

# Why Baptism?

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## Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

**M**y favorite cinematic depiction of baptism takes place in Robert Duvall's remarkable motion picture, *The Apostle*. Sonny, Mr. Duvall's character, is a pious but deeply flawed preacher who, in a fit of jealous rage, kills his wife's lover. He leaves town, jettisons his automobile with the Texas plates that read "SONNY," and tries to start a new life. In the film's most memorable scene, Sonny wades into a lake and prepares to baptize himself as an apostle. "With great

humility,” he begins, looking toward the heavens, “I ask permission to be accepted as an apostle of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of Nazareth. And with your gracious permission, I wish to be baptized as an apostle of our Lord.”

Then, with arms upraised, Sonny submerges himself beneath the waters of God’s forgiveness.

That scene of self-baptism may have been remarkably faithful to the baptism of Jesus, which is recorded in today’s gospel. St. Mark tells us that Jesus “was baptized by John in the Jordan,” but it is very likely that John the baptizer stood on land as Jesus immersed himself in the Jordan River. One of the earliest Christian depictions of the event shows John standing on shore and offering his hand toward Jesus as he emerged from the water.

**B**ut this raises a larger question: Why was Jesus baptized in the first place? When we recite the Nicene Creed, we affirm our belief in “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” But Christian theology holds that Jesus, the son of God, was sinless, so what need did he have for baptism? And a larger question looms behind that one: What was the understanding of baptism in Jesus’ day? Why was John the baptizer so busy with people who wanted to be baptized? It had to be more than his strange appearance and his quirky appeal. How did those John baptized understand what they were doing?

Baptism, as nearly as I can tell, was a form of ritual cleansing, a practice common in many religious traditions. If someone had touched something that was considered unclean, she or he sought ritual cleansing, usually by immersion. In 2 Kings, the prophet Elisha instructed Naaman to immerse himself seven times in the River Jordan to be cured of his leprosy.

So it is very likely that the people of Jesus' day were participating in a ritual of purification. And Jesus? The generally accepted interpretation was that baptism in the Jordan marked the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, his acceptance of his calling. Mark says that as Jesus "was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

**T**he gospel account of the baptism of Jesus reminds us of our own baptism, our calling as people of faith, as followers of Jesus. In the Christian tradition, this ritual of purification has also come to be understood as our dying to sin and our resurrection to a new life, just as Jesus died on Calvary and rose from the dead on Easter morning.

When I was writing *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* in the late 1980s, one of the places I visited was Calvary Chapel in Santa Ana, California. Calvary Chapel was the fount of the Jesus People movement in the early 1970s, when Chuck Smith, the church's pastor, began preaching to the hippies of Huntington Beach. Many came to Jesus with their long hair and straggly beards, their patchwork Levi's and their drug and alcohol addictions. Following their conversions, hundreds of these "Jesus Freaks" were baptized in the Pacific Ocean at Corona del Mar in that ancient Christian rite so rich in symbolism. Many claimed instantaneous deliverance from alcohol and drug dependencies, leaving behind their old lives to embrace the new.

Indeed, baptism is replete with meaning and significance, and I see no need to restrict our understanding to a single interpretation. Part of the richness of the sacraments lies in multiple meanings.

Still, when all is said and done, I find it difficult to top Robert Duvall's version, a complex combination of contrition and boldness: "With

great humility,” Sonny declared, “I ask permission to be accepted as an apostle of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of Nazareth. And with your gracious permission, I wish to be baptized as an apostle of our Lord.”

First Sunday after the Epiphany

January 8, 2012

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut