

JESUS' BAPTISM AND OURS

Epiphany is normally thought of as being relegated to one day during the Church Year. Primarily the day is associated with the visit of the Magi and in that the revelation (the epiphany) of Christ to the Gentiles. But what is commonly designated the season *after* Epiphany incorporates other instances in the life of Jesus when there was a revelation of who he was. So, in some sense, this might be called the season *of* Epiphany. The turning of the water to wine at the wedding in Cana is one of those events associated with Epiphany. The last Sunday before Lent is Transfiguration Sunday in which Jesus was revealed to three of his disciples in a special way. The Gospel writers record another event in the life of Christ that is associated with Epiphany: the baptism of Jesus. In his baptism the Person and work of Jesus is revealed to the world. In his baptism Jesus is identified. Consequently, in our baptism into Jesus Christ, we are associated with this baptism and learn much about who we are as his followers.

Many American Protestants are scared of water. Whenever people start talking about what happens in baptism instead of what doesn't happen in baptism, many evangelical Protestants start twisting in their seats. The idea that God would use water to accomplish something seems almost repulsive; probably because of a number of things. Some of us have seen people presume upon God because they have been baptized. That kind of abuse of baptism has caused us to go to the opposite extreme and reject any effect of baptism at all. Others can't imagine God using something like water to effect anything. Water is after all a *material* substance and we all know that God works on our hearts apart from anything external.

Fears about presumption are real and many times well-grounded. People abuse good things all the time. But abuse of a good thing doesn't make a good thing a bad thing. It only reveals the wickedness of those who abuse it. So, we don't need to throw out the baby with the baptismal waters. As for the fact that God surely wouldn't use anything material to effect something so-called 'spiritual,' would be like saying that God couldn't use a rod (i.e., a stick) to split a sea or use a man and woman to create a being that will live forever. I want to encourage you to see Jesus' baptism for what it is and your own baptism in relation to his baptism; for you have been baptized into his baptism. And if perhaps you are one of those ones who is afraid of water, I want your fears to subside and learn how to splash around and enjoy your baptism.

This article is essentially a sermon that I preached last Epiphany from Matthew 3. Therefore, we will walk through Matthew 3.13-17. In order to get where we need to go, we must understand what is going on in the baptism of Jesus himself. That is what is described in the text which begins in verses 13-15.

JESUS' BAPTISM: THE NEED TO FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS (13-15)

Our text is a continuation of the first twelve verses of Matthew 3: John's ministry. He is John the Baptist (Baptizer) who comes preaching repentance. He is the one who is preparing the way for Israel's husband to come; cleansing the bride. John's ministry was that of preparation. Therefore, it was not an end in itself. John was preparing the way for the Lord to come. And when the Lord came, John's ministry would be complete. We get somewhat of a taste of this textually as we see the juxtaposition between v. 1 and v. 13. In v. 1 John comes. After John's ministry is presented to us, Jesus comes in v. 13. John's ministry is the culmination of all the prophetic ministry of the old creation. Jesus makes this clear to us later in Matthew's gospel (cf. 11.13). In this sense he is the embodiment of OC Israel; the representative. John is the firstborn who willingly concedes that he needs to be replaced by the younger brother, the seed, who is to

come. He even states as much when he says that his baptism was inferior to the baptism of the one coming. John the Baptist must give way to Jesus the Baptist. Jesus has come to usher in the new age of salvation for God's people. But in order to do that he must live out the story of the people of God himself. That is what he as the Son, the seed of the woman, must do. This is what he is doing as he comes to John for baptism.

Matthew records for us that John wasn't too keen on the idea of baptizing Jesus (3.14). In fact, the Bible says that John prevented him. John stopped Jesus. John is not guilty here of disobedience. He simply doesn't understand why Jesus needs to be baptized. John understands that he is the one in need, and that is why he says, "I have need to be baptized of you." This statement should be looked at from a couple of perspectives. First, John's baptism was a baptism into repentance. This means, in one sense, that Israel was headed in the wrong direction and needed to turn around. John's baptism presupposes sin. In fact, the text tells us that they came to be baptized "confessing their sins." So, this baptism has something to do with their sins. If this is the case, then why would Jesus need to be baptized? Jesus is not a sinner; and it appears that John understands that. John is the one who is a sinner and needs to be baptized. In Jesus receiving the baptism of John, he is identifying with his people in their sins. He has come (as Matthew has already pointed out to us) to save his people from their sins (1.21). In order to do that he must be identified with their sins, taking them upon himself as their representative, and go down to death because of them. (We'll see more of this when we get to Jesus' answer.)

