

QUICK THEOLOGY

Four Views of Baptism



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Introduction

There are varied views on baptism throughout the Christian church. We are going to be looking at four different views, but they are housed within two sections or categories.

The first category is pedobaptism, or infant baptism. The second category is credobaptism, or believer's baptism. *Pedo* means child, while *credo* indicates creed or testament. Credobaptism bases the baptism off an individual's personal testimony, and they have to be an adult in order to do that. Underneath these two main categories of pedobaptism and credobaptism are different ways of understanding what baptism accomplishes and how it should work. We will look at two subgroups within pedobaptism and then two subgroups within credobaptism.

Pedobaptism, or infant baptism, will obviously not be by immersion because we do not want to be dunking

a baby in a baptismal font. This type of baptism is also called sprinkling, and there are a few different ways to view it. One of the terms for this view of how infant baptism works is called baptismal regeneration. We are going to look at both the Catholic and the Lutheran views of this particular take on infant baptism because Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Lutherans all baptize infants. We will start with the Roman Catholic view.

The Latin phrase *ex opere operato* basically means that baptism—in the Catholic tradition—confers grace. In all of the sacraments in the Catholic Church there is a measure of grace that is conferred upon the individual as they participate in that sacrament. Catholics believe sacraments are not just symbolic, but rather something is actually happening during their administration. God is using the physical action of participating in a sacrament to administer grace to His people. This is a fundamental doctrine within Catholicism and in more liturgical traditions. The Roman Catholic catechism—which explains what happens in baptism—says “Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the Word. This sacrament is also called the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, for it signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit

without which no one can enter the kingdom of God.” So, clearly baptism is a very important part of being a believer in the Catholic tradition.

I pulled this particular information directly from the Roman Catholic catechism. As always—and I say this every time I talk about a topic—when I want to know what the Catholic Church believes about something, I go to the Catholic Church. If I want to know what a Lutheran believes, I go to the Lutheran Church. I go directly to the source to get my information on these things rather than listen to somebody who opposes them. I think that is a really important part of good research and reporting. The best way to get information correctly is to go directly to the source. What I am about to share with you is a Catholic perspective on some of the fundamentals of baptism and what it accomplishes.



Pedobaptism

In the Catholic church, baptism is the means of bringing people into the family and kingdom of God. I read a Lutheran text a few years ago about the purpose of baptism being the beginning of discipleship and bringing people into the family of God. It serves as a sort of transition from their old family apart from God to this new family of God. Since these are infants who are being raised by Catholic parents, it is a very serious thing, and the parents and the godparents need to be ready and equipped to educate this child in the truths of the church and of Scripture. Baptism ushers people into the kingdom of God.

Secondly, baptism represents the new circumcision and the promise to bring the child up as a Christian and as a Catholic. This is significant, and it carries over to the other views of infant baptism as well, as pedobaptists believe baptism represents the same thing circumcision represented for old covenant Israelites. It was a sign of

being in the family of God. The understanding here is that circumcision is represented through baptism under the new covenant. So for the Israelites under the old covenant it was actual circumcision. Under the new covenant of Christ it is baptism.

This sets us up to understand the necessity of baptism, because Catholics believe baptism is a necessary condition of salvation. There are a few reasons the church supports this. In John 3:5, Jesus says, “Truly, truly I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Then, Paul in Titus 3:5 says that God “saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Peter in 1 Peter 3 says, “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you.” Jesus also says, “He, who believes and is baptized will be saved” in Mark 16:16. Using these verses and others, the church believes that baptism saves. We will discuss the implications of this belief in a little bit.

The practice of infant baptism is also seen throughout church history, as it goes all the way back to the early church. One church father, Cyprian in 253 said, “In respect of the case of infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born

should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day. We all thought very differently in our counsel. For in this course, which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed. But we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to anyone born of man. For as the Lord says in His gospel, the Son of Man has not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them (Luke 9). For as far as we can, we must strive that, if possible, no soul will be lost."

What Cyprian is saying here is that there was a debate among the council on whether to baptize infants on the second day, third day, or eighth day. Not that they should not be baptized at all, but that it was accepted that infants were being baptized. The debate was over whether it should be earlier or later, and Cyprian is saying they think it should be done as quickly as possible. This is just one example, but it shows that the early church was practicing infant baptism fairly early.

Another point regarding Catholic baptism is that it is necessary for discipleship. Oftentimes the Church will look at passages like Ezekiel 36, which says, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from your uncleannesses and I will give you a new Spirit that I will put within you, and I will take out of your flesh the hard of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And

I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.” Baptism, therefore, serves as a launching point for discipleship—by the parents ideally, and then within the family of God in the church. It represents the new circumcision of the heart and being brought up as part of the family of God.

Now, here is where things get sticky. If an infant is being baptized, and if baptism signifies the conferring of grace and of the Holy Spirit upon the child and the beginning of faith in that child’s heart, does that mean the child is saved without ever having to make any testament of faith or without ever having to follow Christ personally? Is their salvation permanent? What do we do with that? I think a lot of Protestants—or non-Catholics—have that question. What happens if this infant that was baptized into the Catholic Church grows up and believes, “I am saved without ever having to actually walk in holiness”? They would grow up without a need to understand what they believe or to have a personal relationship with Christ.

Here is the important thing to note. This baptism is not magical. It actually does have to be walked out. The faith that is put into the heart of the child has to be nurtured and affirmed in order for salvation to