

Matthew 3:1-17 - The Significance of Jesus' Baptism

Pastor Mark Johnson

The baptism of Jesus is a significant event in Christ's ministry. Through this single act, Jesus identifies himself as the object of John the Baptist's preaching, inaugurates the kingdom of God as a present reality, marks his solidarity with those in need of repentance, and commences his public ministry by the anointing the Holy Spirit and the Divine attestation.

In order to fully appreciate the baptism of Jesus, we need to identify and define the key components of John the Baptist's ministry.

John the Baptist and his ministry

John the Baptist was miraculously born of aged parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, in the priestly line of Aaron (Luke 1). He is identified by all three synoptic Gospels as the one foretold by the prophet Isaiah who would prepare the way of messiah and the coming kingdom (Mt. 3:3 cf. Is. 40:3). People came out to him in from Jerusalem and Judea to the river Jordan where he was preaching and baptizing people for the repentance of sins (Mt. 3:5-6).

Water baptism was not uncommon to Judaism as water was the primary agent in symbolizing cleansing and purification. What made John's baptism significant is that it was a one-time baptism (in contrast to ritual cleansing which is repeated) and that his target audience was Jews. John insisted that one's Jewish ancestry was insufficient to guarantee one's relationship to God.¹

John proclaimed that though he baptized with water, one greater than he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Mt. 3:11). He proclaimed a message of repentance that the Kingdom of heaven was near, that God's wrath was ready to be revealed (Mt. 3:7) and, in fact the ax was already at the root of the tree (Mt. 3:10). Simply being a descendant of Abraham was not sufficient for anyone not producing fruit in accordance with repentance will be judged. It is during John's ministry that Jesus appears and submits himself to this baptism.

The Baptism of Jesus

What is the significance of Jesus baptism? If John's baptism is one of repentance, does Jesus' action of being baptized signify that he is in need of such repentance? John's message that the one coming was greater than he and whose sandals John was unworthy to untie coupled by his response to Jesus' request confirms no such need. Matthew is the only gospel writer to record John's protestation of Jesus' request to be baptized (Mt. 3:14).

Why then, does Jesus submit himself to such a baptism? A clue is found in Jesus' own words: "to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15). Jesus' baptism by John fulfills at least three purposes: (1) it serves as a direct, public link between John's message and Jesus' ministry, (2) by it Jesus identifies himself with those who need repentance and (3) it serves as the inauguration of

¹ D.S. Dockery, "Baptism" - Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, p.57

Jesus public ministry marked especially by the descent of the Spirit (in the form of a dove) and the heavenly attestation.

Direct/public link between John's ministry and Jesus'

The baptism of Jesus is the climax of John's work. The announcement of the One to come is clearly identified as Jesus. There is no clearer connection between John's baptism and Jesus' ministry than in John's gospel where the writer quotes the Baptist saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" (John 1:29-30).

Jesus' public baptism confirmed concrete continuity between John's and Jesus' ministries. As Jesus identifies himself with John in the baptism, this represents an endorsement of John's ministry and the message and links Jesus' cause to John's.² When the king arrived, the herald's work was done. Though John continued to preach and baptize after this event, his ministry soon faded. Observing this, John acknowledged, "He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Identification with those who need repentance

The identification of Jesus with those needing repentance was clearly part of the divine plan. For the multitudes the baptismal rite symbolized their desire to forsake their sins, but for Jesus it meant a call to identify himself with a sinful people.³ At his baptism, Jesus takes upon himself by this cultic act their condition and their predicament. He becomes their representative. This reality is later observed by Paul in 2 Cor. 5:21: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf..."

Inauguration of Jesus' ministry

All the evangelists see the baptism of Jesus as the commencement of the public ministry of Jesus. This is marked especially by the descent of the Spirit upon him and by the heavenly attestation. All four gospels directly link with baptism the anointing of Jesus with the Spirit and the declaration of his Sonship.⁴

The anointing of Jesus with the Spirit is an allusion to the suffering-servant found in Isaiah 42:1, "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him..." At the very inauguration of his ministry, Jesus is marked by the foreshadowing of what he must suffer.

The divine attestation: "This is my son in whom I am well pleased" is an allusion to Psalm 2, a coronation psalm, presenting David as God's anointed. The king is God's agent who is now only to do his will and relinquish all selfish interests. This phrase connects Jesus both to David as well as to one who is commissioned to selflessly do God's will. John's gospel records

² Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, p.140

³ Guthrie, *A Shorter Life of Christ*, p.80

⁴ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p.138

Christ fulfillment of this purpose in Jesus' statement, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that *I do nothing on my own* but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for *I always do what pleases him.*" (John 8:28-29 italics added).