



# THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

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*Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, raying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And In a voice from heaven, Aging. This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*

(Matthew 3:13-17)

The baptism of our Lord is strangely neglected in evangelical circles. Even the man who baptized Christ is neglected. The prophet Elijah is a favorite subject for a series of biographical sermons. But John the Baptist, the New Testament Elijah, is almost never the topic of such series. something of great importance. God has shouted, but we have not heard. What the Almighty has punctuated with exclamation marks, we have relegated to a footnote. Is it not time to return to Jordan for another look?

Sadly we must confess that the word strange does not fully describe the situation. The word tragic truly applies. Even a little study reveals that God has given a surprising emphasis to the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Surely our generation has missed

## **I. YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE!**

Our first task is to prove our assertion that God gives great emphasis to

the baptism of his Son. This should secure the attention of reverent Bible students. We must all agree that where God gives emphasis, we should give attention.

**A. Repetition in the Scriptures is a means of emphasis, and this method of emphasis is plainly used in the accounts of the baptism of Jesus and the circumstances surrounding it.**

1. The baptism of Christ is described in all three synoptic gospels. The ministry of John the Baptist is recorded in all four gospels. By way of contrast, the very birth of Christ is recorded in only two gospels. Likewise, the model prayer and the Sermon on the Mount are recorded in only two gospels.

Consider how many important events in the life of Christ and many of his memorable words are found in only one gospel. For example:

- The coming of the wise men.
- The infant Jesus recognized as the Messiah by Simeon and Anna. Our Lord's activity and words at the temple when he was twelve.
- Christ's first miracle.
- Christ's conversations with Nicodemus and the woman at the well.
- Parables like the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan.

When we consider how much attention all these items receive in evangelical pulpits in contrast with the baptism of Christ, surely we must admit that our priorities are out of alignment!

2. Emphasis by repetition is certainly evident in the prophecies that speak of John the Baptist's ministry. That ministry obviously includes our Lord's baptism. Consider the following texts:

Isaiah 7:14, which foretells the virginal conception and birth of Christ, is quoted only once in the New Testament. But Isaiah 40:3-5, which

prophesies of John's work, is quoted five times in the New Testament. Micah 5:2, which foretold the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, is quoted only once in the New Testament. On the other hand, Malachi 4:5-6 is repeatedly quoted and alluded to in the New Testament. It speaks of John as Elijah, who would precede the coming of Messiah.

**B. The baptism of Jesus receives emphasis in that God chose it as the occasion to greatly advance special revelation.** The truth of God's triune nature, while hinted at in the Old Testament, was plainly manifested at Jordan. Not only were the three Persons of the Trinity clearly revealed, but they were also seen in their covenantal roles in salvation. The Father appeared as the One who sent the Son and was well pleased in his obedience. The Son was revealed as the servant of Jehovah. His baptism manifested his willingness to die. The Holy Spirit was revealed anointing Christ. No wonder the ancient Arian heretics were told to "go to Jordan and there learn the doctrine of the Trinity."

Would we ourselves understand Christ's words in the Great Commission apart from the revelation given at his baptism? Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mat. 28:19). Three Persons but one name! Those who understand the meaning of the name know that it teaches that the three Persons of the Godhead are one in essence, in glory and in all of the divine attributes.

**C. Other events accompanying Christ's baptism give weight to that occasion.** The heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit visibly descended on Christ. The barrier of invisibility was breached. (Only here and at Pentecost do we read of the Spirit being visibly manifested.) The Father spoke audibly—the barrier of silence was broken. (Only three times during Christ's public ministry do we read of the Father speaking audibly.) Surely heaven viewed the activities at Jordan as great ones!

**D. All the Persons of the Trinity treated the baptism of Jesus as significant.** The Father spoke audibly and was *well pleased* with Christ. Jesus walked many a weary mile to obey the Father and submit to baptism. Upon that baptism, the Spirit manifested Christ as the Anointed One. *And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.* (John 1:32-33)

Christ (Greek) and Messiah (Hebrew) both mean the anointed one. That Jesus was demonstrated to be the Anointed One at his baptism is highly significant.

**E. We see the importance of Christ's baptism in that it preceded his public ministry.** This is an example to us. Baptism is still the first duty of those who, being converted, would serve the Lord. (See Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 8:36-37.)

## **II. REASONS FOR THE NEGLECT OF CHRIST'S BAPTISM.**

God has placed a spotlight on Jordan. Nonetheless, it has garnered little attention. Evangelical pulpits have paid little attention to what it was that compelled the Father to speak from heaven. Modern Christian authors seem unmoved by that which moved the gospel writers. Why this lack of interest? Here are some possible reasons.

