

Baptism and the Story of Christian Worship

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The history of Christian worship is a story of persecution and popularity, abuse and reform, division and ecumenicity. Throughout the seven major eras of Christian history, we see the progression of belief and practice and how the two form and shape one another. For this paper, I will focus on Christian baptism as a lens through which to tell the story of Christian worship. The theology and practice of baptism will elucidate the unique ethos of each era.

Early Patristic

The Early Patristic period (2nd/3rd centuries) was a time of persecution for the church. Thus, baptism was taken very seriously and involved a lengthy and rigorous process (catechumenate). Each candidate (catechumen) was examined by the church to ensure that his or her reputation and lifestyle made them worthy of “the order of the catechumens.”¹

The *Apostolic Tradition* describes the process as taking up to three years.² The baptism itself involved the renouncing of Satan, undressing and entering the water, creedal affirmations in a trinitarian style (coinciding with three water immersions), the anointing with oil, redressing, joining the assembly, the laying on of hands by the bishop and anointing with oil, and the partaking of the eucharist for the first time.³ Baptisms took place in small, private spaces, such as the house church in Dura-Europos. A baptistry with visual art would have been used in such a

¹ Lawrence E. Mick, “Baptism in the Early Church,” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 6, *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 108-109.

² Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, translated by Alistair C. Stewart (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015), 123.

³ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 47.

space that was adequate for immersing children or by pouring water over adults. In this era, baptism was cosmic in scope and counter-cultural, highlighting the seriousness of one's faith.

Later Patristic

A major shift occurred in this period (4th/5th centuries) as Christianity was legalized in 313 A.D. under Constantine. We see the rise of bishops and liturgical centers including Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople, and Rome. Roman basilicas were renovated as places of worship and buildings were erected over holy places in Jerusalem. With its growing popularity, baptismal rituals became more involved. The basic order remained from the previous era; however, the space for baptisms became more elaborate in the basilicas which contained large, circular baptisteries. According to White, "In such a strange new setting, there was a rapid growth in ceremonial... A whole new vocabulary of gesture, vesture, and visual art had to be learned."⁴ Bishops were no longer performing baptisms in intimate settings, but before large crowds in elaborate buildings.

Baptisms became closely tied to Easter and the resurrection.⁵ In Jerusalem, the bishop Cyril performed the baptismal ritual in the Holy Sepulcher complex where candidates would be catechized in the Anastasis, a shrine to resurrection.⁶ Baptism helped people encounter the Christian story, cosmic in scope, but now more aligned with culture.

⁴ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 73.

⁵ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 47.

⁶ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 488.

Within a predominantly Christian culture, infants rather than adults, became the more common candidates for baptism. In the East, the whole baptismal rite could be performed by a presbyter, thus making baptism, anointing with chrism, and even the partaking of communion, one sacramental act for an infant. In the West, the anointing (confirmation) could only be performed by a bishop. With the increase of churches, bishops were not able to perform the anointing and laying on of hands at each baptism and the two acts, thus, became two separate rites in the West: baptism and confirmation.⁷ The expansion, ceremony, and practices of this period would continue in the East, but would lead to abuse and divergence in the West.

Byzantine

The Byzantine period (6th-16th centuries) is so named because of its centrality around the ancient Greek city of Byzantium in the East, the “New Rome.”⁸ The city would later be named Constantinople, after the emperor Constantine.⁹ In general, eastern churches are characterized by mystery, symbol, transcendence, and ceremony. This characterization was epitomized in the Church of the Hagia Sophia, a “liturgical model” for the East in this period.¹⁰

With regard to baptism, the formula in eastern churches is more passive than in the West. John Chrysostom, revered in the East, spoke of how the priest “does not say: ‘I baptize so-and-

⁷ Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 194.

⁸ Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield, eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press), 257.

⁹ Wainwright, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 257.

¹⁰ Wainwright, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 259.

so,’ but ‘So-and-so is baptized.’”¹¹ Thus, priests are instruments through which the Spirit baptizes. Stevenson outlines the “deep structures” of the Byzantine baptismal ritual as separation (enrollment in the catechumenate), liminality (the catechumenate itself), and incorporation (baptism itself).¹² Even in its shift from adults to infants, “These three stages are the backbone of the Byzantine Baptism Liturgy today.”¹³ Eastern churches have continued to tell a cosmic story, faithful to ancient practices. They remain counter-cultural, yet attractive to those tired of novelty and innovation. Such stability would not characterize the church in the West.

Medieval

In the medieval West (6th-16th centuries), worship theology and practice began to decline. Corporate participation shifted to private baptismal rites held during the week (not at Easter), involving only clergy, parents, and godparents. The baptismal fonts became smaller, often located just inside the main entrance of the church.¹⁴ Augustine’s views on the doctrine of original sin had a major influence on infant baptism. Parents were inclined “to rush their children to the font for fear that they might die and go to hell.”¹⁵ The latin phrase, *ex opera operato*, used

¹¹ Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 151.

¹² Kenneth W. Stevenson, “The Byzantine Liturgy of Baptism,” *Studia liturgica* 7 (1987): 176, 182. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000979220&site=ehost-live>.

¹³ Stevenson, “The Byzantine Liturgy of Baptism,” 176.

¹⁴ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 82.

¹⁵ Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 19.

by Aquinas, has been understood as a “quasi-magical notion of the sacrament.”¹⁶ Thus, parental fear and poor theology led to superstitious practice. According to Salvoni, the medieval teaching of baptism was based on “the decisions of the councils and the doctrine of the theologians, not the Bible.”¹⁷ Such examples of disintegration were the foundation for the Reformation.

