

TWO BAPTISMS

John I:33

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

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“He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’” (Jn. I:33).

When we think of great, dramatic moments in the life of Jesus, we may easily overlook his baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. Jesus’ baptism was not just another thing that happened to him one day, but a decisive moment in God’s saving plan. We can tell this because when John had baptized him, “The heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son’” (Mt. 3:16-17).

This is not something you see every day: the sinless Son of God identifying with sinners, and the Spirit descending on the Savior so that he might in turn pour out the Spirit on all who believe. So significant was that day that John the Baptist expressed his understanding of the gospel in its terms: “He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’” (Jn. 1:33).

THE MEANING OF “BAPTIZE” AND “BAPTISM”

To understand John the Baptist’s message, we need to understand his terminology. Specifically, what does *baptism* mean?

There are two Greek words that relate to baptism: *bapto* and *baptizo*. *Bapto* means “to dip”. This means to insert an object into liquid, either wholly or partially. The second word, *baptizo*, is the

verb the Bible uses for “to baptize.” The noun form is *baptisma*, which gives us “baptism.” This word is used for cleansing, either by immersion, by pouring (see Mk. 7:4; Lk. 11:38), or by sprinkling (see Heb. 9:19-23), but it is used in the Bible with a primary meaning of *identification*.

Biblically, to be baptized with something is to be identified with or joined to it. Some examples of how *baptizo* is used in Greek literature include immersing and saturating an object in water, changing the color of cloth with dye, or drinking too much wine and getting drunk. In these cases, the object is baptized with water, the cloth is baptized with dye, and the drunkard is baptized with wine. Particularly helpful is a passage written by Nicander, a Greek poet and physician who lived about 200 B.C. Nicander included in his works a recipe for making a pickle, using both the words *bapto*, “to dip,” and *baptizo*, “to baptize”. The recipe said the vegetable should be dipped (*bapto*) into boiling water and then baptized (*baptizo*) in a vinegar solution. The former was a temporary act while the latter was a permanent change.

The value of this word study is to realize that the biblical word for baptism has for its primary meaning not a physical act or ritual, but the identifying or joining of two things. This is how “baptism” is used throughout the Bible. The Greek translation of Isaiah 21:4 literally says, “My heart is overcome with fear; transgression baptizes me.” This means the prophet was changed from a state of calm to one of fear because of his sins. Likewise, Paul writes, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). His point is that the Christians have been identified and joined with Christ and thus are changed. This helps us to understand the more difficult uses of baptism in the New Testament. When Paul says that the Jews, by passing through the Red Sea, “were baptized into Moses” (1 Cor. 10:3), he means they were identified with and joined to him for salvation. Understanding this rightly will also help us understand John the Baptist’s meaning when he compares his baptism with water and Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit.¹

¹ This section summarizes material found in James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), I:134-136.

JOHN'S BAPTISM IN WATER

Let us first consider John's baptism with water. "I baptize you with water for repentance," he said (Mt. 3:11). When we consider John's ministry this makes perfect sense. His was a call to repentance in advance of the Messiah, in light of the coming judgment of the Lord (see Mt. 3:7-8; Mal. 3:1-3).

Given that John's baptism was for repentance, how remarkable it was when Jesus of Nazareth presented himself to be baptized. Matthew tells us, "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:14-15). Many scholars have supposed that Jesus was baptized according to the Old Testament law for anointing new priests (Num. 8:5-22). But Jesus was not a Levitical priest under the old covenant and John's baptism was not an exercise in priestly cleansing. It was a baptism in repentance: an identifying of oneself with John's call to repent of sin.

The obvious question is the one John the Baptist raised: Why was Jesus coming to repent of sin? John knew enough about Jesus to know that Jesus did not need to repent. So he reacted: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John was offended that Jesus would be baptized with – identified with – repentance. But Jesus insisted that he must in order for God's righteousness to be fulfilled. The prophecy this fulfilled was Isaiah 53:12, "He... was numbered with the transgressors." This is part of Isaiah's great prophecy of the suffering servant who "bore the sin of many."

It is wonderful news that Jesus was baptized for repentance. It speaks of amazing grace that the sinless Son of God would be numbered as one of us. Yet Jesus did not stop with being counted in the company of sinners, but he went on to take our sins away to the cross.

Moreover, Jesus' baptism addresses one of our greatest needs. John says we must repent to be saved, but our repentance is imperfect and impure. Bishop Beveridge lamented: "My very repentance needs to be repented of: and the tears I shed need washing in the blood of

Christ.”² So how can we be saved? The answer is that Jesus came to do everything we need to be saved but cannot do properly because of our sin. Everything you need to do to be saved, Jesus did for you. He lived the life you should have lived, and he died the death you deserved to die. He even performed the repentance you require to be received into God’s kingdom, being baptized for repentance at the hands of John the Baptist. What a great and sufficient Savior he is!