**A. Baptism as a topic is so controversial that many leave it alone for fear of offending someone.** Strong beliefs are not viewed as positive in our post-modern society.

**B. The baptism of Christ is viewed by most as a topic of great theological difficulty.** The crossfire of conflicting opinions leaves many

pastors intimidated by the subject.

**C. Many evangelicals as well as all Campbellites have concluded that John's baptism was not Christian baptism.** Such thinking naturally diminishes interest in the subject.

### **III. DO WE FOLLOW CHRIST IN BAPTISM?**

On September 13, 1855, an Englishman named J. C. Philpot was baptized by John Warburton at Allington, Wiltshire. Mr. Philpot was a polished Oxford scholar and a clergyman in the established church. John Warburton was an uneducated and unpolished Baptist minister who suffered throughout his life from poverty, persecution and domestic trials. Needless to say, this baptism raised many eyebrows. The action cost Mr. Philpot his income and his respectability in polite society. He had been brought to the font as an infant, yet he considered that to be only a superstitious ritual, a relic of popery. At thirty years of age, cost what it may, he must, as he put it, "follow the dear Lord in baptism."

We who are Baptists often speak of "following Christ in baptism." The expression implies that we submit to baptism willingly, and that the baptism we receive is the same as that received by Christ.

Those who view John's baptism as an Old Covenant lustration (purification) or as a form of proselyte baptism originated by some Jewish sect, do not—indeed cannot—speak in this way. Likewise those who were baptized as infants cannot speak of following Christ in baptism, for they had no choice in the matter. They did not come like Christ but were brought to baptism. Certainly those who believe that baptism saves cannot be said to follow Christ into the water, for he had no sins to be cleansed nor any nature to be renewed.

This leaves us to consider the claim implied by Baptist churches in this

common expression, "following the Lord in baptism." Do these churches indeed follow Christ in the one baptism mentioned in Ephesians 4:5? The only way to substantiate this claim is to compare in each aspect the baptism administered by John the Baptist with that administered in Baptist churches today. Things that are identical in every aspect are the same. Therefore, let us compare.

**A. Baptism acquires a Scriptural mode.** As far as I know, no one claims that John's baptism was any different in mode than baptisms administered later. Baptists, of course, believe that immersion is the only Scriptural mode. The word translated baptism in the New Testament is "baptizo", which means to immerse, dip or submerge.

**B. Baptism must be administered by divine authority.** Jesus commanded us to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Some mistakenly see this as a baptism formula, a liturgical wording intended to be recited when someone is baptized. While there is certainly no harm in such a practice, Jesus was rather explaining that baptism must be performed by divine authority. (Compare this with Matthew 18:20 and I Corinthians 5:4. Also think of the common phrase, "Stop in the name of the law!")

John undoubtedly baptized with divine authority:

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. (John 1:6)  
And John bare record saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God (John 1:32-34)*

You may ask, Was Jesus baptized in the name of the Father, and of the

Son, and of the Holy Spirit? The answer should already be clear, but for the sake of any who may yet be confused, I will again point out that the authority of the Holy Trinity was never more evident in anyone's baptism than in that of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Father audibly expressed his pleasure in it. The Son obviously concurred, because he walked for perhaps two days and then insisted that John baptize Him. The Holy Spirit approved, for immediately upon the baptism he visibly anointed Christ.

**C. Baptism requires a proper administrator.** Baptist churches have historically baptized through their ordained ministers. Now some may question concerning John himself. Was he baptized? Was he a church member? Was he an ordained minister? As we have seen, his ordination came directly from God (John 1:6, 32-34). Was John baptized? We answer by saying that Adam had no mother! Some things must begin with God. John was the first Baptist. By that we mean he was the first ever to administer baptism. His authority came from heaven. There was no one to baptize him. Was John a church member? No. (In John 3:29, he calls himself simply the friend of the bridegroom.) However, without John, there would have been no church, for the first church was made of people baptized by him. This became the church at Jerusalem.

(We often hear that baptism requires church authority. This is somewhat confusing. Baptism is administered by the authority of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The church is not the authority behind baptism, but is rather has received authorization from God to administer baptism; see Matthew 18:20. In this sense, the church holds the keys of the kingdom, Matthew 18:18-20.)

**D. Christian baptism, as well as the Lord's Supper, is a symbolic act and must therefore be invested with the correct biblical meaning.** Both of these ordinances are to be gospel preachments and can only thus be understood where the gospel is believed. Where there is no gospel preaching, there can be no gospel ordinances. As the moon reflects the light of the sun, so baptism and the Lord's Supper reflect the light of the gospel.

