

Baptism

History & Explanation

Wes Woodell

Family Vacation 2025: Foundations

BAPTISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH

History, Theology, and Liturgy
in the First Five Centuries



Everett Ferguson

- Everett Ferguson – BA Abilene Christian University, MA Harvard, PhD Harvard – Distinguished Scholar in Residence at ACU.
- Ferguson is considered the leading authority on the academic study of Christian baptism.
- Ferguson's book Baptism in the Early Church presents comprehensive scholarly work on Baptism covering nearly everything written on the subject from the first 500 years of the church.
- Takes a historical approach to understanding what was explicitly taught about baptism over the centuries, and he documents everything for readers to see.

How did the JEWISH AUDIENCE in Acts 2 understand what they were doing in baptism?

Acts 2:38-39 NIV

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. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Baptism appears first in scripture with John the Baptist:

Matthew 3:1-2, 5-6 NIV

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” ... ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Mark 1:4-5 NIV

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Baptism appears first in scripture with John the Baptist:

“Jewish concepts and practices provide a more likely immediate context for Christian baptism than any other antecedents.”

- Ferguson, Everett. Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries (p. 60). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

Ritual Baths - Mikveh:

Exodus 30:17-21

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base also of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tabernacle of meeting and the altar. And you shall put water in it, for Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet in water from it. When they go into the tabernacle of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn an offering made by fire to the LORD, they shall wash with water, lest they die. So they shall wash their hands and their feet, lest they die. And it shall be a statute forever to them—to him and his descendants throughout their generations.

Ritual Baths - Mikveh:

The priests had to be ritually clean (tahor) in order to serve at the tabernacle, and Israelites who had become ritually unclean (tamay) had to restore their situation with the passing of time and bathing their whole body in fresh, ritually clean (tahor) water, according to Leviticus 15.

Ritual Baths - Mikveh:

Later, when the temple had been built, it was necessary for everyone to be immersed in a mikveh to become ritually clean before entering the temple. There are many ancient mikva'ot (plural of mikveh) to be seen in Jerusalem, and it is clear to see the two sets of steps for each one – a set of steps going down to the mikveh in an impure (tamay) state on one side, and on the other side, steps where the pilgrim will emerge fresh and ritually clean (tahor).

Mikveh Required Full Immersion:

One tractate, Mikw(v) aoth (or “Immersion-Pools”), is devoted to the water to be used for the cleansing baths. The tractate begins (1.1-8) by distinguishing six grades among pools of water according to their degree of purity. In ascending order of excellence they are the water in a small pond, the water in a pond while rain is falling in it, the water in a pond containing forty seahs or more of water (estimates range from 77 to 140 gallons or 292 to 532 liters, which was sufficient for a total immersion of a person), a well whose water can be increased by drawn water, smitten waters (i.e., salty like the Mediterranean Sea or from a hot spring), and (most excellent of all) “living waters” (flowing water, which could serve for all occasions of immersion, for sprinkling of lepers, and for mixing with the ashes of the sin offering. The requirements of the tractate Mikwaoth clearly point to a total submersion.

Mikveh Required Full Immersion:



Mikveh Required Full Immersion:



Jewish Proselyte Baptism

Many scholars have found the origin of Christian baptism in Jewish proselyte baptism. According to rabbinic literature there were three requirements for a Gentile converting to Judaism: circumcision, immersion (ṭebilah), and sacrifice ... [but] The date for the origin of proselyte baptism cannot be determined.

- Ferguson, p. 76

Evidence Jewish Proselyte Baptism was being practiced early in the First Century:

108AD: Epictetus: Why do you act the part of a Jew when you are a Greek?... Whenever we see someone halting between two opinions, we are accustomed to say, “He is not a Jew, but he pretends to be one.” Whenever he adopts the attitude of mind of the one who has been dipped [βεβαμμένου] and has made his choice, then he both is in reality and is called a Jew. So also we are “false baptists” [παραβαπτισταί, imposters], in word Jews but in deed something else.

Evidence Jewish Proselyte Baptism was being practiced early in the First Century:

90AD: “If one has taken the bath without circumcision, or circumcision without the bath, he is not a proselyte, and he will be one only at the moment when he has received the one and the other.”

- Ferguson, pg. 80

Evidence Jewish Proselyte Baptism was being practiced early in the First Century:

MUST BE PRE-70AD DUE TO REFERENCE TO TEMPLE THAT WAS DESTROYED IN AD70:

“A proselyte’s atonement is yet incomplete until the blood [of his offering] has been tossed for him [against the base of the altar].”