John’s baptism teaches the importance of humility before God, calling the people to humble themselves for their sin. Nothing is more poisonous than spiritual pride, yet all of us are fatally prone to this very attitude. God says, “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and... the contrite” (Isa. 57:15). “Humble yourselves under God’s mighty right hand,” says 1 Peter 5:5, “so that... he may exalt you.”

The writings of Paul suggest how growth in grace can be tracked by growth in humility. In one of his early letters, Paul described himself as “the least of the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:9). He was an apostle, after all, but since he had persecuted the church, he felt humble among the other church leaders. Later on, Paul described himself as “the very least of all the saints” (Eph. 3:8). He was a saint, a “holy one,” but humble in such company. Late in life Paul wrote, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim. 1:15). As Paul grew in grace and in his relationship with Christ, repentant humility increasing shaped his life: “least of the apostles,” then “very least of all the saints,” and, finally, “chief of sinners.” Paul ultimately considered rubbish everything in which he once had boasted. He explained why: “That I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own... but that which comes through faith in Christ” (Phil. 3:8-9).

This means that if you want to grow in grace and joy, you must nurture an awareness of your sin and guilt before God. This is what makes Christians grateful and gracious. And this is the exact opposite of what the world tells us. The world says we must do everything to enhance our self-esteem; we should never allow anything to make us

² Cited in Donald Grey Barnhouse: *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,), 4:165.

feel badly about ourselves. But has anyone noticed that our generation, so obsessed with self-esteem, is also the most depressed and disturbed generation in memory? Does anyone wonder why? The reason is that we are made by God and for God, that only God gives joy, and that God exalts those who are humble. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:3). “Blessed are those who mourn... blessed are the meek... blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” Jesus said (Mt. 5:4-6). True happiness comes not from thinking better about ourselves but from thinking better about Jesus Christ, about his blood and righteousness, about the love of God he reveals, and who gives us righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

A second spiritual lesson of John’s baptism deals with our witness. John was the forerunner to the Messiah, so how did he prepare the people? Did he extol the benefits that following Christ would bring? Did he promise earthly riches or comfort or ecstatic spiritual highs? No! John warned them against the coming wrath of God. Matthew 3:10 tells us his message: John preached, “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into fire.”

Our witness to people will not always begin with cries of coming doom. When I used to ride the train into Philadelphia, there was often a woman in the station with a large placard. It showed the world rent by a great chasm. On one side were shrieking people in flames; on the other were crowds robed in white. Across the chasm was a cross, the only bridge to escape the flames. The sign read, “Repent, believe in Christ, and be saved!” I often reflected on the theological accuracy and also the apparent ineffectiveness of this witnessing tool. We will often do better to befriend our neighbors, pray for them, perform acts of kindness and develop a relationship, out of which our witness to Christ will grow. But still that witness must ultimately proclaim the truth of God’s coming judgment.

Our witness should therefore include God’s law, which serves as a mirror in which people can see the truth of their sin and guilt before God. The Christian witness always involves bad news: the problem of sin. Like John, we must humbly call people to repent and confess their sin. Only then will our witness to Jesus as “the Lamb of God” make any sense. If our witness to family or friends has lacked spiritual

results, it may be because we have neglected the biblical pattern shown by John the Baptist. The law must knock us down before the gospel can lift us up, and Jesus always exposes the ill before he applies the cure. You cannot be saved until you have felt conviction over sin; unless you have repented and come to Christ as the only Lamb of God you have never been saved.

JESUS' BAPTISM WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

John the Baptist's witness to Christ was two-fold. He pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God, referring to his atoning death. Then he bore witness to Jesus' baptizing ministry: "This is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit" (Jn. 1:33). Matthew records a fuller version: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Mt. 3:11). Jesus, like John, was to be a baptizer: but his baptism identifies and joins us to the Holy Spirit for power and life.

The Bible says that Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit took place on the day of Pentecost. Shortly before ascending into heaven, Jesus told the disciples "to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, 'you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 1:4-5). Peter and the others waited in Jerusalem, and while they were "devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14) the Holy Spirit came upon them. Luke writes:

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4).

Acts 1:4-5 identifies Pentecost as Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit, and at Pentecost John's predictions were exactly fulfilled: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Lk. 3:16). This is what happened as the Spirit fell in tongues of fire. The fire represents purification from sin. Jesus brings fire to cleanse sin from the world – either the spiritual fire of the Holy Spirit to sanctify believers or the eternal fire of judgment for those who rebel in unbelief.