The second perspective from which this needs to be viewed and related to the first is that John understands that Jesus is bringing in the new age long ago promised by God through the prophets. Jesus is the preeminent one. He is the one in whom everything will culminate. Jesus, it seems to John, is getting things all backwards. John is the one who needs to come into the coming kingdom. This looks like a digression to John. But the fact is that Jesus' baptizing anyone at this stage would be premature. He has a mission to complete before he can give the baptism prophesied by John earlier.

All of John's reservations are answered when Jesus speaks his first words recorded in Matthew's gospel, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (3.15). As soon as Jesus tells John this, John baptizes him. Why? What does it mean that this must be done in order to fulfill all righteousness? Well, this has a couple of parts to it that need to be understood.

First, we need to understand what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of fulfilling all *righteousness*. What is this righteousness of which he speaks? Our instinctive response to that is that Jesus is simply being obedient to the command of God. This is true enough. But where is it commanded that Jesus needed to be baptized? I believe it is a little more involved than simply acting as if this is a rule laid down by God that Jesus has to obey so he can check it off the list on his way to the resurrection. Righteousness is "the right thing to do." It is being in conformity to the proper standards. Those proper standards are found in the covenant that exists between God and his people. This covenant defines what it means to be righteous for both God and man in this relationship. So, for us as God's people to be righteous means that we conform to the covenant. We obey God and trust him. When we sin, we obey God in confessing our sins and receiving his forgiveness. When we do this God is *righteous/just* (according to 1Jn 1.9) when he forgives us our sins. God acts righteously when he acts in accord with the covenant as well. For God this means that he fulfills his promises. Sometimes this means punishment on the impenitent. But it mainly means that God acts in accord with his covenant, his promises, to save his people. This concept of God's righteousness permeates the message of the prophet Isaiah. Listen for the parallels between *righteousness* and *salvation*. YHWH speaks through the prophet Isaiah saying,

“My *righteousness* is near, My *salvation* has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples; The coastlands will wait upon Me, And on My arm they will trust. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, And look on the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish away like smoke, The earth will grow old like a garment, And those who dwell in it will die in like manner; But My *salvation* will be forever, And My *righteousness* will not be abolished” (Isa 51.5-6). Then again later he says essentially the same thing, “Thus says YHWH: ‘Keep justice, and do righteousness, For My *salvation* is about to come, And My *righteousness* to be revealed.’ (cf. also Isa 45.8; 46.13; 51.8; 59.16; 62.1). In both of these cases God’s righteousness is parallel to his salvation. YHWH’s righteousness is his acting in accord with his promises to save his people. It is his covenant faithfulness. God is righteous when he saves his people. The act of Jesus being baptized to fulfill all righteousness, I believe, is the act of YHWH himself, in fulfillment of his promises, to save his people from their sins. Jesus is telling John something like this, “John, this must be done in order to bring about the salvation of my people in fulfillment of my covenant. My baptism will bring the promised salvation.” This then is not some bald act of obedience, a tick mark on a “to do” list as if Jesus were simply jumping through arbitrary hoops. Jesus baptism is covenant faithfulness that brings about the salvation of his people.

That answers one question. But why does Jesus need to be *baptized* in order to fulfill all righteousness, or to bring about the salvation of his people? Why is baptism necessary to this whole process. As we learn earlier in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is the Son who is called out of Egypt (2.15). And when God’s Son, Israel, is called out of Egypt, he must pass through the waters of baptism in order to be saved from their enemies. Jesus is the new Israel passing through the waters that bring salvation and punishment. He is the One who has been called to fulfill Israel’s destiny. In him and in his baptism Israel will be saved. He goes through baptism for his people, identifying with them and bringing them through the waters of judgment. The baptism of Jesus is an integral part to his mission as the Son of God, the true Israel.

The scene continues in vv. 16-17. There we see Jesus officially “ordained” for his ministry as the Son of God.