- Mishnah, R. Eliezer b. Jacob

Evidence Jewish Proselyte Baptism was being practiced early in the First Century:

100-75BC: "When these have entered the Covenant, they shall be separated from the habitation of the men of deceit and shall go to the wilderness to prepare there the way of Him; as it is written, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of [the Lord, make smooth in the desert a highway for our God]' (Isa. xl, 3). No man shall enter the Community of those united for the truth, nor shall he be purified by their waters of purification, until they have examined his spirit and deeds, until he has completed one full year."

- 1QS, Dead Sea Scrolls, 100-75BC

Did the Jews borrow Baptism from the Christians?

It is hardly conceivable that the Jewish ritual should be adopted at a time when baptism had become an established religious practice in Christianity. After A.D. 70 at least the opposition to Christians was too sharp to allow the rise of a Christian custom among the Jews. Proselyte baptism must have preceded Christian baptism.

- Albrecht Oepke (german theologian), “βαπτω” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed., G. Kittel, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964), 535.

Did the Jews borrow Baptism from the Christians?

While there is no very clear evidence for the practice of baptizing proselytes at a date prior to the ministry of John, it is in the highest degree improbable that Judaism adopted a practice which had already become an essential practice of Christianity, and the opinion is today generally held that, despite the paucity of evidence, it is scarcely to be doubted that the Jewish practice antedates [came before] the ministry of John the Baptist.

- HH Rowley – Hebrew Union College Annual (Jewish Institute of Religion) - University of North Wales (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23501706>)

How was proselyte baptism DIFFERENT from Christian baptism?

Proselyte baptism required witnesses but was self-administered; baptism by John and Christians had an administrator. In proselyte baptism the candidate was freed from pagan impurity; in Christian baptism one received pardon and regeneration as divine grace. The heart of the rabbinic conversion ceremony was circumcision, not baptism; baptism was the central act in Christian conversion. Proselyte baptism was for Gentiles; Christians baptized Jews as well as Gentiles. These differences are significant ...

- Ferguson, pg. 81-82

How was proselyte baptism SIMILAR TO Christian Baptism?

Rabbis taught that a proselyte is ...

- Newly born child
- A different person
- Freed from slavery - if they were a slave, they were quite literally given manumission (officially released from slavery)
- New beginning
- Fully Israelite/child of God
- Beloved of God
- Forgiveness of sins – though most emphasis was put on new life
- Repentance and change of life were expected. You were expected to practice your faith.

Jewish Proselyte Baptism

- Each candidate was studied with, mentored, and held accountable after conversion.
- Could be annulled
- Counted the cost with two people before immersion. Went over the commandments and agreed to follow them before immersion.
- Went down into the water to be immersed, removed clothing, put new white robes on before emerging to symbolize new life.
- Jewish Baptisms were done modestly and self-administered.
- Women had to be in water up to their neck, men up to their waist. Men helped men, women helped women, and they kept their backs turned during the changing of clothes.
- Children's own choice to convert or not allowed later.
- Age of Majority was 13 for boys, 12 for girls. Would not have been allowed to make the choice before this age.

How did the JEWISH AUDIENCE understand what they were doing in baptism?

Acts 2:38-39 NIV

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. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Baptism Connected to the Death, Burial, Resurrection of Jesus and New Life

Romans 6:3-7 NIV

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ 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.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

Baptism Connected to the Inheriting the Blessing of Abraham

Galatians 3:26-29

26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,
27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Does Baptism Save You?

1 Peter 3:21 NIV

21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ ...

How did the JEWISH AUDIENCE understand what they were doing in baptism?

SAME EXPECTATIONS/EFFECTS AS PROSELYTE CONVERSION

- You were not considered “in” until after.
- New Life attached to a Special, One-Time pledge to God
- Commitment to Repentant & Obedient Life
- Mentorship/ongoing instruction and accountability
- Fully part of God’s family

NEW EXPECTATIONS/EFFECTS WITH CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

- New life in Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit
- Permanent forgiveness of Sin
- Not self-administered
- Could be performed in bodies of water besides Mikveh
- Greater emphasis on the connection between Judgment, death, and forgiveness of sin.

In the early centuries of the church Baptism was ...

- Explicitly connected to the Death, Burial, Resurrection of Jesus
- Full immersion.
- No infants or baptisms separate from repentance/commitment to obedience.
- Associated with being “**sealed**” with Christ.
- Was described as how to “**Call on the Name of the Lord**” to be saved. Early writings associated with “Calling on the name of the Lord” with baptism.