Errors abound when it comes to Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit. Some think it involves a second-stage of Christian salvation, often

associated with speaking in tongues. The Book of Acts records that as the gospel spread to new people groups – to God-fearing Gentiles, to the Samaritans, and to the Greeks – the Pentecost experience was repeated: the Spirit fell and believers spoke in tongues. God was showing the equality of Gentiles with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Speaking in tongues – a gift unique to the apostolic age – symbolized the unity of the new Spirit-filled church composed of every tribe and tongue. Michael Green explains, “Nowhere are *Christians* subsequent to the day of Pentecost said to be baptized with the Spirit... Baptism with the Holy Spirit is not a second-stage experience for some Christians.”³ Instead, the baptism with the Holy Spirit inaugurated a new era in the history of God’s people, so that now all who belong to Christ are indwelt and empowered by God’s Spirit.

Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit was the once-for-all event of Pentecost, but its effects are realized by believers today. Like Jesus’ other once-for-all works, the benefits of Pentecost come into our lives through faith. Jesus died on the cross once-for-all, but we are forgiven our sins when we believe. Jesus rose from the grave once-for-all, and as a result believers have eternal life. Likewise, because Jesus baptized his Church with the Holy Spirit, all who believe are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Never are believers told to wait for a special post-conversion experience that is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Instead, through faith in Christ, we are all baptized with – that is, identified with and joined to – the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul said: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). There are no second-class Christians waiting for the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are all baptized to drink from the Spirit whom Christ has sent into the world.

BAPTISM – THE MARK OF A CHRISTIAN

When we are baptized with water today, we are baptized into (that is, identified with and joined to) the name of the Triune God who is revealed by Jesus. This is the baptism that Jesus instituted prior to leaving for heaven: “Go therefore and make

³ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 183.

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19-20). Christian baptism takes a similar form as John the Baptist’s, but its meaning has advanced beyond his call to repentance. Christian baptism signifies Christ’s cleansing blood on the cross. And, in fulfillment of Ezekiel’s great promise, the sprinkled water of Christian baptism especially points to Christ sending the Holy Spirit: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean... I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you... I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Eze. 36:25-27).

Water baptism is the ritual symbol that identifies Christians, but the true mark of a Christian is not water poured over the head or immersion in a lake. The true mark of a Christian is the reality of which water baptism is but the sign: the indwelling Holy Spirit, who brings life, power, joy and freedom to those who believe. In other words, since Jesus baptized his Church with the Spirit, the mark of a Christian is a changed life. A Christian is one whose family and friends say, “I’ve noticed that you have changed,” because the Spirit has come to us with power.

Indeed, the mark of a Christian is not merely a *changed* life, but a *changing* life. The Bible says that Christians are not only born again by the Spirit, but also “are being transformed into the [Christ’s] image from one degree of glory to another” by the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

This means constant progress in holiness as we increasingly turn from sin. Paul says, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). It also means godly changes in our character: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22). Are those things growing in your life? They should be, if you are a Christian. If they are not, then your prayer life should include pointed requests for the Spirit to exert his power to specific aspects of your character.

The good news is that because of the Holy Spirit, Christians have power to change. Isn’t this what we need: a changed life? Don’t we desire new habits and a new attitude, a new spirit – a new ability to love, a revived faith, a renewed hope, and growing joy? Real change does not come merely by positive thinking, or by mystical techniques,

or by fleeting emotional highs. Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit so that he can lovingly change us, and we are to follow the Spirit's leading as he guides us by the Word of God. We are to "keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25, NIV), repenting of sins, communing with God in prayer, and asking in Christ's name for the Spirit's increasing work to make us more and more the new men and women God wants us to be.

GREATER THAN JOHN THE BAPTIST

John the Baptist was the greatest of all the prophets, Jesus said. But Jesus added, "The one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mt. 11:11). He meant that we have something John the Baptist did not have, the Holy Spirit living in us fully. But we also have a better message to give to the world because Jesus Christ has come. It is true that we must begin with the bad news of John the Baptist's message: his warning against God's wrath and his call to repentance. But we also have the privilege of offering the good news of Jesus Christ: forgiveness from sin, power for change through the Spirit, and eternal life in heaven. We have a power that is greater than John's, and a gospel that is better than his baptism.

Are we telling the world? The best witness we can give is the demonstration of the Spirit's power in our own lives: as we turn from sin, display the fruits of the Spirit, and rejoice in eternal life. If you will confess your sin and believe on Jesus, then you will be forgiven and he will fill you with the Holy Spirit. If you are a Christian, then you have the Spirit. So walk with the Spirit, growing through God's Word and prayer, and seeking to increase in humble grace. If you do that, God will preach a great message to the world through you.