JESUS’ BAPTISM: THE SON’S INAUGURATION INTO THE MINISTRY (16-17)

Baptism is a death and resurrection event. We learn this explicitly from Paul later (e.g., Rom 6), but this is in the warp and woof of all of the OC baptisms as well. Baptism is a symbolic death. That is how you are cleansed from uncleanness. Death is the only thing that can free you from this uncleanness. But once you pass through the waters you come into a new life. So Paul is not stating anything new when we says that we are buried with Christ in baptism unto death and we are raised to walk in newness of life. It is just that baptism is now understood in terms of Christ and his death and resurrection. Jesus comes out of the water. He emerges from the death of baptism (a connection he makes quite clear later on in Matthew’s record) into resurrection, or new life. Jesus’ baptism prefigures his death and resurrection.¹

When Jesus comes out of the water, immediately the heavens are opened. What is going on here? What are “the heavens?” Going back to Gen 1 and day 2 of creation, we see the creation of “the heavens.” Heaven, in this sphere, is the firmament. The firmament was created in order to separate the waters below from the waters above. That is, when the world was created it was a big mass of water. God took some of the waters from below and put them above the firmament. They are heavenly waters. Whenever people like Ezekiel look to see God’s throne above the firmament, they see crystal-like barrier between God and the earth. Just above the firmament-heavens, therefore, is God’s throne. One of the various places that this firmament-heavens is

represented in the Tab/Temple and the veil that separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Behind that veil and above the cherubim is the throne of God, where God remains hidden from his people. He cannot come into contact with them lest he break out in wrath upon them. The veil—the firmament—protects the people of God. When the people drew near to God in worship, they were always at a distance. They had to draw near through animals. The high priest could only enter the Most Holy Place once per year (cf. Lev 16). When the heavens open up, the Father is indicating that Jesus is the high priest that draws near. He is the one who will open up access to the heavenly throne so that God’s people may draw near in him (i.e., in Jesus). This is also made clear later in Matthew when the veil of the Temple is torn from top to bottom indicating access to the Most Holy Place. According to what the book of Hebrews says, the Tab/Temple were shadows of the heavenly reality. God showed Moses the pattern for the Tabernacle when he was on the Mountain. He got a glimpse into heaven and made a replica on earth (cf. Ex 25.40; 26.30; Heb 8.5). Now the heavenly reality of which the Tab/Temple were shadows has opened up. Jesus has opened up a better way. In him will be found the substance of which the Tab/Temple were only shadows. In this we also see the nature of Jesus’ baptism and ministry. That is, we see what Jesus is being commissioned to do. Jesus is being anointed as a priest. He is being anointed by one of the sons of Aaron—John the Baptist—who is now handing over the priesthood to Jesus—a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews makes it clear that Jesus is our great high priest who enters in behind the veil (Heb 6.19-20). Jesus has drawn near, and in him God’s people are able to draw near.

Had the veil been torn before this time, God’s wrath would have broken out upon the world because of sin. But that does not happen when the firmament-heavens are opened here. Instead, there are indications and declarations of favor. First, we see that the Spirit descends like a dove and alights on Jesus. Again, there are a couple of images Matthew is drawing upon that ultimately lead in the same direction. Going back to ordination of Jesus to the priesthood, this descent of the Spirit corresponds to the anointing with oil that Aaron’s sons received after their baptism in Lev 8. The sons of Aaron are washed. Then Aaron is vested as high priest. After the Tabernacle is anointed, then Aaron is anointed with the fragrant anointing oil. He is declared to be the high priest, the one who enters behind the veil once per year. He is the one upon whom all the sins of Israel rolled and who makes atonement for them.

But the image of the dove goes back further in its biblical reference. In the beginning the Spirit is portrayed as “brooding over” the unformed and unfilled world; i.e., like a bird. The Spirit is the One who forms this new creation. This picture becomes even more evident in creation/new creation imagery in the flood story. After the rain had ceased and the waters of destruction were subsiding, the dove is sent out three times. Before the waters were completely abated, the dove came back to find rest upon Noah himself (whose name means “rest” not so incidentally; cf. Gen 8.9). Eventually the dove found rest in the new creation after the waters subsided. Jesus is the new and true Noah who brings in the new creation. Creation is renewed in him after the waters of destruction have been endured. He will bring creation to its rest, its true Sabbath.

A further indication of favor from beyond the firmament-heavens is the declaration that comes the voice: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” This is a new word, as it were, that comes from behind the veil. The old word was written in stone kept hidden in the ark; i.e., the Ten Words. This is the new Word of flesh and Spirit. What is said by the Father from heaven comes from at least three places in Scripture: Psa 2.7; Gen 22.2; and Isa 42.1.

