

Why Be Baptized?

Baptism



- What is baptism?
- Jesus' teachings
- History and methods of baptism
- Old Testament symbolism in baptism

ROSE
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A close-up photograph of water splashing, with several droplets suspended in the air above a pool of water, creating a dynamic and refreshing visual.

Why Be Baptized?

Baptism is one of the most important practices in the life of the church. The need for baptism is something that most Christians recognize. Jesus emphasized the importance of baptism when he commanded his disciples to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Baptism reminds us of

- Jesus' death and resurrection
- Our relationship to God and one another through the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Committed Christians interpret baptism in different ways, but most Christians agree that baptism

- is central to the Christian faith;
- is not optional but a commandment;
- is often a way for people to show in public their commitment to God;
- unifies Christians as members of the same body;
- has no ultimate significance apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

Baptize

The term *baptism* comes from a Greek word. The verb *baptizo* means "to cover in water, wash, dip, baptize."



What Happens During Baptism?

Although baptism ceremonies may look quite different from group to group, there are more similarities than differences.

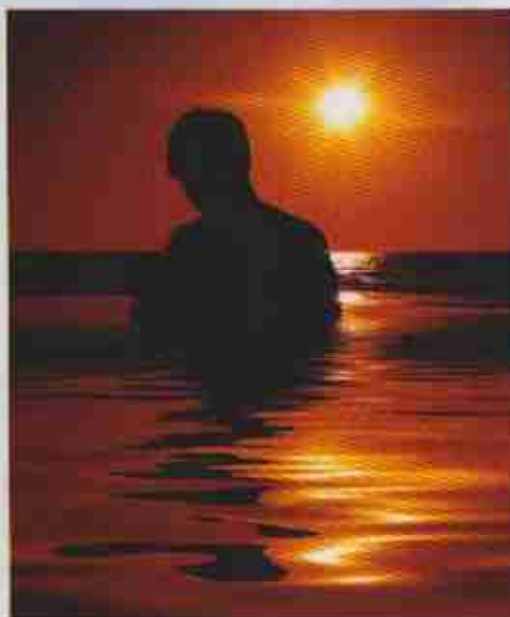
1. Water is always present, whether it is in the form of a natural body of water, a baptismal font, a baptistery, a pool, or simply a bowl of water.
2. A church leader asks a few questions to give opportunity for persons involved in the baptism to profess their faith outwardly, then asks the support of those present. In the case of infant baptism, those questions are for the parents and others present to make certain that the child will have Christian examples, support, and instruction to guide the child toward an eventual profession (public expression) of faith.
3. The leader sprinkles, pours, or immerses the person being baptized and says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."



Method of Baptism

Different methods are used in baptism—some groups sprinkle water on the forehead, others pour water from a pitcher over the whole head, and others dip or immerse a person's whole body in water.

- Those who practice believers' baptism believe that the practice of immersion (being completely covered with water) more fully displays the symbolic burial of the believer's old life. As believers go under and emerge from the water, they identify themselves with Jesus' sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4).
- Other modes of baptism developed in the early church—such as pouring (affusion) and sprinkling (aspersion)—are more practical during times of persecution, and also with infants. As a result, pouring and sprinkling are usually connected with churches that practice infant baptism and with places where Christianity is illegal.
- See pages 8–10 for historical information.



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Believer's Baptism vs. Infant Baptism

One of the main points on which Christian groups differ is about *who* can be baptized. The following table clarifies the emphasis in perspective that each tradition places on its understanding of baptism.



Note the difference in emphasis. Both traditions agree that the act of baptism itself does not save a person. Salvation comes through Christ alone by faith (Galatians 3:26–28; Ephesians 2:8–9). Christians disagree about whether a person must be able to communicate a desire for baptism and an understanding of its meaning (sometimes referred to as the “age of accountability”).

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Believer's Baptism	Infant Baptism
Emphasis on faith as a human response to God's grace	Emphasis on faith as a gift from God
Believer who trusts	God who acts
Obedience and faith of believer	Command and promise of God
Believer's witness to the world	Covenant and covenant community
Old Testament model of sacrifice	Old Testament model of circumcision

Those who advocate *believer's baptism* refer to Bible passages that reveal recognition and repentance as a sign of readiness for baptism, such as:

Acts 2:38

Peter replied, **Repent and be baptized**, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:41

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Acts 8:12

But **when they believed** Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Those who advocate *infant baptism* point to covenantal promises that include children (Genesis 17:7) as well as instances in Scripture where entire households—including children and slaves—were baptized based on the faith of the head of the household, such as:

Acts 16:32–33

Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then **immediately he and all his family were baptized**. (See also Acts 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16.)

