

# The Deacon's Corner By Deacon Ron Desmarais

*I baptize you in the Name of the Father,  
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Have you ever wondered where the idea for baptism came from? We all know that our image of baptism comes from the Gospel accounts of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. John baptizes with water, but tells us that one is coming after him who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

If you read the Gospel accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke you will find that they simply state John Baptized with the water of repentance. They don't tell us about baptism, because they assume we are already familiar with the concepts.

Have you ever wondered where this concept of Baptism came from? Did John make it up as an instrument of his ministry? Did he wake up one morning and say, "Hello God, I need a tool to grab people's attention if I'm going to announce the coming of the Messiah. How about giving me a staff like Moses had where I can part the Red Sea. That would be cool!" Somehow I don't think that is what happened.

So where did the concept for a baptism for the remittance of sin come from? Sometimes the Bible seems to leave us with more questions than answers. Sometimes you just have to look a little further in scripture. When this happens we need to do some research. Water is important, and not just to desert nomads. Water is important in the context of Gods relationship with his chosen people. We know from Genesis when God created the world he "breathed on the water". We know about Moses leading the Jewish people through the parting of the Red Sea and how that relates to our Baptism, dying and rising in Christ. But that isn't the answer we are seeking, but a reflection. There has to be more to it and there is.

If we go back into the Old Testament we find the use of water and cleansing to be scattered throughout the Bible. Especially in the Pentateuch, the first five books attributed to Moses. In Exodus 30: 19-20, we find the Lord telling Moses to place a basin of water outside the Tent of Meeting and God tells him, "*Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet with water from it. When they enter the Tent of Meeting they will wash with water so that they will not die.*" Here is a reference to cleansing in preparation to enter into the presence of God. That nothing unclean can approach God. That is why God says, "*So they may not die.*" Hey I'm like St. Peter at the Last Supper, (Jn 13:9) "*Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well.*"

In the book of Numbers we find example after example of cleansing with water. It is replete with purification rituals. An example of this is in Numbers 19:17. "*Then a man who is ceremonially clean is to take some hyssop, dip it in the water and sprinkle the tent and all the furnishings and the people who were there. The man who is clean is to sprinkle the unclean person.*" This continues with further explanation of purifications using water. So we can see that the use of water to purify and cleanse goes way back to the beginning of God's relationship with his people. These examples only show sprinkling, using water for purification, and washing hands and feet it doesn't fully explain where John got the idea of Baptizing in the river.

Okay, that may be true, but let us go further into the Bible and see if there is anything there that can expand on baptism. The book of Samuel tells us. "*When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted*

*and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the Lord.'" (Sm 7:6)*

Here we get a little more definitive in the concept of pouring water and forgiving sin. Now we can see that water is not just being used for purification, but is taking on a greater meaning: the forgiveness of sin. Can we see that maybe a theology of water and washing away sin is starting to develop? Maybe John the Baptist had a better understanding then we give him credit for.

We seem to be doing pretty good now. There are more references to baptism. Let us journey a little farther into scripture and see what it can reveal for us. The prophet Zechariah tells us, *"On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity."* Much more definitive isn't it. We have not only a fountain or font that will be used to cleanse from sin and impurity, but that it will come from the House of David. Now we have a direct tie between water, forgiveness of sin, and a link to Jesus Christ.

Wow! We could stop right here and feel good about answering the question. However, there is another example of the use of water and the forgiveness of sins from the Prophet Ezekiel. *"I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees...you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ez 36:25-28)*

Now this is a description of Baptism more as we know it; pouring water, cleansing from impurities, changing us into a new person,

placing His Spirit within us, and making us a child of God. I don't think we will get a better example from the Old Testament to use as a precursor to Baptism.

In the Old Testament ritual washing is used many times so the Jews could purify themselves from sin. Our Baptism is only performed once. Their ritual purity only lasted a short time. Our Baptism accomplishes much more as it marks us as a child of God, our sins are forgiven forever up to that point, and we receive the Holy Spirit. Like the Jews we still fall into sin, but our ritual washing is now the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Christ institutes Baptism as we know it when he sent the disciples out to Baptize in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We also know that our Baptism is more than the ritual in the Old Testament when Jesus tells Nicodimus, *"Amen, Amen, I say to you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."* (Jn 3:5)

So in answer to my questions at the beginning we find that John did not just make it all up. He had something to work with that God had already used to call the people of Israel to repentance. John in turn used the call to repentance to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of the messiah.

I hope I have shown you how the theology of Baptism developed over time. It is not the definitive example, but I hope I showed you how scripture reveals the teachings of the church.