

John's Baptism and the New Testament Sacrament

[Delivered to the North Atlantic District/New England Circuit
at St. Paul Ev. Lutheran, Arnherst, NH, January 23, 1989]

By Pastor David A. Kehl

A Comparison of John's Baptism and the New Testament Sacrament

I. The Baptism of John – Questions Raised

“While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'

They answered, 'No we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'

So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?'

'John's baptism,' they replied.

Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.'

On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.” Acts 19:1-7.

How are we to view John the Baptist's baptism? Was it ineffective? Was it different from Christ's? Was it just preparatory? How does John's baptism compare with the New Testament baptism? I don't think anyone really is baptizing with “John's baptism” today, so I don't think this study would be necessary for that purpose. But the study of John's baptism is important in giving us a clearer picture of our practice of baptism today.

Most Christian churches (except groups like the Salvation Army) will acknowledge that Christ commanded us to baptize. Yet there remain not a few divisive issues that fall under the titles of “believers baptism”, “immersion”, baptizing “in the name of Jesus” and of course - the effect on the baptized. But the differences lie far deeper than just baptism. It has to do with the whole issue of our relationship with God and his dealings with us.

As we venture into John's baptism some questions may arise. Who commanded John to baptize? How did he learn about baptism? What formula did John use? Did he baptize by immersion? Did he baptize infants? Was his baptism carried on after his death, or did John's baptism stop after Jesus disciples started? Is baptism before the death of Christ any different from circumcision in effect, and if not, why were Jews baptized? Were John's followers brought to true faith without a knowledge and trust in Jesus, suffering, death and resurrection or an encounter with Pentecost? Were those baptized by John to be rebaptized but the disciples? I don't intend to answer all of these things but beginning with a study of Christian baptism itself I hope to lead us to proper conclusions from Scripture.

II. Baptism – An Essential Part of Christian Ministry

Very early in Christ's ministry he emphasized that entrance into kingdom of God was connected to baptism. To Nicodemus he said (Jn 3:5), “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Later it is written, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved,” (Mk 16:16 - although the two most reliable early manuscripts do not include this verse.) And of course, at the end of his earthly ministry Jesus commissions his disciples to go and “make disciples” by “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Mt 28:19)

Then at Pentecost Peter enjoined the listeners to “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” (Acts

2:38) Such also “he ordered” for those at Cornelius’ house who had heard the message and visibly received the Holy Spirit’s extraordinary gifts. (Acts 10:48)

After being struck down from his horse, Paul was told by Jesus, “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away.” (Acts 22:16). In Acts 8:36-39 we hear of the Ethiopian Eunuch’s deep desire to be baptized. In chapter 16 Lydia’s household and the family of the Jailer of Philippi were baptized in response to the Gospel message. Then “many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.” (Acts 18:8)

All this was done in accordance with the command of Christ and in connection with His name. There is a movement by some to declare that the Apostles’ baptism was “in the Name of Jesus Christ” and never in the name of the Triune God. That is a logical conclusion for them since they also deny the existence of three persons in one Godhead (2 Co 13:14). Baptism was ordered by Jesus and to be done in the name of the Triune God (Mt 28:19). When the disciples baptized “in the Name of Jesus Christ,” they were baptizing in the name of and according to faith in the Triune God since the two cannot be separated (Jn 10:30; 15:26; 1 Jn 2:23). It was in connection with what the Triune God has done for our salvation, for the purpose of bringing us into membership with His kingdom and by His authority that baptism was administered. Luther commented, “What I do, I do not by my own authority, but in the name and stead of God, so that you should regard it just as if our Lord himself had done it in a visible manner ... as if God were baptizing us himself.” (LW vol 36, p.63)

The exact mode of baptism used by the Apostles, or for that matter by John the Baptist, isn’t specifically mentioned in Scripture. Luther very much preferred to see baptism by immersion because of the significance of baptism signifying that the old man and the sinful flesh are to be wholly drowned and by the grace of God a new man should arise as from the dead. (LW vol 35, p. 29-30) Yet he also realized that the outward form was not essential. Yet many try to prove immersion by twisting or reading into the words of Scripture something that is really not there. More important, rather, is the essence and the effect of Baptism.