Psa 2.7 is part of what is called an enthronement Psalm. This is a Psalm that would have been sung when one of the sons of David acceded to the throne in Israel. In the Psalm we sing

about how the nations have joined forces against YHWH and his Messiah. The one who sits in the heavens laughs at them and declares the enthronement of his King. This King will rule with a rod of iron. It would be wise for the kings of the earth to submit to him. So, in Jesus' baptism he is not only being anointed as priest but also as king. He is the priest-king.

The voice from heaven says also that he is his *beloved* Son. This echoes what was said by God to Abraham about Isaac when he was told to go and sacrifice his son on the mountain. Abraham was to take his son, his beloved son, and offer him up (cf. Gen 22.2). Jesus is the seed/son of Abraham, the true Isaac, who will be offered up. The knife will not be stayed this time. He will be the one who dies and is raised back to life.

The third allusion is to Isa 42.1. The passage reads: "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One *in whom* My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles." Jesus is the Servant, the Elect One, in whom the Father delights or is well-pleased. The Father loves and delights in him. But the Servant of whom Isaiah speaks is the One who also suffers for the sins of his people (Isa 53). This is what it means to be the One in whom the Father delights because it reflects the self-giving nature of God himself.

3. JESUS' BAPTISM AND OUR BAPTISM

So Jesus' baptism is a saving act of God in line with his covenant faithfulness. It is the pre-figuring of his death and resurrection. It is his anointing to be the priest-king and the one who will usher in the new creation in himself. In his baptism he is declared to be the beloved and delighted-in Son of the Father who is the Suffering Servant. But what does that have to do with you and me? Much in every way. We must remember that as Paul says there is only "one baptism." That baptism is the baptism of Jesus which he then gives to us. John Calvin, in his *Institutes* says it this way,

[O]ur faith receives from baptism the advantage of its sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings. For he dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body [Matt. 3:13] in order that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form with us. Hence, Paul proves that we are children of God from the fact that we put on Christ in baptism [Gal. 3:26-27]. Thus we see that the fulfillment of baptism is in Christ, whom also for this reason we call the proper object of baptism ... For all the gifts of God proffered in baptism are found in Christ alone." (4.15.6)

We are baptized into Christ and his baptism determines what our baptism means. Baptism means what God says in Christ, not what we say it means. We can receive either blessing or curse depending on whether we respond to what God says about it in faith or unbelief. But, it needs to be clear, *we don't determine the meaning of baptism*. So, because God demonstrates what baptism into Christ is, we need to understand what God does in baptism.

First, *baptism is a Trinitarian event*. People go to the passages recording Jesus' baptism frequently to prove the reality of the Trinitarian nature of God. The passage certainly proves that, but that is not where we should stop. Later Jesus will commission his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. That baptism is rooted in this event. And in our baptism (as is indicated explicitly in Jesus' words) we are brought into this Trinitarian family. We are drawn near to God. In our baptism we become a part of the divine community inasmuch as we share the baptism of Jesus. We are engrafted into his body and therefore become

a part of this community.

Second, *baptism gives sanctuary access*. When Jesus was baptized the heavens were opened. Access to the Most Holy Place was granted to Jesus. In our baptism into Christ we are given this same sanctuary access because what belongs to him belongs to us. We are anointed as priests before God in our baptism as the Scripture makes explicit elsewhere (1Pt 2.9; Rev 1.6). As priests (i.e., the priesthood of all believers) we have access to the holy things and holy food. God does not require an extra step such as “confirmation” or its equivalent. Baptism grants that access. God cleans you up and gives you a place at his table. You are simply to respond in thanksgiving and faithfulness.

Third, *baptism means participation in the Spirit*. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. When Jesus shared his baptism with his body, the church, on the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out on the church. Peter then called for people to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus (and thus in his baptism) in order to participate in or receive the Spirit (Act 2.38-39). Baptism brings us into Christ’s church where his Spirit lives, forming the new creation. Being a member of the body of Christ means that you participate in the work of the Spirit. Why? Because you deserve it? Absolutely not! It is because of Christ and Christ alone.