Reformation

The Reformation (16th century) was a call to leave behind the private rites, superstitions, and abuses of the medieval church and return to the authority of Scripture. The beliefs during this period were shaped by Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer (Anglican), and the Anabaptists.

Luther did not radically revise the baptismal rite. For him, baptism was the ritual sign of justification and his “Flood Prayer” emphasized the cosmic story.¹⁸ For Zwingli and Calvin, baptism was part of the covenant, linked to the practice of circumcision.¹⁹ They affirmed household baptisms, that the gospel is “for you and for your children” (Acts 2:39).²⁰ Baptisms, typically by affusion, returned to corporate worship and fonts were positioned near the pulpit.²¹

¹⁶ Lawrence E. Mick, “Baptism in the Medieval West,” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 6, *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 110.

¹⁷ Fausto Salvoni, “Baptism in the Medieval Church,” *Restoration Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1957): 211. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001597443&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁸ Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 289.

¹⁹ Dennis Okholm, “A Reformed Theology of Baptism,” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 6, *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 132.

²⁰ English Standard Version.

²¹ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 111.

Confirmation was “a ready-made opportunity for the Reformers.”²² They used the rite to catechize those baptized as infants, teaching them the grand story and key doctrines of the faith.

The Anglican tradition reflects the middle of the road position taken by the Church of England. Its worship is characterized by the liturgy and ceremony of the Roman church, but its theology is Reformed. More than the Reformers, the Anglican church held to medieval practice and belief.²³ The most radical shift took place among the Anabaptists. For them, baptism was limited to those who could make a conscious profession of faith. Infants did not qualify. Baptism was about personal transformation, a witness to the world of the saving power of Jesus.²⁴

Later Reformation

By the Later Reformation period (17th-19th centuries), we find a myriad of congregations including Methodist, Wesleyan/Holiness, Quaker, Baptist, Puritan, and Presbyterian. To summarize this era, we will focus on two traditions: Methodist and Frontier.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was a priest in the Church of England; however, an experience with a group of Moravians profoundly shaped his life and spiritual practice. He brought both tradition and fervency to the Methodist movement. Though he stressed the idea of new birth, Wesley saw the connection between circumcision and baptism and affirmed the

²² Daniel B. Stevick, “Historical Origins and Development of Confirmation,” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 6, *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 18.

²³ Daniel B. Stevick, “An Anglican Theology of Baptism,” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 6, *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 133.

²⁴ Thomas Finger, “An Anabaptist Theology of Baptism,” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 6, *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 138.

practice of household baptisms. Methodism, however, took on a mixed character as it adapted to the American frontier of the nineteenth century. Adults were received as members six months after their baptism, and pouring, sprinkling, and immersion were acceptable modes.²⁵ Wesley's influence led to the Holiness movement and shaped later worship practices, including baptism.²⁶

In the nineteenth century, the Frontier movement emerged from the Great Awakenings through individuals like Charles Finney and was "specifically designed to make converts."²⁷ Baptism was by immersion and was the conscious decision of the individual (believer's baptism). The term "ordinance" is often used, a biblical command without any inherent grace.²⁸ This period heightened the personal over the cosmic and carried this ethos into the Modern era.

Modern

In the Modern era (20th/21st centuries), we find a mix of liturgical and baptismal practices among Catholics, mainline Protestant denominations, Charismatics, and Evangelicals. Some are reaching back to ancient traditions, while others are continuing with nineteenth-century innovations. Liturgical and baptismal renewal within Catholic and mainline churches today can be traced to the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. One significant change among Catholics is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, an initiative stemming largely from

²⁵ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 148-150.

²⁶ Brad Estep, "Holiness Worship," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 2, *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1994), 98.

²⁷ Wainwright, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 485.

²⁸ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 148.

the *Apostolic Tradition* of the third century.²⁹ Mainline denominations are celebrating a reaffirmation of their baptism vows to keep one's faith alive at various ages and seasons of life.³⁰

Baptism in the Pentecostal tradition (with roots in the Holiness movement) consists of two phases: believer's baptism by immersion (after conversion), then a second baptism of the Spirit or "second blessing," evidenced by speaking in tongues.³¹ Charismatic churches such as the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, founded by John Wimber, also hold to believer's baptism.³²

Evangelicals, represented largely by Baptist churches, mostly hold to believer's baptism by immersion. Klopfer summarizes, "What emerged within the revival context was the idea that baptism was personal, a relational reality between sacramentalism and mere symbolism."³³ Today, most Evangelicals continue to hold to the individual nature of salvation and baptism.

Baptism has played a vital role within the story of Christian worship. Throughout the major eras, the church, often through key individuals, has expressed her beliefs and wrestled with change in ways that have formed and shaped its practices to the present day.

²⁹ Jeffrey M. Kemper, "Baptism in Contemporary Roman Catholic Thought," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 6, *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 110.

³⁰ Daniel B. Stevick, "A Theology for the Renewal of the Baptismal Covenant," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 6, *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 198-199.

³¹ Wainwright, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 579-580.

³² Randolph Sly, "A Charismatic Theology of Baptism," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 6, *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 146.

³³ Sheila D. Klopfer, "From Personal Salvation to Personal Baptism," *Baptist History and Heritage* 45, no. 3 (2010): 76. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001817434&site=ehost-live>.

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