III. What is Baptism – Its Essence and Effect?

Luther wrote, “Blessed be God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to the riches of his mercy has preserved in his church this sacrament For he desired that by it little children, who were incapable of greed and superstition, might be initiated and sanctified in the simple faith of his Word. But Satan, though he could not quench the power of baptism in little children, nevertheless succeeded in quenching it in all adults, so that now there are scarcely any who call to mind their own baptism, and still fewer who glory in it; so many other ways have been discovered for remitting sins and getting to heaven.” (Babylonian Captivity, LW vol. 36, p. 57)

The foundation for understanding and cherishing baptism lies in the universal, objective reconciliation or justification that exists. It is history - a finished event in the past. (2 Cor 5:19,21; 1 Jn 2:2) Saving grace is the gracious disposition of God toward us in Christ (Eph 2:8-9), not a good quality implanted in the heart (*gratia infusa* - Catholicism, Calvinism). All of us are by nature inclined to look inward to gauge God’s feelings toward us by the thoughts and moods we find in our heart instead of listening to and believing God’s declarations of love in the Gospel.

God for our sakes attached the promise of forgiveness of sins to certain external acts which He has ordained. (Mt 28:19; Acts 2:38; 22:16) Baptism is such an act of God and not a symbol of a human decision to be cleansed. When the Gospel is preached, God is present, and so He is also in baptism for He has bound self to be there. To the skeptics stumbling over their reason Luther commented: “if God were to bid you pick up a straw or strip a feather, and with it command, order, and promise that through this act you could have forgiveness of all your sins, grace, and eternal life, should you not accept that with great pleasure and in gratitude love it, praise it and esteem that straw or feather a higher and holier possession than heaven and earth?” (St L. XVI:2296)

We receive two great gifts in Baptism: 1) an objective gift: the right relationship with God through the forgiveness of sins. There God reveals and declares to men that He is fully reconciled through Christ and that because of Christ’s work He loves them; 2) and there is a subjective gift: the Spirit, which empowers us from

within (Eph 3:20-21). This is the effective power through which the Holy Spirit works and strengthens faith in the very forgiveness, love and grace which this “means of grace” declares and reveals. Through baptism the Spirit is at work in a quiet power in our lives, conforming us to Christ and sending us out into the world in quiet service.

In baptism God allies himself with us and becomes one with us in a gracious covenant of comfort, while making each of us a new person. Those baptized are constantly living in a state of “penitent forgiveness.” God pledges himself not to count against us the sins which remain in our nature after baptism nor to condemn us because of them. He is satisfied and well pleased as we constantly strive and desire to conquer these sins and at our death to be rid of them. (I Jn 1:9-10; 2:1-2) There is no greater comfort on earth than baptism. (Acts 2:38/22:16/Eph 5:26/1 Pe 1:23/Titus 3:5)

Baptism is a “visible Word” and at the same time by that Word and rite God moves hearts to believe and conceives faith. (Rom 10:17). Baptism is means of regeneration (Titus 3:5) for it bestows the remission of sins and through that generates, or strengthens faith. (Jn 3:5,14-16; Rom 6:1-11) He starts with the divine promise: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mk 16:16) All the wealth of spiritual blessings also are ours. Only by the lack of faith in it is baptism’s blessings canceled out. Luther again comments, “We must so consider it as to exercise our faith in it, and have no doubt whatever that, once we have been baptized, we are saved. For unless faith is present or is conferred in baptism, baptism will profit us nothing.” (LW vol 36 p. 59).

Baptism is also a sign similar to those of the Old Testament. To these signs God has attached a word of promise which requires faith. Those signs have often been changed. In the time from Adam to Abraham people had only the sign of sacrifices. Afterward Noah had a rainbow and Abraham had circumcision. Since the time of Christ baptism has been set apart for us. Again from Luther, “The sign and promise should be tied to each other, not torn from each other. For the promise always stands in such a way that the letter and the seal should be together. Neither avails without the other. One doesn’t have faith in a seal which stands by itself, nor in a letter by itself. It doesn’t matter whether one is baptized when young or old, but it matters that God is the God of young and old and that he gave his Son for them. It’s on this that you should be baptized.” (LW vol.54, p.57)

IV. A Look at John's Baptism

Baptism in Scripture finds a prominent place first in the ministry of John the Baptist. He didn’t invent it. He didn’t borrow it from pagan forms or adopt the practice from Jews baptizing proselytes. He had direct command from God as Luke reports (3:2), “The Word of the Lord came to John, son of Zacharias.” This was the Lord calling him into special service. (Jer 1:2,4) John reveals the call as “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John told the people, “The one who sent me to baptize with water told me.” (John 1:33) And Jesus states that John’s baptism was “from heaven.” (Matt 21:25)

The Pharisees, however, questioned John’s authority to baptize, saying, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” (John 1:24-25) They must have expected baptism perhaps as a fulfillment of Ezekiel 36:25-33 which describes a cleansing of God’s people, and this cleansing was a distinctly Messianic act. Besides, not just anyone was allowed to administer rites of purification, and John hadn’t asked their permission.