Acts 2:38–39

Peter replied, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off**—for all whom the Lord our God will call.

Early Debate

Some of the earliest writings from the church fathers show that a **debate over baptism for believers vs. infants** was underway within the first hundred years of Christianity's beginnings.

Tertullian (AD 145–220), early church leader, contended that baptism was for believers, arguing that a **conscious choice** should precede baptism. On the other hand, Cyprian (AD 200–258), bishop of Carthage in North Africa, supported **infant baptism**, which was becoming a dominant practice in some areas.



Underlying the issue of believers' vs. infant baptism is the question of whether baptism is *primarily* about the believer personally identifying with the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ, or whether it is *primarily* about God initiating the believer into the covenant community. (Note: Both traditions include the other view; the distinction is made to show emphasis only.) Below are descriptions of the Old Testament models upon which each tradition is based.

The Old Testament Models

Sacrifice	Circumcision
Sacrifice was a conscious act of repentance for sin	Circumcision was the sign and seal of being initiated into God's covenant people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification with the sacrifice for sin • Individual's conscious response to God is crucial. • The faith of the believer connects one to God, not the symbolic act alone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign and seal of initiation • Included entire community • Individual's faith not crucial, as symbol points to God who gives faith • Individual, personal faith will follow God's action in covenant

Sacrifice was a conscious act of repentance for sin and thus, only believers in the God of Israel could bring a sacrifice to the altar of God. In sacrifice, the believer was to be identified with the death of the animal given on behalf of sins. Understood in this way, baptism is seen as identification with the death of Christ (Romans 6:3–4). In both the Old Testament act of sacrifice and the New Testament act of baptism, it is faith that connects the believer to God.

Since **circumcision** was about God's command and promise in covenant relationship, it involved entire families and nations and included not only adults but also infants. The covenant ceremony included sacrifices and thus pointed to the need for cleansing and faith in God's actions on behalf of believers (Exodus 13:1–16; Leviticus 12:1–8). It also brought the individual into a covenantal relationship that made the need for sacrifice clear.

In circumcision, the immediate faith of an infant was not crucial since the effect of the symbol was to point to God who commands, promises, and gives faith in covenant relationship. Paul connected circumcision with baptism in Colossians 2:10–12: "You were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, ... having been buried with him in baptism." (Circumcision took place eight days after birth.)



"Baptism in the River." Postcard of a river baptism in New Bern, North Carolina, around 1900.

By looking at how the church has practiced baptism over the centuries, it is possible to understand the current variety of views about baptism.


Where Do the Differences Come From?

