

JOHN THE BAPTIST, JESUS, AND BAPTISM

The Jews already had a baptism for converts, alongside circumcision. The thinking was that any person whose mother had not offered the sacrifice for cleansing on the fortieth day was unclean, together with her baby. The convert had to receive a full immersion, and even remove rings and ornaments. Jews regarded the newly baptised convert as a one-day-old person in the Jewish faith. There are points of contact with the New Testament. John 3: 25 tells us “Then an argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a Jew about purification.” Some would have remembered that Naaman the Syrian had been cleansed of his leprosy when he dipped himself in the Jordan.

There is another. Receiving the baptism of John the Baptist would imply that for Jews all their previous involvement with God and His Word was worthless. They had to begin again, like recent converts. That highlights the Baptist’s call: “Repent!” This may help us understand why the scribes and Pharisees refused to accept John the Baptist’s baptism. They not only had doubts that God had authorised it, but receiving it was an insult, in view of all the earning of God’s favour they thought they had been doing. Nicodemus expressed the same thought when he said, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Jesus also spoke about baptism as a re-birth, being born from above, of water and the Spirit.

John the Baptist’s baptism prepared people for the important coming of the Messiah. Early in Jesus’ ministry, His disciples were also baptising. Jesus affirmed the same message, that the kingdom of God was near.

Perhaps a problem for some early Christians was that Jesus seemed to put Himself in an inferior position to John the Baptist if He received baptism from him. However, John the Baptist repeatedly said that the One coming after him was greater than he was. It later became evident that those who became Christians had to receive Christian baptism, even if they had previously received the baptism of John the Baptist (Ac 19:1-6). Even the apostles, who had been with Jesus for three years, traced their faith back to their Christian baptism on the day of Pentecost. Peter said that the family of Cornelius had to be baptised because God had given them “the same gift” as He had given the first disciples when they “became believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.” In the New Testament, the expression “become believers” is regularly baptismal (Ac 11:17).

There was a point of similarity between the baptism of John and that of Jesus. Through both God worked repentance and bestowed the forgiveness of sins. For early Christians, that would have raised another difficulty. By receiving baptism from John the Baptist, would Jesus not be implying that He was a sinner and needed forgiveness? However, Matthew clarified that in his record of Jesus’ answer to John, “Permit it to be so now; for that is how it is proper for us to fulfil all righteousness.” Jesus’ baptism was part of His work as the Saviour. When He was baptised, He was doing something for us, putting His fulfilment into the total of His saving work, in order that sinners might receive the benefits of His work in their own baptism.

The significant difference between the baptism of John and that of Christian baptism is that Christian baptism bestows the Holy Spirit. That is the point of the New Testament references to John’s baptism as water only. Baptism is always with water, but the Holy Spirit is a principal gift in Christian baptism with water. John testified, “I myself did not know Him, but the purpose for which I have come baptising with water is that He may be revealed to Israel. I have seen the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and He has remained on Him. I did not know Him, but He who has sent me to baptise with water told me, ‘The One on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the One who baptises with the Holy Spirit.’” The Scriptures say that people saw the Spirit coming down, and that He came “in bodily form.”

The titles “Messiah” and “Christ” both mean “the anointed One.” An important passage in Isaiah had said, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor.” At His baptism, Jesus began His ministry as the One whom the Holy Spirit had anointed. Immediately after His baptism, the Spirit led Jesus, full of the Spirit, into the wilderness, as the Representative of Israel, to set right Israel’s failure in temptation by the Devil. After that, Jesus “returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4:14). When He went to the synagogue at Nazareth, He quoted Isaiah’s words as fulfilled in Himself as He recited them: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me because He has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor.” The presence of the Spirit was at the same time a sign that the last times of fulfilment had arrived (Ac 2:17).

When Jesus was baptised, God opened the closed doors of heaven to reveal His glory. The visible presence of the Spirit and the proclamation of the Word came together. God acknowledged Jesus as the man whom He loved and had chosen. However, the Father’s voice from heaven asserted that Jesus was His Son (Ps

2:7) and the One whom Isaiah had described as the Servant of the Lord, who would suffer to redeem Israel. Isaiah had foretold, “Here is My Servant, whom I uphold; here is My Chosen One, in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him” (Isa 42:1).

Jews at that time understood God’s imparting of the Spirit as prophetic inspiration. At the very least, the Spirit’s descent on Jesus meant that the Spirit was active in Israel again after a long silence, since Zechariah and Malachi, and that Jesus was a prophet. Jesus later affirmed that John the Baptist was “more than a prophet” The Old Testament prophets began their work when God called them. In an important sense, Jesus’ baptism was His call to begin His ministry. Jesus Himself, however, was not simply like another of the Old Testament prophets. He told the people, “Something greater than Jonah is here!” (Mt 12:41). John the Baptist acknowledged that great difference between himself and’ Jesus: “He must become greater; but I must become less. The One who comes from above is above all.” When Jesus challenged his opponents “Where did the baptism of John come from? Was it from heaven or from men?” (Mt 21:25), He implied more that John’s authority. If God had authorised John the Baptist, Jesus’ reception of the Spirit when John the Baptist baptised Him, was His authorisation.

Jesus said, about John the Baptist, “Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” John’s proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven was near. When Jesus came, that kingdom was present among men. The New Testament is the time of the fullness of the Spirit It had arrived. Jesus was God’s final word. Through Him, the Spirit gives life. His words were Spirit and life (Joh 6:63).

Jesus’ baptism was not the institution of Christian baptism. For that, we have Matthew 28: 19-20: “Make disciples of all the nations by baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and by teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you.” However, we see in Jesus’ baptism everything that is important in ours. Our baptism has included the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Spirit Peter proclaimed that the first time Christian baptism was offered: ““Repent, and let every one of you be baptised, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit For this promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away, all whom the Lord our God calls” (Ac 2:38-39). In baptism we became believers and received the baptismal seal of the Spirit (Eph 1:13). In 2 Corinthians Paul wrote about a specific point in the past, obviously baptism: “God is the One who makes both us and you firm in Christ and who has anointed us, who has also sealed us and has given us the guarantee of the Spirit in our hearts.” There, God bestowed faith, and made us His sons. Paul wrote, “For you are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, because all of you who were baptised into Christ have put on Christ” (Gl 3:26-27). The Spirit is the “firstfruits.” The Spirit that we have received in baptism is “the guarantee of our inheritance” (Eph 1:14). We see in our baptism the opening of the doors of heaven also.