

## **Baptizing the World, Part One**

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Until the fourth century, the Christian Church continued to celebrate one feast, for the birth of Christ and his baptism together. The feast marked one occasion to celebrate two divine events. However, after the Byzantine emperor, Constantine the Great, converted to Christianity followed by many others, starting in the fourth century, their new religious practices started to become mixed with the pagan customs and ceremonies previously ingrained in their conscience, which conflicted with their new faith. This forced the Church to confront and overcome the new challenge by Christianizing it.

The feast of the sun god was a great feast in the Roman Empire, especially in the East. Feasts are always, unfortunately, occasions to escape morality for many. When new believers continued to celebrate this feast alongside the Christian feasts, the Church, the pillar of truth, decided to separate Christmas from Theophany and assign a special feast for it – independent feasts for the Lord's birth and baptism. The feast of baptism remained on January 6, and Christmas was moved to December 25, the date of the feast of the sun.

Therefore, those who attend the prayers and liturgical services will notice an almost complete similarity in the structure of the two festal services.

The Christmas apolytikion uses the title "Sun of Justice" for Christ: "For they that worshipped the stars learned through a star (the light of the knowledge of Christ) to worship Thee, O Sun of Justice." Thus, in time, the pagan festival became Christianized, and Christians began to celebrate in a manner befitting their faith.

This is what we call the Christianization, or baptism, of the world. It consists of adopting an existing practice and giving it a Christian meaning. Let us take baptism as a second example. Water in ancient civilization was a source of fear and danger. Ancient man did not have the ability to confront floods, torrents, heavy rains and their aftermath, let alone seas and rivers. Water was considered a source of uncontrollable chaos, and was called, in the Old Testament, "chaos." The god of water was a fearsome god. However, water was also considered a sign of purification and cleanliness, and a tangible proof of the inner purity towards which the repentant person turns. Therefore, it was used in most religions as a symbol of purification and inner cleanliness.

St. John the Baptist called for the baptism of repentance, which was a sign of a change in the baptized person's behavior and taking a new path, well pleasing to God and in accordance with the divine commandments. Would the Baptist have called for this water baptism if this practice was unknown and unfamiliar to his contemporaries? Christ came and accepted John's baptism, to teach us "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). He also asked his disciples to baptize those to whom they preached in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

Baptism by water was no longer a mere sign, but became, in Christ, a spiritual rebirth, divine sonship for the baptized, forgiveness of sins, a garment of incorruption, etc. It was no longer a symbol or image of a deeper meaning, but a real act bearing divine grace. In other words, Christianity adopted a familiar practice, gave it a completely new meaning, and arranged a special ritual for its completion, commensurate with the faith.

The same is true for many other things.

Some people try to ridicule Christianity on the grounds that it adopted rituals and practices that existed long before it, and therefore are not of its own invention. Their argument is that the rituals were taken from what came before Christianity – as if the authenticity of a subject lies only in its invention!