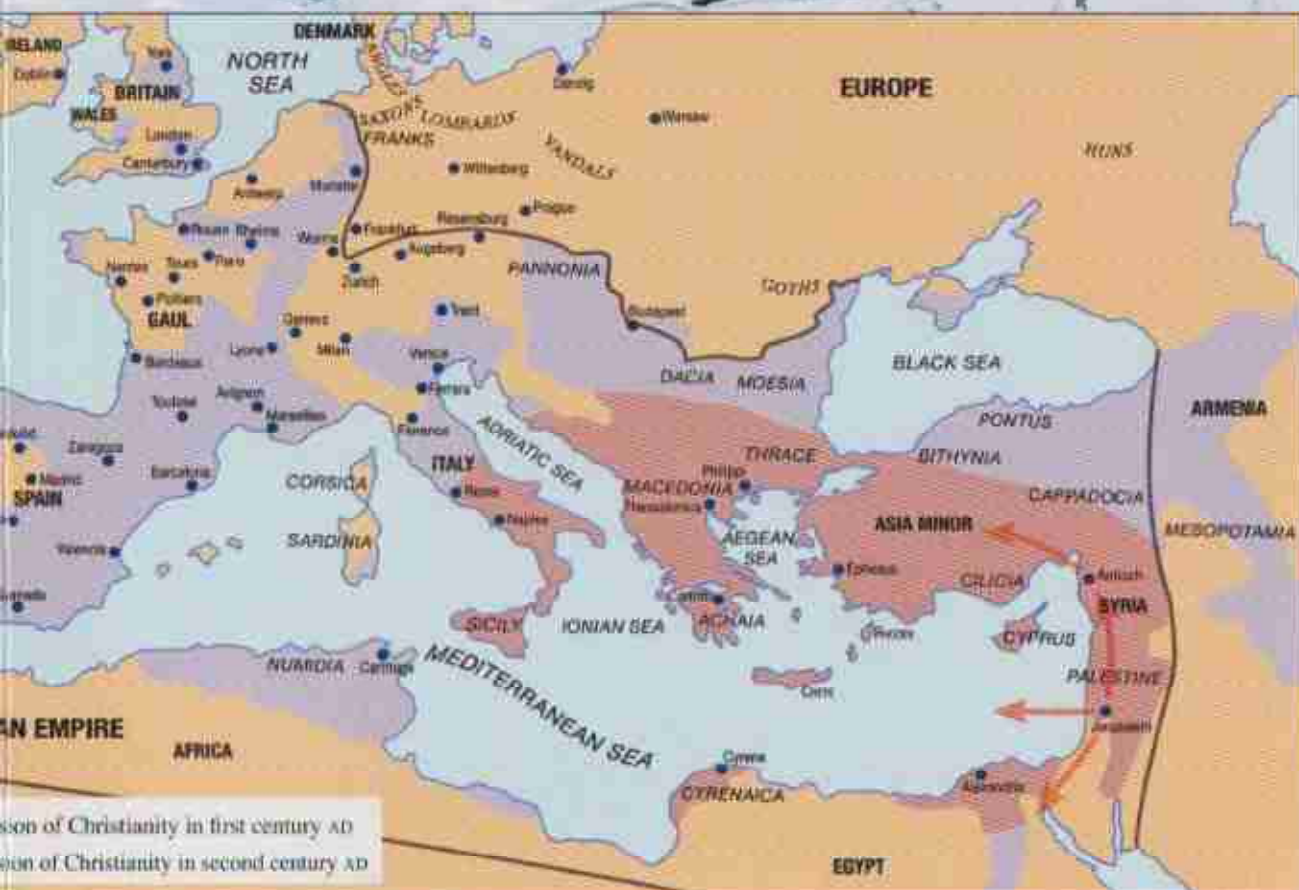
Growth of the Church

As the early church took root in different places in the Roman Empire, different traditions developed about baptism.

The church grew somewhat like a plant (Matthew 13:31–32). The phases of growth may be outlined in three stages:



The Early Church (around AD 1–500)	The Middle Church (around AD 500–1500)	The Modern Church (around AD 1500 to today)
<p>Marked by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid expansion similar to the rapid growth from seed to shoot seen in plants. • Time of great danger when persecutions by Roman rulers and religious authorities threatened to destroy the tender plant (Matthew 13:1–23). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite early threats, the church consolidated and grew into a mature tree. • Many different peoples and cultures found a place in the church's various branches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The church grew, broke open, and scattered its seeds throughout the world. • The first split took place between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox branches (AD 1054), but an even greater scattering occurred at the Reformation (c. AD 1500).



Scriptural Roots

During the growth of the church, baptism's various Scriptural roots were emphasized at different times.

Initiation: The word comes from a root meaning "to enter in." Those who are initiated into the church enter into the life of Christ's body.

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."—Matt. 28:19-20

See also: Acts 2:41; 8:12, 36-38; 1 Cor. 12:13

Identification: The word comes from a root meaning "to treat as the same."

Those who are identified with Christ inherit God's riches through Christ (Ephesians 2:6-7), as children of God, because Christ identified with us by being treated as sinful.

"Or don't you know that all of us who were

baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."—Romans 6:3-4

See also: Gal. 3:26-27; Col. 2:9-14; 1 Peter 3:21

Infusion: The word comes from a root meaning "to pour into." Those who have been infused have had the Holy Spirit and his power poured into them. Many biblical passages mention the Spirit's involvement in the lives of believers.

"When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."—Acts 8:15-17

See also: Matt. 3:11; Lk. 24:49; Acts 1:5; 2:1-4; 8:15-17; 10:44-47; 11:15-16; 19:1-6; 1 Cor. 12:1-31

One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism (Ephesians 4:4-6)

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The Spirit of God has an end and goal for believers—to transform us into the image of Christ (Romans 12:1-2). We may be works in progress, but we are God's work (Ephesians 2:10).

