

Christians: old and new



Questions for discussion

1. What is this story about?
2. What is the meaning of baptism for Christian life?
3. How does baptism take place in your church, if at all?
4. What are the main differences between the approaches of those who favour infant baptism and those who advocate believer's baptism?
5. Both groups make positive affirmations. Do these complement or contradict each other?
6. Have you ever taken part in or observed a baptism in a church tradition other than your own? What were your impressions?
7. "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins" (Nicene Creed). Is it defensible in either scripture or tradition to separate two baptisms? Explain the personal experience of Philip and Cornelius (Acts 8,10) in view of the baptismal theology of the apostolic Church (cf. Rom. 6:3-6; Cor. 12:13-14; Eph. 4:4-6).

Adapted from the book "[Growing Together in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry—A Study Guide](#)," William H. Lazareth. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982, pg. 29-31 & 35

On Baptism...

Maria's blue jeans seemed strangely incongruous with her long braided hair. Yet mixing the modern with the traditional was not at all unusual for her. It was a characteristic that made her a constant delight to her fellow students at the university. They were never quite sure whether she was going to quote someone like Dostoevsky or Brecht, to say nothing of humming aloud from both "rock" music and the Orthodox liturgy. In her religious life, however, Maria experienced an inner turmoil that she rarely shared with others. Even her closest friend, Tanya, could not really understand or approve of her increasingly frequent visits to the small congregation of "New Christians" in town.

"Our people have been Orthodox for centuries and centuries," Tanya insisted. "You are still a loyal Christian, Maria. You love the Lord. If not everything is to your liking in our church, stay and help us change it gradually from the inside. Nothing will be gained by leaving!"

Maria respected Tanya, but she remained impatient and unconvinced. There had been no organized parishes near her home as a child. She therefore joined her parents in closely following the liturgical life of a monastic community. As the years passed, though, she became growingly dissatisfied with the community's traditional routine. There seemed too few opportunities for personal involvement, and so little sensitivity for parish renewal and modern development.

"I'm sure that the Orthodox faith is eternally true," she would say quietly to Tanya, "but it's so hard for me to understand how to put it all into everyday practice."

It was only after she started to attend the university that Maria became attracted to the congregations of "new Christians". She liked their modern music, free prayers, and the fuller participation of lay persons in Sunday worship. The adult discussions in Christian education were also lively. Though she had to admit that she certainly missed the awesome beauty of the Orthodox liturgy, she really did feel closer to daily life in her new church home. That is, until the pastor began to talk privately to her about being rebaptized—as a reborn Christian.

The leader of the congregation explained that her baptism as an infant in that remote Orthodox monastery was of no real effect. Why? Because her Christian faith was never personally and publicly expressed. Her baptism was not actually a sign of Christian conversion. It was more like a family presentation in the temple according to the social customs of the traditionally Orthodox people.

No, the pastor said, if Maria wanted to continue in this community church, and she was certainly very welcome, then she would be expected to make a public profession of the faith and be baptized in the Spirit.

"But I'm already baptized in the Spirit!" was Maria's spontaneous response. It was on that basis that she had been a faithful member of the Orthodox Church for over twenty years.

She could understand and even accept some variety of baptismal rites in the various churches. Indeed, didn't her own personal experience demonstrate the weakness in baptizing all infants of Christian parents and then not providing enough care later for their nurture in Christian education and service? Yet Maria could not bring herself to believe that she must now reject her baptism as an infant, in order to become more fully engaged in active Christian discipleship.

For months now, Maria did not know which way to turn. She wanted desperately to become part of church renewal. But she could not see why some Christian communities wanted to increase their membership by denying the infant baptism of other churches in the same place. She was completely surprised when she also learned from Tanya that both churches were members together in the World Council of Churches.