



# BAPTISM

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, January 27, 2008**

**Bernice Johnson Reagon, Lectionary Team Cultural Resource Commentator**

### **Historical Documents**

The English words *baptize* and *baptism* are derived from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means to intensively immerse. Within Christianity, these words normally refer to a ritual performed by a member of the clergy in a church. Most Christian faith groups agree that baptism is the method by which an individual is welcomed into the church. However, denominations disagree on the precise significance of the act and the age when baptisms are done.

Baptism is a religious act of purification by water, usually associated with admission to membership or fullness of membership in Christianity. John the Baptist baptized for the forgiveness of sins. In the early Christian church, the most usual form of baptism had the candidate stand in water and water was poured over the upper body. The English word *baptism* is used in any ceremony, trial, or experience by which one is initiated, purified, or given a name.

The early first and second century churches' belief that the baptism ritual washed away the Christian's sins was based on a number of biblical passages: Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Titus 3:5, and 1 Peter 3:21. The belief that baptism led to salvation and an indwelling of the Holy Spirit was based on John 3:5, Acts 2:38, Galatians 3:26-28, Titus 3-5, and 1 Peter 3:21...

The early church baptisms were confirmed by the direct teachings of the Apostles, by individuals like Polycarp of Smyrna (69-155 CE) who had been taught directly by one or more apostles, or by individuals like Irenaeus (130-200 CE), a pupil of Polycarp. Many theologians feel that the second century church continued with reasonable accuracy the beliefs and practices of primitive Pauline Christianity of the first century.

Some statements confirming the belief in the regenerative nature of baptism – and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as a result of baptism – are seen in the writings of the early church Fathers

Justin Martyr (100-165CE), Irenaeus (130-200CE), and Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (200-258CE):

Justin Martyr (100-165CE)

*There is no other than this—to become acquainted with Christ, to be washed in the fountain spoken of by Isaiah for the remission of sins, and for the remainder, to live sinless lives.*

Irenaeus (130-200CE)

*For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean, by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, from our old transgressions; being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes, even as the Lord has declared: "Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." John 3:5*

Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (200-258CE)

*But later, by the help of the water of new birth, the stain of former years was washed away, and a light from above—serene and pure—was infused into my reconciled heart. Then through the Spirit breathed from heaven, a second birth restored me to a new man.*

Bishop Cyprian described that baptism canceled his sins, caused the Holy Spirit to indwell his body, allowed him to be born again and changed his behavior.

## **Southwest Georgia Recollections of Baptism**

In the African American Baptist community I grew up in, in Southwest Georgia, we heard stories as children about how our sins were carried by our parents until we were twelve, and that by or before that age we needed to repent, have our sins forgiven, and be baptized. I was 11 years old when I was baptized in a stream of clear running water. For the rest of my life, those who went into the water that morning would be as a permanent class of sisters and brothers, and when referencing our connections with each other, we always began with, “we were baptized together.”

As we gathered at the stream, all who were to actually enter the water—those who conducted the ceremony and those who were to be baptized—were dressed in white gowns, both males and females. All heads were covered in white. The ceremony was led by the pastor and two accompanying Deacons. It began on the bank with the singing of the song, “Take Me to the Water” and was followed by one verse of a lined hymn, “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand,” usually or “Come Ye That Love the Lord,” followed by a traditional prayer. In our community, our prayers began with the “Our Father” down to the line that is “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever, amen.” This line becomes a transition to the personal text section of the prayer: “For Thine is the kingdom and all power in heaven and earth are thine. This morning, dear Jesus, we stand here on the banks of the Jordan, asking you to be in our midst...” At the end of the prayer, layered with moans, the pastor would read the scriptural lesson. It was the story of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus, and the song begins again, “None but the righteous, none but the righteous, none but the righteous, shall see God.” Those conducting the ceremony move into the water, holding each other’s hands to this singing. When they reach the selected place, they turn and face the congregation on the banks. Still singing, each candidate

for baptism is handed down into the water by selected attendants also dressed in white. The candidate is held each step of the way, never taking a step without the support of a hand on each side. When the candidate gets to the location of the ceremony, she or he is turned around to face those on the banks singing. When they get to the end of a cycle of the song, the pastor raises his hand and chants:

*Obedience to my God and my Savior  
We baptize this our beloved sister  
Under the profession of her own faith  
In the name of the Father,  
In the name of the Son,  
In the name of the Holy Ghost!*

Next, gently covering the candidate's nose and mouth, they take her back until her body is under the water and then fully drenched, lifts her up again, and the singing continues... "I love Jesus..."

After all candidates are baptized, sometimes there is a benediction, but in some cases it is announced that there is no benediction, and members are urged to stay in the state of prayer as they go home to redress for the big meeting day of two full services with a feast between.

Baptism Sunday was the highest day at our church. It was also Homecoming Sunday where people who had moved away would come back to visit. When I joined the church, there was no choir and no piano. All singing was congregational and unaccompanied. The service was opened by two mothers of the church, followed by two deacons. The service compositions would be an opening song with a rhythm, a lined hymn, a prayer, and a repeat. Before the Pastor took the pulpit, there would be four of these cycles, and a devotional service of about thirty minutes. There was also a song, prayer, and scripture led by the pastor before the sermon. After the sermon and the freewill offering, the newly baptized members were brought to the front of the church for the Right Hand of Fellowship ceremony: to the singing of a song, each Christian in the congregation rose and filed to the front to shake their hands welcoming each new convert into full membership of the church community.

## **Baptism Songs Remembered**

### **Take Me to the Water**

Take me to the water  
Take me to the water  
Take me to the water, to be baptized

None but the righteous  
None but the righteous  
None but the righteous  
Shall see God

I love Jesus ... Yes I do

Jesus will save you... yes he will

**Certainly Lord**

Have you been to the pool? Certainly Lord!  
Have you been to the pool? Certainly Lord!  
Have you been to the pool? Certainly Lord!  
Certainly, certainly, certainly Lord!

Have you got good religion? Certainly Lord!...  
Have you been redeemed? Certainly Lord!...

**Wade in the Water**

Wade in the Water  
Wade in the Water  
Wade in the Water Children,  
Wade in the Water, God's gonna trouble the water

**Lined Hymns**

I was blessed to grow up at a time when many congregations lined the text of the hymn before singing the text. The lining of the text was in a chant form, and the congregation followed using a familiar tune for the meter of the hymn text. In our congregation, we sang common, long and short meter tunes. And we knew several tunes to each meter. Sometimes, the leader chanting the text would *raise* the hymn (leading the singing section) or ask for a suitable tune and a strong hymn singer from the congregation to raise the text into singing. In Southwest Georgia, we harmonized our hymns using the melody on three octaves with the harmony line a fifth above the melody. We never used the third as a harmony line in singing the lined hymns.

**On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand**

On Jordan's stormy banks I stand  
And cast a wishful eye  
To Canaan's fair and happy land  
Where my possessions lie  
Stennett

**Come Ye That Love the Lord**

Come Ye That Love the Lord  
And let your joys be known  
Join in a song of sweet accord,  
And thus surround the throne.  
Isaac Watts