The words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians are a humbling reminder that baptism is an external symbol of our unity as believers. Our baptism, our faith, and our Lord unite us into one body: the church.

Jesus' desire for his church is revealed in his prayer for all believers in John 17:23, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

—John 17:23b



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Methods of Baptism Throughout History

Historically, the method of baptism is related to the meaning

Tradition	Meaning
Initiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meaning centered on the water as a sacramental symbol of God's cleansing.
Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The act of immersion symbolizes identifying with Christ's death and burial, while rising out of the water symbolizes resurrection and eternal life.
Infusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Infusion of the Spirit's power is highlighted.

g and symbolism of the ordinance.

Mode

- Mode of baptism is not critical; any method can be used.
- The symbolic application of water is crucial.
- Methods needed to be flexible during times of persecution.
- Emphasis is on outward expression of inward faith through immersion.
- One of the main meanings of the Greek word *baptizo* is "to cover with water."
- The activity of the Spirit is more important than the specific mode of baptism.



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Perspectives Throughout History

	INITIATION	IDENTIFICATION
The Early Church (before AD 500)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baptism is a corporate act of initiation into the community of God. Baptism is seen as the act and sign that the Holy Spirit is planting faith and working in the life of the new baptized. God initiates the person (1 Corinthians 12:13). Baptism is a group act and may include clans, tribes and families, infants through adults on the model of circumcision (see page 4). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baptism is an individual act of faith and personal identification with Christ. Baptism is seen as a personal act of faith that expresses the repentance and conversion of believers as they identify with Christ (Colossians 2:12). Baptism is an individual act of faith and is therefore to be restricted to believers who have professed their faith (see page 4).
The Middle Church (around AD 500–1500)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baptism as a corporate act of initiation becomes the dominant view. The expansion of the church and the end of persecution pushes this majority view to the forefront as the church pursues a group identity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification through baptism is minimized as churches pursue unity and consistency of teaching. At this time, the emphasis on group identity rather than individual identity makes this view secondary.

INFUSION

- Baptism is God's act of **infusion** of power for ministry.
 - Baptism is seen as the act of receiving the Holy Spirit sent by the Father and the Son to infuse the believer with power for ministry (Acts 1:8).
 - Baptism is an act of both God who gives his Spirit and the believer who receives the gift of the Spirit. Only those who can make use of the gift show the evidence of the Spirit's baptism.
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- The infusion tradition is minimized early, becoming associated with heretical groups.
 - Montanism, a heresy that emphasized ecstatic prophecy, may have understood baptism in terms of infusion.

The Modern Church (around AD 1500 to today)

- Baptism in this tradition is retained by the Reformed, Anglican, and Roman Catholic denominations.

Note:

The act of baptism itself does not save a person. Salvation comes through Christ alone by faith (Galatians 3:26–28; Ephesians 2:8–9).

- Identification becomes the focus among Anabaptists and other Protestant bodies in the free church tradition, and the Greek Orthodox Church.
- The fragmenting of the tradition of initiation in the Reformation allows for the re-emergence of the tradition of identification.
- With the rise of individualism and personal choice, this view flourishes among independent church groups.

- The tradition of infusion is downplayed at the time of the Reformation, but appears intermittently.
- The scattering of the church results in the tradition of infusion resurfacing slowly and sporadically.
- The rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (late 1800s to present) brings this view to the church. Many such groups, however, identify infusion with the “second blessing”—usually demonstrated through speaking in tongues—rather than with water baptism (Acts 8:14-17).
- Other churches today believe that the Holy Spirit’s power is given upon conversion or water baptism, and that believers simply need to be aware of this power from God and use it.