33 AD

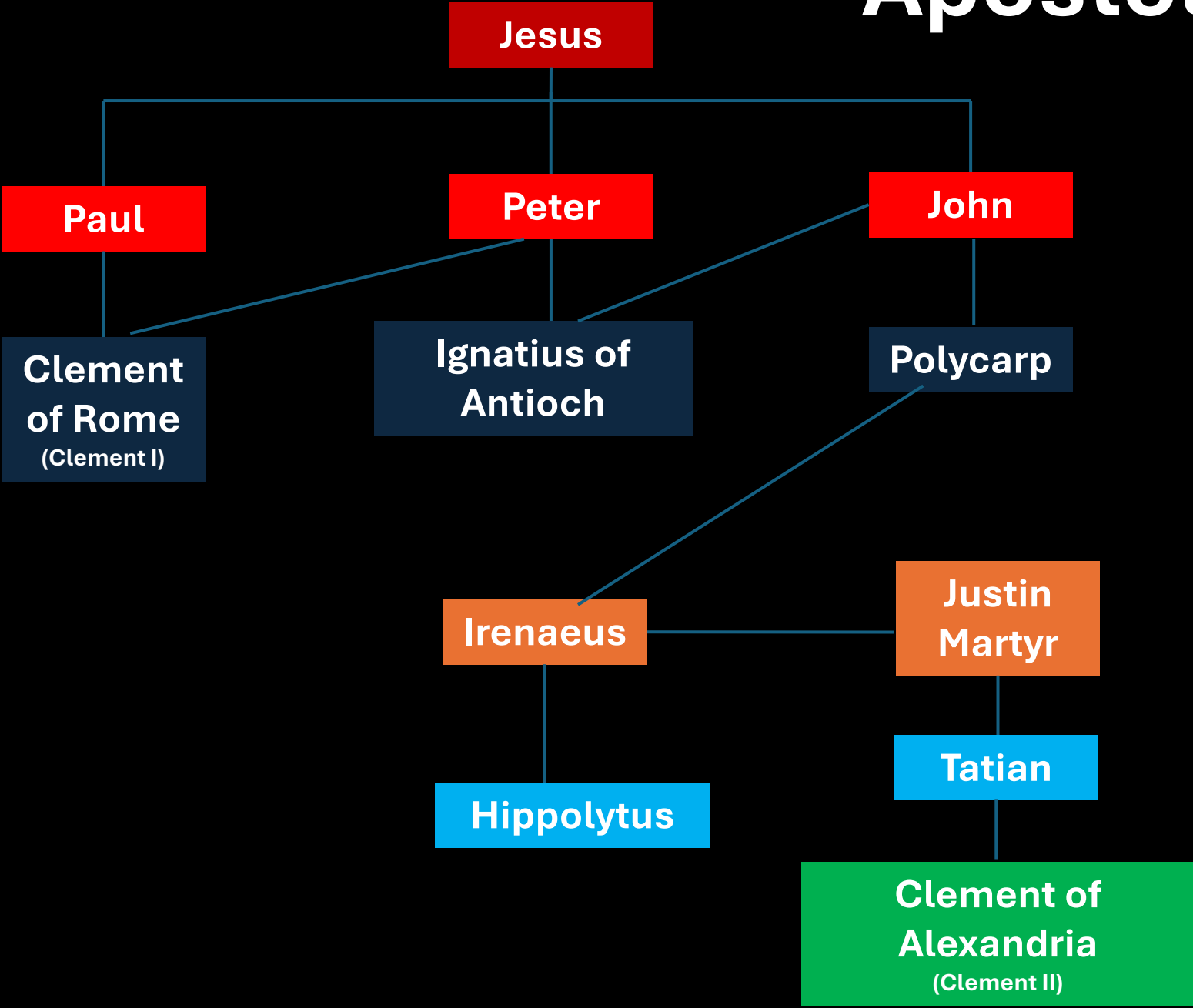
Apostolic Fathers

70 AD

100 AD

150 AD

200 AD



Didache
50AD-150AD

“No one is to eat or drink of your eucharist except those who have been baptized [βαπτισθέντες] into the name of the Lord” (9.5).

“Seal” – II Clement in many early works refers directly to “baptism”, though “seal” in later centuries would come to refer to Catholic Confirmation.

“Grace” – was sometimes used in place of “baptism”