The Old Testament prophecies (Mal 3:1, Is 40:3) list John’s credentials - sent by God as the messenger to announce the coming of his Son and prepare the hearts of his people to receive him. To the Pharisees he preached a rousing sermon of law - “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” (Matt 3:7) The baptism of John was the means by which to escape God’s wrath, but the outward ceremony was not in itself sufficient. Those who sincerely came to be baptized by him came, “confessing their sins.” (Matt 3:6) That was not the case with the Pharisees. John’s baptism was a “baptism of repentance for the remission of sin.” Repentance fitted a person for this baptism. Repentance (metanoia - a religious change of the heart which turns from sin and guilt to cleansing and forgiveness by God’s grace) is so necessary for access to the Kingdom of God.

Some say John's baptism is simply a confession by individuals of the guilt of their sins. Others read into it an outward expression of an inner change of heart. Others will argue that it did not make the baptized person a member of the kingdom of heaven, but prepared him for it. It is referred to as a type of the Baptism of Christ and could not take its place. But John's baptism was an effective sacrament, which brought regeneration and the remission of sin. It was for "remission of sins" (aphinmi), "sending away" of sins from the sinner so far that God will not find them on Judgment Day. (Ps 103:12; Is 43:25, Mi 7:19)

The "good news" of Christ was the main focus of John's message, (Lk 3:18) for without it his baptism would simply be pagan. Baptism and remission of sin were connected to message of Christ. He pointed out the greatness of him who is "more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." (Mk 1:7) John told the people, "The reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel", (Jn 1:31) The target of that good news was "Israel" his own nation. For them he said, "Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (Jn 1:29, cf Is 53) At times there seemed to be some resentment Jn 3:26) on part of John's remaining disciples over Jesus, success. But he again points to Jesus - the greater, as the bridegroom of the church while he John is just a friend of the bridegroom. "He must become greater; I must become less The one who comes from heaven is above all Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life." (Jn 3:30-36) Much later as Jesus returned to the area in which John had been baptizing in the early days, "Many people came to him (Jesus). They said, "Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true. And in that place many believed in Jesus." Jn 10:41)

V. The Comparison

I suppose if we put any stock in the man-made dicta of the Catholic church we would be shaking in our boots with their proclamation, "If any man say that the baptism of John has the same efficacy as the baptism of Jesus, let him be accursed" (sess VII de baptismo, Can. I).

Yet the comparison of the disciples' baptism and that of John begins much earlier than Pentecost. "After this (the Nicodemus episode), Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them and baptized. Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Alim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized some of John's disciples said to him, "Rabbi that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan - the one you testified about - well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." "Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples." (Jn 4:1-2) Jesus' activity (through his disciples) was basically the same as that of the forerunner. Jesus took up and continued the baptism John had among the Israelites and after his resurrection he instituted it for all nations.

The baptism on the day of Pentecost was "for the remission of sins." (Acts 2:38) But John's baptism is also expressly described as a "baptism for the remission of sins." (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3) As the Christian baptism is called a washing of rebirth and renewing of the Holy Spirit through which "He saves us" (Ti 3:5,) so Baptism of John is described as a means through which the Holy Spirit works salvation and regeneration. (1 Pe 3:21) In talking to Nicodemus, Jesus must have had John's baptism in mind when He says: "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" Those who were not baptized by John (the Pharisees and the lawyers) are described as rejecting the "counsel of God against themselves." (Lk 7:29-30)

John held Christ's baptism as superior - "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (Mk 1:8) Does that mean that John's baptism was without the Spirit? If it were it would be a mere ceremony. But it did bring "forgiveness of sins" and entrance into the kingdom of God which cannot happen without the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit. In fact the Holy Spirit has been active since the Fall working in hearts a faith in the saving promises of God. When John contrasted "I baptize" with "he will baptize," he was acknowledging that he is simply an instrument in the hand of God. All John can do is apply the means of Grace. His own strength is sufficient only to pour the water in baptism. But Christ is able to work redemption itself

and, by virtue of his own divine power, to crown it by pouring out the Spirit from on high (and that only after completing his redemptive work and then ascending to heaven).

