

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Baptism of the Lord, January 11, 2015

Why Are We Baptized?

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Mark 1:4-11

The story of the baptism of Jesus is told in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. While the three stories differ in emphasis, all three tell of John the Baptizer baptizing people in the Jordan River and of Christ coming to be baptized by John.

To understand the story, you need to understand what baptism represented two millennia ago and what it means now.

Jewish tradition claims that Jacob, or Israel as he had been renamed, was prepared on Mt. Sinai to receive salvation by means of immersion. He was cleansed in preparation for receiving the Spirit of God.¹

Baptism was a Jewish ritual for repentance and forgiveness of sins and was always by immersion, not sprinkling or pouring of water as is commonly done today. It was always done with adults, never with infants as is often the case today.

Wealthier residents of Jerusalem often had pools for immersion built into their homes and there were precise requirements for how the pools were to be built. They were one cubit square and three cubits deep, rather like a tall square box. They held about eighty gallons of water and people immersed themselves by standing in the pool and bending their knees.

But why was a pool needed? It was simply because in Judaism baptism was a ritual cleansing of one from sins, a rite of purification. It was an act of repentance for past sins but, unlike today in Christianity, it was retroactive only. Thus repeated baptisms were necessary.

We don't know for sure but considering that people immersed themselves by standing in water less than five feet deep and bending their knees, it is likely that John the Baptizer did not immerse those he baptized. He rather may have served as a priest and supervised the people as they immersed themselves by bending their knees.

The big difference between this early form of Jewish baptism for ceremonial

purification and John's baptism was that John's baptism was not repeated. His baptism was not merely a ritual cleansing but instead was an initiation in which one accepted God's forgiveness and salvation.

Not everyone agrees with this understanding of John's baptism. Josephus, the noted early historian, seems to have found this interpretation to be offensive and took exception to the idea of baptism "... *to gain pardon for whatever sins they may have committed.*" Josephus considered John's baptism to be only a rite of purification.

All of that changed when Jesus came to John for baptism.

John had preached that someone would come who would baptize with the Spirit. John's baptism was preparation for the coming of the Messiah and signified repentance to be ready for the coming of God's kingdom. The definitive baptism would come later with baptism by the Spirit.

Consider how John reacted when Jesus came to be baptized. John objected. He said that he was not worthy to untie the thongs on Christ's sandals, let alone baptize him. But Jesus did come and was baptized. He had nothing to repent for but his baptism opened the eyes of every one who was there in a very dramatic way. Our scripture reading says, "*Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.*" (NIV)

Do you see the parallel of the heavens being torn open to the temple veil being torn open when Christ was crucified? His ministry on earth begins and ends with this symbolism.

Isaiah 64:1 prophesizes, "*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you.*" (NIV)

The rending of the heavens and the descent of the Spirit when Jesus was baptized fulfills Isaiah's prophecy rather well don't you think?

The Zondervan Commentary² says, "... *the image of the Spirit hovering over the waters at the beginning of creation, as well as a rabbinic tradition that describes the Spirit hovering like a like a dove*" is recalled in what happened at Jesus' baptism.

"*God's Spirit swooping down on Jesus signifies the beginning of a new creation. The image confirms that Jesus' ministry will be Spirit directed.*"

"*The rabbis relegated the Spirit's activity to the past because their authority was*

based on their ability to interpret previous revelation(s). To protect that authority, they undermined any who acted unconventionally and claimed more direct links to the divine through the Spirit.”

Can you see from this why the Pharisees and Sadducees were so opposed to Jesus? But they were wrong in their opposition.

The Spirit had not come to an end in Israel at all. It was back in full force and was *“breaking loose in a new and momentous way.”*

Baptism was no longer merely a ritualistic washing away of sins but now was acceptance of Jesus as the Christ and as Savior of all humankind.

So we no longer stand in shallow water and bend our knees to submerge ourselves, nor do we do it periodically to wash away sins committed since our last baptism.

Now we are baptized only once. There is no need for further baptisms. Christ died for our sins and washed them away with his blood. There is nothing further for us to wash away. By accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior, or if our parents do that on our behalf, we are forgiven of sins, past, present and future and we are assured of salvation.

Immersion, pouring or sprinkling is not important. What is important is acceptance of Christ’s salvation and of reaffirming that acceptance. As followers of Christ, let us now begin this New Year by reaffirming our baptismal vows or those given on our behalf by our parents.

Amen.

1. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary
2. ibid