Fourth, *baptism is a declaration of sonship*. As Calvin alluded to the words of Paul in Gal 3, those who have put on Christ in baptism belong to Christ. These are children of Abraham and heirs according to promise. As we have already seen in Matthew’s genealogy and teaching, to be a son of Abraham is to be a son of God. We are declared to be sons of God in *the* Son of God because we are baptized into Christ. What’s more, *your Father delights in you!* Your father is well-pleased with you and delights in you because you are in the beloved Son. United with him we are the loved and the delighted-in of the Father just as Jesus himself is the loved and the delighted-in. How should this help us in the time of temptation ... much like it did Jesus. Just after this scene Jesus is driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Three times Jesus’ sonship is challenged; i.e., “If you are the son of God.” Jesus had been declared to be the Son of God in his baptism. When we are assailed with similar temptations, we must trust the word of God declared to us in our baptisms. Martin Luther, when he was assailed by temptations from the devil would say, “I am baptized.” (Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, 287). In that Luther was looking away from himself and his own feelings to the sure word of God declared about him in his baptism into Christ. Assurance doesn’t come from within us but from outside of us in the word of God declared to us. It is in *that* word and not our own that we must have faith and find the assurance.

Fifth, *baptism is the declaration of God about us, not our declaration about God*. God is doing the speaking in baptism and we are to listen. We are not to tell God what baptism should mean to us or what it ought to mean. We passively receive baptism, and in that we passively receive what God says about us. As I mentioned earlier, this means that what we feel or think about our baptisms makes little difference as to its meaning. The word of God stands whether we believe it or not. It is to our benefit to believe or have faith in the word of God. If we do not, then our baptism becomes a curse. But it means what it means because God declares its meaning. So, you, when you are baptized, your identity is determined. God declares certain things about you that cannot be washed off. God is the One speaking. You listen, receive his word, and respond in faith.

Sixth, *baptism is an act of deliverance*. Jesus insisted to John that he must be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. God was saving his people through the waters of Jesus’ baptism. This was a part of Jesus’ own redemptive work in which he would fulfill his mission and save his

people from their sins. In his own body Jesus makes a new creation, and in that a new humanity. His church is this new humanity. When God brings us into his church, he is delivering us from the world. To be turned over to Satan at this point is to be cut off from the church as Paul speaks about in 1 Cor 5. Peter says that Noah, the ark, and the waters were all types of the baptism that we now receive in Christ. Peter says that this is the baptism that now saves or delivers us. Jesus delivers us into this new creation in his own baptism and our baptism into him. Our Larger and Shorter Catechisms recognize this as they speak about the sacraments being among God's "effectual means of salvation." Baptism, the Lord's Supper, with the Word and prayer are the outward ordinary means whereby Christ's communicates the benefits of his mediation to us; i.e., his saving work (cf. WLC 154, 161; WSC 88, 91). Our baptisms are God's acting in covenant faithfulness to deliver his people.

Seventh, *baptism is a calling to mission*. To be declared all of these things by God is a tremendous privilege. But to be sons of God is not only a privilege but a responsibility/mission/vocation. Baptism as a cleansing rite is not an end or goal in itself. Jesus has come to save us from sin in order that we may be what God intended us to be from the beginning and do what God planned for us to do. As Paul says in Eph 2, we are saved by grace through faith and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus *unto good works* which he has before ordained that we should walk in them. We are not only saved *from* something. We are saved *to* something. God is not cleaning us up so that he can put us on a shelf. He is cleaning us up so that we can fulfill our mission. Understanding that baptism is a declaration of God—it is true whether you accept it or not—means that you have this calling. It is non-optional. The only question is, will you respond in faith to the declaration/word of God and walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called, or will you rebel in unbelief? The blessings of God's declaration can only be enjoyed by faith. What you get from unbelief won't be enjoyed.

As we meditate on the baptism of Jesus this Epiphany season, we need to understand that what he did he did for us so that we could participate in him and be drawn near to God. So then, as the writer of Hebrews says, let us draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

1. Just a quick note here. Jesus "coming up from the water" does not necessitate the mode of baptism being immersion. In fact, if Jesus is fulfilling OC rites, immersion would be all wrong. There are no prescribed immersions in God's prescriptions for baptism. That would be novel. All OC baptisms were either done by sprinkling or pouring, generally represented as "waters from above the firmament" or heavenly water that cleansed. Baptismal waters came from the bronze laver in the courtyard of the Tab/Temple which represented waters above the firmament. The only immersions that took place in the old creation happened to people like the wicked in Noah's day and Pharaoh's army. God's people were baptized with waters from above.