Baptism and Water Cleansing in the Bible

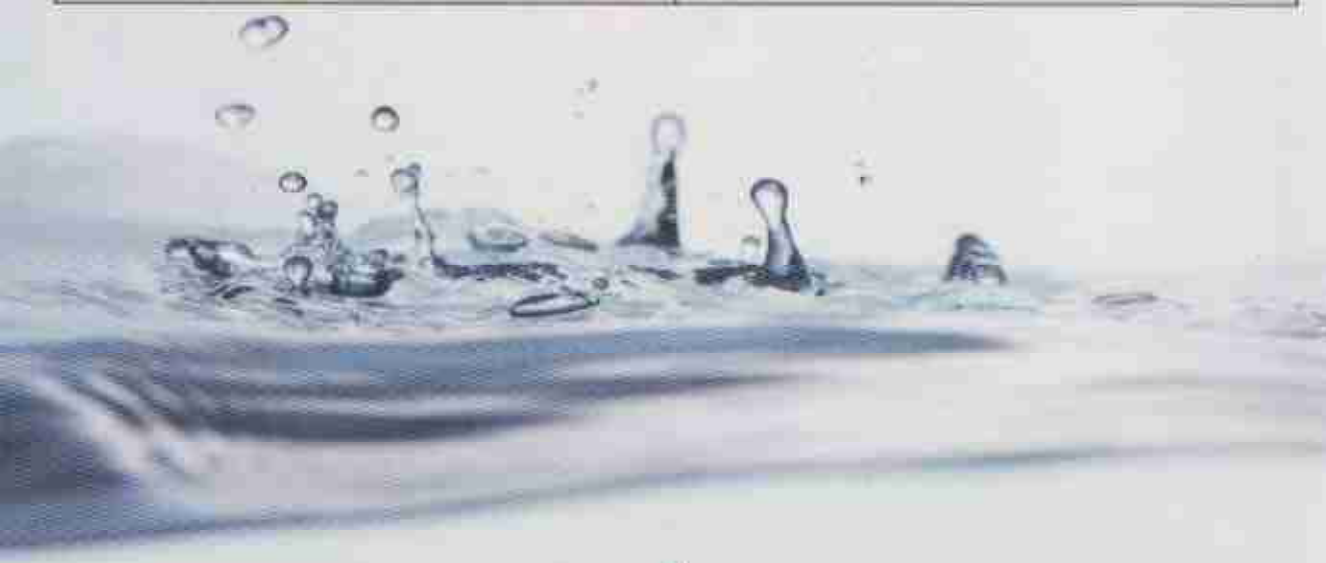
What Was John the Baptist Doing?

Is the baptism of repentance that John the Baptist practiced the same baptism that is now practiced in the church? No. However, there are several similarities:

Water is used as a symbol of purification and cleansing.	Matthew 3:5, 6, 11; 1 Peter 3:21
Repentance, turning away from the self-centered life to a God-centered one, is central.	Mark 1:4–5; Acts 2:38
The practice includes all manner of people, both genders, all levels of society.	Luke 3:7–14; Acts 16:25–33

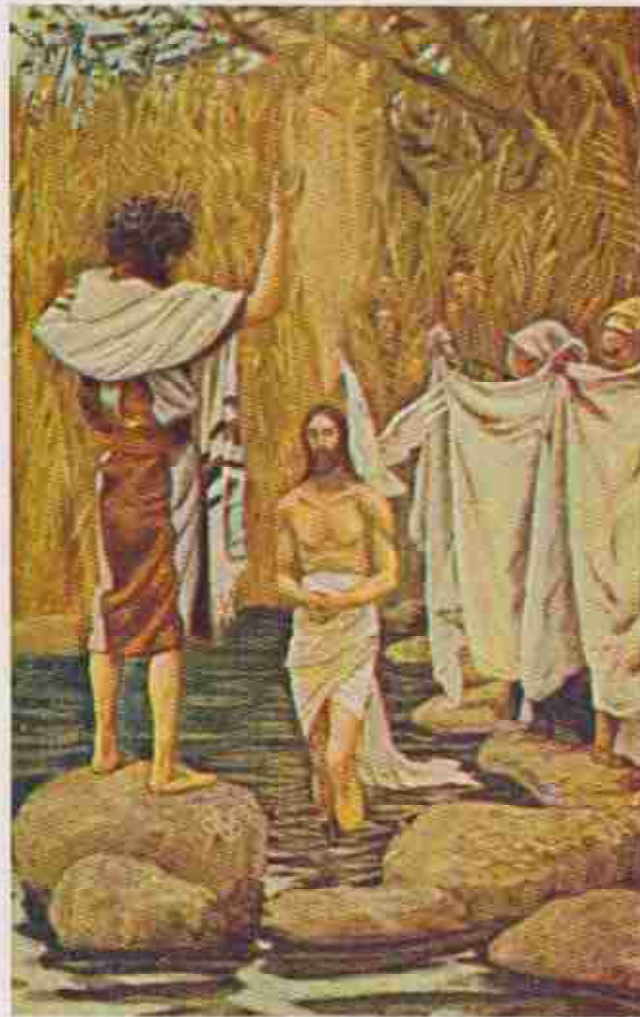
There are also important differences between John's baptism and Christian baptism:

