

Baptism-- What's the point? John's Baptism of Jesus

Passages: Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:1-11

In just a few weeks, 12 people from our church are going to be baptized. It will truly be a momentous occasion!

But, you know, I wonder just how many of us really understand the importance of this sacrament? I mean, will we be there? We will support these 12 people as they undertake this extraordinary event? Will some of us eagerly accept to be sponsors or 'godparents'? Will we be excited for them in their new journey of faith?

That's why I thought it would be really helpful if we did a short series of 6 sermons on the topic. Each week, we'll explore a different aspect of baptism so that we can better appreciate what it is all about.

Let's pray.

The funny thing about baptism is that it's an exclusively New Testament ritual. There is no record of baptism in the Old Testament. Indeed, the only baptism outside of the NT that we know about was a ritual that developed in the ancient Essene community in the years before Christ came. In this religious sect, baptism only occurred when a non-Jew wanted to become a Jew—in order for Gentiles to be accepted into the Jewish community, they had to be baptized as a way of washing away their former, unclean, life. Baptism was exclusively for Gentile converts coming into the Jewish faith.

That's why John's baptism was such a radical thing! John suddenly showed up in Israel preaching and calling for Jewish men and women to repent, turn away from their sins and be baptized. In other words, John was literally saying to God's chosen people that God wanted to start all over again and create a new nation...a new people of God. From now on, there would be no favoritism or special position shown to Israel. All people, Jew and Gentile together, needed to come to God by faith. Most shocking of all, no special position would be given to the priests, or the religious leaders of Israel. Everyone needed to repent and start again!

That's what made John's baptism so incredibly controversial! In fact, John's baptism was actually dividing the nation. On one hand, the ordinary people of Israel loved John. Hundreds (if not thousands) of people followed him and were baptized by him. But those in power hated John! He was undermining their authority by taking people away from the established religion and into the wilderness. Everyone needed to make a fresh start, including the religious leaders and powerbrokers!

This, of course, raises a new question: Why did Jesus need to be baptized? Did he need to repent and make a fresh start, too?

One thing you'll notice in today's passage is that John really doesn't want to baptize Jesus. In Mark 1:7, John says that he is unworthy to stoop down and untie Jesus' sandals. In Matthew's version of the story, John even tries to reverse the situation by saying that he should be baptized by Jesus!

That being the case, why does Jesus get baptized?

There's one thing we need to always keep in mind here and that is that **God is starting a new people...a new nation...a new humanity!** This is why Jesus is baptized by John—He is baptized in order to become the new Leader...the Head of this new people. Through the waters of baptism by John, this 30-year old Jesus is being anointed as the new High Priest and King of a new nation! In His baptism, Jesus is figuratively becoming the new Moses, leading a newly-formed people through the deep waters of death and destruction and into the Promised Land.

It's no wonder why the two other members of the Trinity suddenly join with Jesus to celebrate His baptism! Verses 10–11.

¹⁰ As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.

What we need to see here is that Jesus' baptism by John was not some random event that just happened to take place. No! This event was the culmination of God's ancient plan to establish a new people on this earth. That's why the Father and the Holy Spirit are present here! The entire Trinity is celebrating together the masterful accomplishment of

their plans and purposes thus far! They are celebrating over Jesus because, in His baptism, they are looking forward to all those who will follow Jesus by faith ...all those who, in the waters of Jesus' baptism, will be renewed, restored and redeemed as a new people for God. In other words, they are celebrating our inclusion into their ongoing work of bringing all things back into submission to the Father, by the Spirit, through the Son.

Now can you see the importance of baptism? By repenting (turning away) from our former life of self-sufficiency and pride, and by joining Jesus in His baptism, we are submitting to this new work of God! We are allowing Jesus to lead us into His new humanity; we are accepting our need to be renewed and restored as new people in God's Kingdom. And as we follow Jesus into His baptism we can be assured that we, like Him, will also be filled with His Holy Spirit and declared by His Father to be God's beloved children.

To further highlight this last point, let's quickly turn to our second passage for today-- **Acts 19**.

In the town of Ephesus, there was a bit of confusion. People in that town had been baptized into John's baptism. In other words, they had heard that they needed to repent of their former way of life. Some of them may have even gone to the Jordan River to be personally baptized by John! But that's all they understood. In fact, they were building a small community around this idea of John's baptism. Years had passed and they kept this idea of John's baptism alive, probably by following the pattern of John's baptism.

And so, when the Apostle Paul came to them and found out that they were still talking about John's baptism and that they had never even heard of Jesus' baptism nor of the Holy Spirit, Paul immediately baptized them "**into the name of the Lord Jesus.**"(v5)

What was going on? Clearly, these people recognized that they were going the wrong way. They were aware that they had to turn away from their old and futile lifestyle. And that's exactly what John's baptism was about. It was a baptism of repentance! However, they had never heard of the new life in Jesus Christ; they were not aware of the new beginning that He offered. And so, they had **turned away** from one life....but, as yet, they had no new life to **turn towards**. They

turned away from the old kingdom without knowing the new kingdom. That's why Paul baptizes them again... but this time, it's **“into the name of the Lord Jesus.”**(v5)

In other words, John's baptism is now completed! They've finally come home! They've made the full journey from their old life into their new life...from their old lifestyle into a new lifestyle...from an old nation into a new nation. In Jesus' baptism, they've crossed the Red Sea and finally entered the Promised Land where they finally receive the gifts of their new life in the Holy Spirit!

The important point here is that John's baptism was never meant to compete with Jesus' baptism. Rather, it was always meant to segue (seg-way) seamlessly into Jesus' baptism. It was only ever meant to be a precursor to Jesus' baptism. Obviously, in Ephesus, something went wrong which Paul quickly corrected.

So...let's make a quick review of what we've talked about today: **Why is baptism so important?**

1. It marks the beginning of a new and radically different people! Following on from John's baptism of repentance, Jesus' baptism creates a new humanity.
2. It was also a defining moment for Jesus! It marked him out as the king and new high priest of this new community.
3. Baptism **“into the name of the Lord Jesus”** is the mark of our inclusion into Jesus' ongoing work of restoration...of the Triune God's determination to bring all things into subjection to the Father, by the Spirit, through the Son.

On February 12th, 12 people will be taking these concepts very seriously as they step into the waters of Jesus' baptism.

Let's pray.