Christ accepts John's baptism of water and himself is baptized by John. However, Jesus promised something not yet experienced. "'Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified" (Jn 7:39) No believer was ready or able to function as Jesus wanted him to function as long as he did not understand his sacrificial death and his glorification. Prior to the completion of Jesus, redemptive work all faith was like that of the Old Testament saints - a trust in the promise whether connected with a baptism by John or by Jesus disciples. Jesus' glorification would fulfill that promise, and then too he would send down the Spirit in special measure. (Jn 14:25-26; 16:7-14) One can't become the greatest possible blessing to the world until the Holy Spirit comes upon him, and Spirit could not come in full measure until Jesus was glorified.

After Pentecost they experienced the power of the Holy Spirit as he worked through the message of completed redemption, working a fuller understanding and a bolder faith in Christ. Three thousand were added to their number that day. Their lives of worship were rich in meeting together daily, devoting themselves to the apostles teachings, to communion and prayer, to sharing with anyone who had need and enjoying the favor of all people. (Acts 2:42f)

Before he was taken to heaven, Jesus told his disciples, "John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 1:5) John began the work with his baptism, Jesus was to put on the finishing touch at Pentecost. Here the Spirit filled the disciples in a miraculous way and gave them great power ushering in the age of the church. Occasionally we run across instances of others also filled with special signs of his inner working. In Paul's report (Acts 11:16) he shared how at Cornelius' house those who heard the message received the same special gifts of the Holy Spirit - even before they were baptized. The special outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was for equipping disciples for their calling as witnesses of Christ in the world. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

But not all were so well informed. Of Apollos, who "knew only the baptism of John", we read in Acts 18:25, "he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately." By the "Baptism of John" the whole teaching and work of the Baptist are referred to. He had only known the ministry of John. Although what he knew of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, was accurate, his knowledge did not extend to the completion of the work of Jesus. Things he most likely rejoiced to hear would have been the news about the Lord's Supper, his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost and the command to now "baptize all nations." Yet like the disciples and a host of others, the Baptism of John was all he needed. That baptism of John, which was soon replaced by the Baptism of Jesus, was founded on and pointed to the Messiah that was already coming. Connected with the same promise it was effective in bringing souls into the kingdom of God.

But we read of another case involving the baptism of John - the case of Acts 19:1-7 which began the discussion of this topic in this paper. Here were twelve men who went by the title of Christian. Paul asked them if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. He was thinking of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit that had touched many converts (such as Cornelius' crew) even though for the most part it did not occur at all among new Christians. Paul received a surprising answer, they had not even heard of Holy Spirit. Those who knew the Old Testament should have already known the existence of the Holy Spirit (eg. 2 Sam 23:2-3; Is 63:10,11,14) These men however were lacking proper understanding. Those who know nothing about the Holy Spirit cannot have received genuine and valid baptism. Denial of the Trinity is denial of true God, destroying the very substance of baptism.

Paul asked what was proposed to them as an object of faith and confession when they were baptized? They replied, "John's baptism." Unlike Apollos they had been misled. Not all disciples of John had entered into discipleship of Christ. Their continuation of the baptism of John was no real baptism but a mere dead ceremony. Had they been true followers of John they would have known Christ and heard of the Spirit, (Jn 3:34, Mk 1:8)

they would have had remission of sin and the working of the Holy Spirit. There seems to have been no proclamation of Christ nor his baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. What a thrill it must have been for them to hear the message of Christ, to be properly baptized and to have the Holy Spirit show his working in their lives in a very visible way.

And what a blessing baptism is for us personally and what a privilege to administer. Although it is essentially the same baptism with which John baptized, it is since Christ's ascension and Pentecost charged with more. John's baptism rested on a partial picture of the Messiah's work, Christ's reveals the accomplished details of that salvation. John's made followers of the Christ to come, Christ's made followers of the Christ who had come. While John's Baptism brought forgiveness about to be won, Christ's brought the forgiveness that had been won; John's was for Israel, Christ's for all nations. May its greatness not once slip from our thoughts, words or actions but renew us daily with its comfort and power.