This brings us to ask the question, "Did John the Baptist preach the gospel?" Only if he preached the gospel could his baptism be considered as Christian. To answer this question, we ask the reader to reflect on the following Scriptures:

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. (John 1:6-7)*

*He that believeth on the Son bath everlasting life: and he that believed) not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abided) on him. (John 3:36)*

*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. (Mark 1:1-4)*

*And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shall go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76-79)*

Another angle from which to approach the symbolism of John's baptism is to ask, "How did Jesus understand his own baptism?" In answer to this question, we point out that during his earthly ministry, our Lord twice spoke of "baptism" in a metaphorical sense.

*Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She said; unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit,*



*the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. An ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father.*  
(Matthew 4:20-23)

*But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!* (Luke 12:50)

Notice that in both cases the baptism pointed to Christ's future saving work. Yes, Jesus did understand the importance of his baptism. In fact, in his baptism he manifested his willingness to die at Calvary. So deeply did his baptism impress him, its meaning hung over him like a dark cloud during his entire earthly ministry, as Luke 12:50 indicates.

Jesus, ere he gave his blood,  
Was immersed in Jordan's flood,  
There, and in that way,  
to show What he had to undergo.

**E. Christian baptism requires a proper candidate.** John baptized only those who repented and believed the gospel, according to Matthew 3:5-6; John 1:6-7. Historically, Baptists have seen repentance and faith as prerequisites for Christian baptism, clearly concurring with John of old.

The objection may arise in the minds of some that Jesus could not repent, for he had no sin. While Christ's sinlessness is wonderfully true, it does not prove that his baptism was not Christian. Rather, it reveals that in his baptism, he was identifying with his people and showing his willingness to die in their behalf.

**F. Baptism as a positive law belongs in a specific time frame.** Positive laws are not permanent as are moral laws. Scriptural baptism belongs exclusively to the New Testament economy.

Some may object that John's baptism could not be Christian, because it occurred before Calvary and thus the Old Covenant was still in force. Here we find theological water in which to swim! We shall not attempt to explain how everything fits together. Indeed, theology is full of tensions. We shall simply step around the difficulty and write about things that are clear in Scripture. (Sometimes it is best to enjoy the fish, and let someone else choke on the bones! I think of a Baptist preacher who, when asked how to reconcile predestination and man's responsibility, answered that he never tried, for by the time he had reconciled his checkbook, it was always bedtime!) Staying with the plain teaching of Scripture, we would ask our troubled friends, Was not the Lord's Supper instituted before Calvary? If one ordinance may exist before our Lord's passion, might not both? In fact, baptism is a prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper. Truly, the Lord's Supper is a church ordinance, and its observance reveals that Jesus and the apostles were in church order at the time. (Compare Matthew 26:30 with Hebrews 2:12.) Were not the tabernacle of Moses and the temple of Solomon built before either structure was cleansed by sacrifice or filled with God's presence? Even so Christ instituted his church before Calvary or Pentecost.

Yes, our Lord dismantled the Old Covenant by his death. Yet, as the systematic theologian knows, it is difficult to pinpoint every transition and fit all biblical revelation into neat categories. For instance, whereas the New Covenant began at the cross, the last days or days of Messiah began *with* Christ's advent (Hebrews 1:1-2; Genesis 49:1, 8-10). Furthermore, the gospel, in terms of the whole "Christ-event", began with John the Baptist.

The previous sentence may excite shock and jealousy for the centrality of Christ in the gospel. Let the reader take up this issue with Mark or with our Lord himself.

*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. (Mark 1:1-4)*

*For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. (Matthew 11:13)*

Of these verses, Athanasius said, "Up to John, the law; from him, the gospel." Certainly the gospel is about Jesus Christ and his saving work. But Christ is a king, and kings must be announced. They are always preceded by a forerunner who prepares the way. The "prophets and the law" pointed to John. As a forerunner, he was the first blip on the prophetic radar scanning for the presence of the Messiah. This is why Isaiah 40:3-5 is so often repeated. Here is the reason why the last words of the Old Testament speak of John the Baptist.

*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful! day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. (Malachi 4:5-6)*

*And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come. (Matthew 11:14)*

When Peter spoke of a replacement for Judas Iscariot, he specified that the new apostle must be a witness to John's ministry (Acts 1:21-22). Apart from this, he could not be an eyewitness to the entire gospel story. Again, when Peter carried the gospel to the Gentiles, his message included a reference to John's ministry (Acts 10:37).

Indeed the witness of John was part of Messiah's credentials. Christ himself pointed this out in Matthew 11:13-14. He said, in effect, If John is

Elijah, then I must be Messiah. The true shepherd did not climb over the fence but went to the door and was recognized and admitted by the porter. No doubt, when Christ spoke of the porter, he was thinking of John the Baptist.

