to Him. If John the Baptizer could be filled with the Holy Spirit even while yet in his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15), it must surely be possible for already-born infants to receive the Holy Spirit as well. Obviously, as they mature, they must treasure the gift given to them and seek to grow in the Holy Spirit in order to finally be saved, just as adults must seek to grow and cultivate the baptismal gift they were given. But the necessity for growth after baptism does not mean that grace was not already freely given in baptism. Of course grace was freely given; that is what “grace” means.