John's Baptism	Christian Baptism
John the Baptist and his ministry were the last of the Old Testament order.	With the coming of Christ, a new order begins (Matthew 11:7–15; John 5:33–36).
The old order is not destroyed, but becomes the basis for the new.	The new order fulfills the old but is not identical to it.
John the Baptist pointed to the coming Messianic King.	Jesus the Messiah announces the coming of the Kingdom of God.



Purification with Water in the Old Testament

- The high priest ritually washed himself before his service on the Day of Atonement, as did the priest who released the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:3, 4, 26–28).
- John the Baptist, from the priestly line of Aaron (Luke 1:5–80), may have transformed the priestly rites of purification into baptism.
- At the time of John the Baptist's preaching, some groups were practicing baptism as a ritual of purification for all believers.
- The Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea scrolls appears to have been one such community.



Baptism of Jesus by James Tissot



Baptism, Ritual and Ceremonial Cleansing in the Bible

- Baptism is connected to Old Testament practices of cleansing and purification.
- Besides meaning “to cover with water,” the Greek word *baptizo* also means “to wash or dip in water.”
- Old Testament people saw little distinction between physical washing and ceremonial cleanliness—physical acts were spiritual acts as well.
- Old Testament purity laws pointed toward the spiritual cleansing that was to happen through Christ.
- Thus, baptism came to symbolize the washing away of sin.

Old Testament	New Testament
<p>Aaron—Leviticus 16:4, 24; and other priests—Leviticus 8:6; 16:26, 28; Exodus 29:4; 30:18–21; 40:12, 31, 32; Numbers 19:7–10, 19; 2 Chronicles 4:6; elders, Deuteronomy 21:6; the people, Exodus 19:10, 14.</p>	<p>John the Baptist—Matthew 3:5–11; 21:25; Mark 1:4–5; 11:30; Luke 3:2–3, 12; 7:29; John 1:25–33; 3:23; 10:40; Acts 1:5, 22; 10:37; 11:16; 18:25; 19:3–4</p>
<p>Washing with water used—For clothes, Exodus 19:10, 14; burnt offerings, Leviticus 1:9, 13; 9:14; 2 Chronicles 4:6; infants, Ezekiel 16:14; hands, Deuteronomy 21:6; Psalm 26:6; feet, Genesis 18:4.</p>	<p>Jesus—Matthew 3:13–16; Mark 1:8–10; Luke 3:7–8; John 3:5, 25–26; 4:1</p>
<p>Conditions cleansed—Leprosy, Leviticus 14:8–9; discharge of blood, Leviticus 15:1–13; defilement by dead, Leviticus 17:15–16; Numbers 19:11–13.</p>	<p>Disciples—John 4:2; Matthew 28:19</p>
<p>Common purification for normal body functions—Leviticus 12:6–8; 15:16–30.</p>	<p>Paul—Acts 9:18; 1 Corinthians 1:13–17</p>
<p>Fire and water together as symbols of purification after battle—Numbers 31:19–24.</p>	<p>Church—Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12–13, 36–38; 10:46–48; 16:14–15; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in the Old Testament did not baptize. However, some practices provide the background for the New Testament baptism. Purification rites and sacrifices in the Old Testament point to the need for cleansing of impurity, evil, and sin. • In Christ, the functions of both water and blood came together. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The blood of Christ cleans us from all sin and evil (1 John 1:7). ▶ The blood of Christ atones for our sins (Romans 5:9). • Baptism symbolizes this cleansing in Jesus' blood (1 Peter 3:21) 	<p>Moses, a type—1 Corinthians 10:1–2</p>
	<p>Initiation—1 Corinthians 12:13</p>
	<p>Identification—Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12</p>
	<p>Infusion—Matthew 3:11, 16; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:22; 24:49; John 1:32–33; 3:5; Acts 1:5; 2:1–38; 8:15–17; 10:38–47; 11:15–16; 19:2–6</p>
	<p>Water a symbol for the cleansing by the Word and Spirit—Ephesians 5:28; Titus 3:5–6; 1 Peter 3:21</p>