*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entered, not by the door into the sheepfold, Gut climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. (John 10:1-3)*

Perhaps an illustration from our modern world will help. In sporting and entertaining events, a star draws the crowd. This celebrity is introduced by a host who 'speaks with a very distinctive voice. (Remember, John identified himself as a "voice", John 1:23.) When the host walks onto the stage, the crowd goes wild. The show has begun! However, when the star walks onto the stage, the host retires and is soon forgotten. As the "voice", John announced the Messiah. His job done, he retired from view. His testimony was, *He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3:30).

Thus we see from the Scriptures the folly of connecting John's baptism with some Old Covenant lustration. John was not the end of the law, but the beginning of the gospel.

**G. We conclude this study by calling attention to the implications of denying that John's baptism was indeed Christian baptism.** Those who hold a different view must live with some glaring inconsistencies. If John's baptism was not Christian:

- The Christ was without Christian baptism.
- The Head of the church was without Christian baptism.
- The twelve apostles were without Christian baptism.
- The first church began without Christian baptism.
- The Lord's Supper was first observed without Christian baptism.

- The apostles spent their lives carrying out Christ's commission and starting churches without Christian baptism.

May God keep us from believing things so ridiculous and dishonoring to the wisdom of God!

In conclusion, I ask one simple question. Have you followed the Lord in baptism? If you are a believer, it is your duty.

His institutions would I prize;  
Take up the cross, the shame despise;  
Dare to defend his noble cause,  
And yield obedience to his laws.

## **ADDENDUM ON ACTS 19:1-7**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Some argue from this passage that the re-baptism of these disciples proves that John's baptism was not valid for this dispensation.

#### **I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION.**

To understand this passage, several facts must be considered:

- A. At this time John the Baptist had been dead for over twenty years.
- B. Ephesus was far from Judea where John's ministry was carried out.
- C. John, while on earth, had received authority from Heaven to baptize (John 1:6, Mark 11:30). This authority was not passed on to his disciples. Christ and his apostles were baptized by John and it was Christ who gave his disciples authorization to baptize (John 4:1-2; Matthew 28:28-29).
- D. Some who came under John's widespread influence did not remain to become disciples of Christ. These men were ignorant of the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2) and other great truths.

E. Some of these men for years afterward attempted to teach others while having a very imperfect understanding themselves. Some even took it upon themselves to baptize as John had.

## II. VERSE BY VERSE EXPOSITION.

Verse 1. Paul came to the great city of Ephesus. Here a ministry was begun that eventually affected all of Asia Minor (verse 10).

Verse 2. At Ephesus, Paul met certain men who had been ill-taught and baptized without authority by someone who professed to be a follower of John the Baptist (Apollos?). These men had obviously never met John, because they were ignorant of the Holy Spirit and other truths that John preached (Matthew 3:11; John 1:26-30). Upon meeting them, Paul seemed to notice that something was lacking. His question and their answer revealed their ignorance of:

1. The person of the Holy Spirit who dwells in the heart of believers.
2. The baptism with (or in) the Spirit foretold by John, which occurred on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and was validated throughout the book of Acts on various occasions with the bestowing of miraculous gifts.

Verse 3. All baptism is "unto" someone's doctrine and authority (I Corinthians 10:2). In baptism we are identifying with someone and some system of doctrine. Paul, upon hearing their ignorant answers, asked them unto what they were baptized. They answered that they were baptized unto the authority and teaching of John. They were not claiming to have been personally baptized by John.

Verse 4. Paul then explained to these men that they had been ill-informed. They did not know even the purpose of John's baptism and seemed ignorant of much or all that concerned Christ.

Verse 5. Paul's reason for baptizing these men was not that John's baptism was invalid. After all, Christ Jesus, the Head of the church, had John's baptism. The original apostles had only John's baptism. The first church

started by Christ during his earthly ministry was made up of people who had only John's baptism. None of these were ever rebaptized. While it is true that the church at that time was in an undeveloped state, there is no good reason to reject John's baptism. To do so is to unbaptize all true churches.

Our baptism came from John through Christ. These twelve men at Ephesus were re-baptized because:

1. They had been baptized by an unauthorized administrator.
2. Baptism is an act of obedience to the truth. These men did not know the truth. According to verse 4, they did not even know the purpose of John's baptism.

Verses 6-7. Having been baptized by Paul, these men received miraculous signs of the Holy Spirit. This was outward proof that the Spirit had come to them and that Paul's teaching to them was true. These men finally came to know the truth that John had preached. They followed the Messiah whom John had preached, and they received the Holy Spirit (in terms of His extraordinary gifts) of whom John had prophesied.

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