



Finding an Identity in Baptism

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Coventry Cathedral Baptistry by Basil Spence
(1956-1962). Window by John Piper.

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After the initial outpouring of the Spirit in the beginning of Acts, the Church is birthed and continued to steadily grow as “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Connected to this was the public display of belief and allegiance that we now celebrate as Baptism.

This ordinance (or “sacrament” as others may call it) is a call to obedience that Jesus Christ demonstrated for us in His own life as well as called us to follow Him in our own practice. The early Church saw this and diligently followed after it. In fact, we have evidence of the importance of baptism in a document called *The Didache* (“Did-uh-kay”) which means *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. This document listed a multitude of qualifications and instructions for Christian worship and service. In fact, here is the entire section on baptism:

“Now about baptism: this is how to baptize. Give public instruction on all these points, and then ‘baptize’ in running water, ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ If you do not have running water, baptize in some other. If you cannot in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, then pour water on the head three times ‘in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.’ Before the baptism, moreover, the one who baptizes and the one being baptized must fast, and any others who can. And you must tell the one being baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand.”

Wow, these people were desperate to get the details correct! Let’s break down some of the reason and rationale that went along with this life-changing event!

First, the water. Why is water present for baptism? Well, the Church desired to keep in line with Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist. To keep with this, the Church saw the need to simulate the river; this may also suggest a reminder that those individuals who believe in Christ will find “out of [their] heart will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). They also sought to perform baptism in either cold or warm water so as to remind themselves of Christ’s remark to the church in Laodicea (Revelation 3:16). Lastly, if they could not find any of the aforementioned waters, merely pouring three cups worth upon the head would serve as enough symbolism.

Second, the pronouncement. It is said twice that when one is baptized, he or she should be baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This inherently trinitarian statement reminded Christians of their God and how the act of baptism was an allegiance to Him, and therefore an abandonment of any other deity. I use the following statement within my classes at Lee when I discuss the Trinity:

Three equal, eternal, and essentially distinct persons who work together in the same power in the world without separation, division, and who mutually indwell one another without assimilation or dissolution.

As complicated as it may sound, the God of all creation exists in this manner, and we have readily accepted it from very early within our theological development. It is a distinctive that matters. It is unique to us, and we proclaim it from the beginning of our faith until we meet with God in glory!

Third, the fast. Fasting is a visceral and tangible practice. Removing food from our plates is unnatural. We learn to clear our plates from a young age. We learn to find sustenance whenever and wherever we can in college. We learn the frugality of eating leftovers as we begin families and careers. Food is intimately interwoven with who we are. It was even more important in the ancient Near East.

In ancient civilizations, no one carried identification cards; sin nations spanned thousands of miles, who individuals ate with and what they ate identified who they were. For an individual to restrict themselves for two days would easily cause a social dynamic to shift before their eyes. Friends and family would ask questions, relationships would be reevaluated and the individuals would find themselves in a socially isolated condition.

But the beauty of this fast was that those of the Church would partner with them in their preparation. It was as if the fast set them apart to be given to one another in fellowship.

The practice of baptism meant living different in public. It meant risking it all to declare your allegiance to a God who was three persons and supremely more powerful than anyone else. It meant traveling out to a river in the middle of public and being baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” As you reflect upon baptism today, take time to read *The Lorica of Saint Patrick* (aka *Saint Patrick’s Breastplate/Hymn*) that has been modernized into song by The Brilliance and ask yourself how you find these things within you today.

(In lieu of questions, we are going to reflect upon the following words.)

Christ be with me
Christ before me, Christ behind me
Christ within me
Christ below me, Christ above me
Christ be with me
At my right hand, At my left hand
As I lie down, As I rise up
As I stumble, As I fall down
Christ as I stand
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me
Christ in every eye that sees me
Christ in every ear that hears me
Amen

Source(s):

*All Scriptural citations utilize ESV

Michael W. Holmes. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and their English translations* (3rd edition, 2007).