

## **What Is Baptism?**

**Philip Gulley**

My sister was the first to jump ship. It was 1973, she was 17, a junior in high school, when she informed my parents she had something to tell them, something important, that they were going to find out anyway, eventually, so she might as well tell them now. I was 12, and listening from behind the couch in the parlor, which was pushed to the wall, but I was skinny and could wiggle my way in there. It wasn't eavesdropping, it was more investigative reporting, which to me was essential to a free press.

My brothers and I knew she had been harboring a great secret, because she'd been nice to us, which could only mean one thing, she wanted us on her side. So when she told Mom and Dad she had something to tell them, something important, I hurried into the parlor, which is where we held all our important family discussions, and crawled behind the couch. So was there when she told my parents that she felt new life stirring inside of her. I remember her pausing to let that news sink in.

"New life?" my father asked.

"Yes," my sister said. "New life. I've been born again, and am going to be baptized in the Baptist church this Sunday. I'd like you to be there."

It was a masterful way to deliver potentially devastating news, the it-could-be-worse approach.

"Well, honey," my father said, "I'll be happy to go with you."

“Can I go, too?” I asked from behind the couch. Religion had always fascinated me.

So we went, my sister, my father, and I to the Baptist church, while Mom went to the Catholic church, she being of the opinion my sister had already been baptized as a baby, by a priest, in the One True Church, so why do it again?

I had seen baptisms before, at the end of the Catholic Mass, when Father McLaughlin would announce a baby had been born and would summon the parents and godparents forward and anoint the baby’s forehead with holy water, so if they died, they would go to heaven with all the other Catholics.

But I had never seen an adult baptism. It began with the minister announcing that my sister had grown up Catholic, but was now becoming a Christian, which was pretty much how Protestants saw things back then, then dunked her in the water and up she came, a new person, saved, and going to heaven with all the other Baptists.

Four years later, I began attending youth group at Lee and Mary Lee Comer’s house and became a Quaker.

I met with my parents in the parlor to tell them.

“I’ve been feeling new life stir within me,” I said.

“Oh, God,” my mother said.

“Yes, I think that’s who it is,” I said.

When my mother learned my becoming a Quaker didn’t involve water, she was all for it.

Today, I want to talk about baptism, and want to begin by assuring you Quakers believe in baptism. Sometimes, you might hear a Quaker say, “We don’t believe in baptism,” but that isn’t accurate. What they really mean is that Quakers don’t have a ritual of water baptism, but we do believe in baptism, if by baptism we mean this entrance into a new life, this regeneration, this new life stirring inside us.

It is this inward regeneration, this spiritual baptism, we Friends cherish. We believe that unless someone has experienced this inward spiritual regeneration, the outward baptism with water matters little. Now let me describe this regeneration, this transition to new life. It begins when we undergo a spiritual shift, a new birth, when we catch a glimpse of something so beautiful and compelling it changes our path. We were walking through life in one direction, and we changed course. We said, *Not this way, but that way!* The needle on our compass swung and we set off in a fresh direction.

It happened for me when I was 20 years old and reading James Michener’s book *Chesapeake*. Some people begin their new life reading the Bible or the Torah, or the Koran; I began mine reading *Chesapeake*. One of the characters in that novel was a Quaker woman named Ruth Brinton, a brave, feisty woman who spent her life fighting slavery. She dedicated herself to this great cause of freedom for blacks, which drove everyone crazy.

The authorities threatened to arrest her for teaching slaves to read, her husband told her to pipe down and tend to the house-keeping, her Quaker meeting turned its back on her, but she soldiered on. So I was 20 years old and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, and read that book and thought to myself, “I want to be like her. I want to make a difference, and if I have to annoy people to do it, so be it.”

Now I know you’ve had those moments, when you’ve caught a glimpse of something big and wonderful beyond you, something noble and virtuous, that caused your life to shift. You woke up that morning one person, and went to sleep that evening feeling another person being born inside of you, feeling this new life stirring inside of you. And that was your baptism, or its beginning. You might have been sprinkled or immersed by a priest or minister, but that was an outward ceremony that may or may not have been accompanied by this inward baptism.

The Spirit that gives this new life has always been in us. But one day we became aware of it, and said *Yes!* to it, and that was our moment of baptism. Or maybe our baptism was more gradual, a slow waking over time, a dawning awareness. All we know is this, that before baptism we had goals and priorities, then during and after our baptism our goals and priorities shifted. The Greek word for *baptism* means to be submerged or immersed. So we found ourselves immersed in a new reality, a new life.

Now I've known folks who've been going to church their entire lives and they haven't had this inward transformation, this spiritual baptism. And I know folks who've never darkened the door of a church and they're just bursting with Spirit. So the church can bear witness to this Spirit, but it can't bestow it, it can't control it or own it. It can only live in its power. Or not. I've known lots of churches, and you have too, that are content to just slog along in petty piety, sprinkled with a dash of nationalism, and mistaking it for Spirit-ed living.

But I have never known anyone who earnestly sought this inward baptism, this presence of Spirit, who didn't eventually receive it. This might be the one prayer God always answers, our prayer to see the world with new eyes, with changed hearts. God didn't answer my prayer to have a book on the *New York Times* bestseller's list, but every time I have asked God to help me see something or someone in a new light, it has eventually happened, which tells me that baptism isn't something that happens just once, then it's over. No, our baptism unfolds, as we are immersed in God's spirit. Baptism unfolds. So the question for us isn't "Have you been baptized?" The question for us is, "Are you being baptized? Are you submerged in God's spirit, becoming new?"