

IMMERSION

It was [ordained](#) by [Jesus](#) Christ that water represents the visible sign of baptism: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). In conformity with Christ’s teachings, the apostles used water in administering the sacrament through complete immersion. This practice has since been followed by the church, as stipulated in the DIDACHE (7.1-4): “Baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living [i.e., running] water. If you have no living water, then baptize in other water; and if you are not able in cold, then in warm” (Jurgens, 1970-1979, Vol. 1, p. 2).

The following points provide further [confirmation](#) of this practice:

1. Matthew 3:16 says that after baptism, [Jesus](#) came up out of the river Jordan, a clear indication that He had been completely immersed in water.
2. Had the sprinkling of water been considered proper, it would have been superfluous on the part of John the Baptist and the apostles to take the persons desirous of baptism to the river (Mt. 3:6; Mk. 1:5; Lk. 3:3; Jn. 1:28). Acts 8:36-39 makes clear that Philip and the high official of Kandake, Queen of Ethiopia, went down in the water.
3. Baptism symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ: “Buried with Him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised Him from the dead” (Col. 2:12). It is, therefore, a form of ritual death, where the believer becomes incorporated with Christ in a death similar to His and is united with Him in a resurrection like His.
4. Through complete immersion the early fathers practiced what they preached regarding baptism, a point they stressed in their writings. Saint Justin Martyr (c. 100-c. 165), the first to mention this practice as an essential step toward regeneration, said, “Whoever is convinced and believes that what they are taught and told by us is the truth, and professes to be able to live accordingly, is instructed to

[pray](#) and to beseech [God](#) in fasting for the remission of their former sins, while we pray and fast with them. Then they are led by us to a place where there is water; and there they are reborn in the same kind of rebirth in which we ourselves were reborn” (“First Apology,” in Jurgens, 1970-1979, Vol. 1, p. 54). Likewise, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-386) wrote, “When you go down into the water, then regard not simply the water, but look for salvation through the power of the Holy Spirit. For without both you cannot attain to perfection. It is not I who say this, but the Lord [Jesus](#) Christ, who has the power in this matter” (“Catechetical Lectures,” in Jurgens, 1970-1979, Vol. 1, p. 349).

A further excerpt from Saint Augustine sums up the point distinctly: “What is the Baptism of Christ? ‘The washing with water, in the word.’ Take away water, and it is not Baptism. Take away the word, and it is not Baptism” (“Homilies on the Gospel of John,” in Jurgens, 1970-1971, Vol. 2, p. 117).

Various equally clear testimonies abound in the writings of Hermas (fl. c. 140-155), Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220), GREGORY OF NYSSA (c. 330-c. 395), JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (c. 347-407), and other early fathers.

5. Etymologically, the term “baptism,” derived from the Greek verb *baptizo* (dip in water), signifies full immersion. Appropriately the epithet qualifying John the Baptist as used in the diptychs of the Coptic liturgy is the word *sabigh*, which originally meant “dyer.”

Nevertheless, the Coptic church recommends aspersion (i.e., sprinkling of water) as an exceptional dispensation allowed in [cases](#) of baptizing the handicapped, crippled, or sick infants who may be on the verge of death.

A person receiving baptism is immersed three times in water, in the name of [the Father](#) and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28), in accordance with the Didache, canon 7, and the teachings of the early fathers. At times, these teachings were disobeyed by some heretical sects. For example, Eunomias (d. 395), who held extreme, unorthodox views,

advocated the discontinuation of baptism in the name of the Trinity, and used words that made it a baptism in the name of the [Creator](#) and into the death of Christ (see also Marriott, 1908, p. 161).

The Apostolical Canons were explicit in condemning such views: canon 49 stipulates that if any bishop or [presbyter](#) baptizes anyone not into [the Father](#) and the Son and the Holy Spirit in accordance with the Lord's ordinance, but into three beginningless beings or into three sons or into three comforters, let him be deposed. According to canon 50, if any bishop or presbyter does not perform three immersions in making one baptism, but a single immersion, that given into the death of the Lord, let him be deposed (Percival, 1956, p. 597).

Canon 7 of the second Council of Constantinople (see CONSTANTINOPLE, COUNCIL OF) reflects the importance attached to the three-immersion baptism: "Eunomians, who are baptized with only one immersion, and Montanists, who are here called Phrygians, and Sabellians, who teach the identity of Father and Son, and do sundry other mischievous things, and [the partisans of] all other [heresies](#)—for there are many such here, particularly among those who come from the country of the Galatians, all these, when they desire to turn to orthodoxy, we receive as heathen. On the first day we make them Christians; on the second, catechumens; on the third, we exorcise them by breathing thrice in their face and ears; and thus we instruct them and oblige them to spend some time in the Church, and to hear the Scriptures; and then we baptize them" (Percival, 1956, p. 185).

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