

WATER BAPTISM

By Ron Harvey

Text: Matthew 3:1-11

INTRODUCTION

Baptism as we know it began in the gospels. It started with John the Baptist. John said in Matthew 3:11,

I baptize you with water unto repentance . . .

And baptism was a distinguishing mark of John's ministry. John was always seen preaching to the Jews in Judea and he baptized in the Jordan river.

John is known as John "the Baptist" because he baptized. He was the first baptizer. There was something different about the ministry of John because he came baptizing.

There was no baptism in the Old Testament.

The heathen nations had their religious ceremonies and sometimes they had rituals that involved water. But these various rituals in no way prefigured Christian baptism. They were merely human rituals devised by godless men into a false religious practice.

The Jews had various ceremonial purifications and washings, but even these were quite different than the baptism that came on the scene with John.

Now, you might ask, "How is it that John came up with this idea of baptism?" It was completely new and it was not done in this way before.

And the fact is that John didn't just dream it up. He wasn't sitting out in the wilderness one day and thought, "You know, I think I will start a new ordinance of God. Yep, I think we need something new around here."

Now he was in the wilderness

The Bible says,

There was a man sent by God. (John 1:6, 33)

And this verifies that John was sent by God himself and by the authority of God. It was God that sent John.

And you will notice that the Word of God came unto John (Luke 3:1, 2). John didn't just dream up the concept of baptism. Rather, God came to him in the wilderness and instructed him in the message of baptism.

And you will also notice (John 3:3) that after God came to John, John came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

So you see that **God sent John** to preach repentance and to institute the ordinance of baptism. And this baptism that John was sent to administer was so different from any other rite ever known by the Jews that John became known by that rite. He was known as John the Baptist.

Had baptism been instituted in the law, then Moses may have been known as "the Baptist." If God had instructed Elijah to originate baptism, then Elijah may have been known as "Elijah the Baptist." But baptism was not instituted until God came to John and told him to preach baptism unto repentance. And so, John will forever be known as "the Baptist."

Now, John was very effective in his preaching. God gave him great success. People came to John from everywhere. (See Matthew 3:5) And they were baptized, confessing their sins.

Now remember, the public ministry of John started slightly before the public ministry of Jesus. John was the forerunner. He prepared the way for the king. And John preached first and John baptized first. But then when Jesus opened his ministry he joined in with John in the same message and in the same baptism (although the Bible says that Jesus himself didn't baptize, but his disciples.) But Jesus and the disciples preached the same message as John. (See Mt. 4:17) And they baptized, just like John. (See John 4:1, 2) And Jesus had even more success than John. (John 4:1)

So, John baptized first. Then Jesus through his disciples baptized.

Then later, after his resurrection, Jesus commanded the disciples to **continue this work of baptism.**

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Matthew 28:19

And the ordinance of baptism has continued ever since and is reiterated in the epistles as a continuing work which should continue until Jesus comes again.

Now John's baptism and the baptism of Jesus and the apostles are the same baptism. And this is shown in various ways.

- A. John and the apostles baptized contemporaneously. (John 3:22, 23, 26)
- B. Both John and the apostles baptized penitent sinners.
 - 1. John baptized penitent sinners (Mt.3:6-8; Mark 1:4)
 - 2. The apostles baptized penitent sinners. (Acts 2:38)
- C. Both John and the apostles baptized in the same way, that is, by immersion.
 - 1. John baptized by taking his subjects into the river Jordan. (Mt.3:6)

John baptized Jesus by taking him into the Jordan. (MT.3:16)
 - 2. The apostles baptized by the same mode. Philip baptized the eunuch by taking him into the water. (Acts 8:38, 39)
- D. Both John and the apostles baptized in the name of God himself.
 - 1. John baptized in the name of Jesus. (Acts 19:5)

2. The apostles were specifically instructed to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Mt. 28:19)
- E. Both John and the apostles used baptism to signify the remission of sins.
1. John's baptism signified the remission of sins. (Mark 1:4)
 2. The apostles' baptism signified the remission of sins. (Acts 8:38)

So, the baptism of John was the same baptism that was performed by Jesus and the apostles while Jesus was on the earth. And it is the same baptism that was performed by the apostles after Jesus ascended to heaven. And it is the same baptism that is performed today. There is one water baptism. It was begun with John the Baptist and continued by Christ and the apostles. And it is the same baptism that we continue to employ today.

Now this morning, we will consider,

The Baptism of John

We have already said that the baptism of John was the beginning of baptism in the Bible. And it was really the beginning or the root of Christian baptism, though the Church itself would be established by Jesus a little later.

You must remember that this is a transition period. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts are transitional books. They are transitioning from the Old Testament to the New Testament. It was a period of transition from the Jewish economy to the Church economy. In John's day, God had not yet turned to the Gentiles. And the church was not yet established. But, it was in the making and times were changing and the message of God became very sharp and focused.

I. John's baptism focused on a radical act of individual commitment to God based on personal confession and repentance. (See Mt.3:2, 6) And this message was a jolt to the Jews. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." John was saying, "It does you no good to be a Jew. It does you no good that you are an Israelite by birth. You must personally repent of your sins."

This was to the Jews a radical, new idea, because the Jews based their confidence on the fact that they were children of Abraham by birth.

But along comes John who preaches repentance from sin as the way of salvation. This should not have been so upsetting to the Jews. Salvation has always been personal not corporate. God has always saved persons. He has never saved everyone in an entire nation. True enough, he was extremely gracious to Israel and saved many persons out of Israel, but he saved them not because they were physical descendants of Abraham but because they were spiritual descendants of Abraham by election and by faith. God has always been a very personal God and he is very interested in the individual. And John the Baptist began to preach this message. Each individual must repent for remission of sins.

Note: This is one reason that we do not believe in baptizing infants. It is impossible for infants to make this personal commitment. It is impossible for an infant to confess and repent. And John's baptism called for a personal repentance. Is it possible for God to save infants? Yes. God may regenerate infants and save them. Faith and repentance are only the natural result of being made alive. But should infants be baptized? We say no, because they are incapable of expressing repentance and baptism is inextricably linked to confession of sins and repentance.

Now remember, John the Baptist preached exclusively to the Jews. He was preaching to those who were God's chosen people in an outward, ethnic sense. So, he was calling God's historic people to repentance. These were people who were already a part of God's covenant to Abraham and they already had the sign of the covenant which was circumcision. And yet, that was not enough. John cried, "Repent." And when they professed their repentance, John baptized them. So John's baptism was administered not to those who were physically circumcised, but to those who professed repentance.

This was always God's way of salvation, but this seemed like a radical new message to Israel who had come to believe that they were saved by a national covenant and by their birthright.

So, you see how John's baptism is exactly like church baptism in that it is administered to an individual who repents of his sins. But secondly,

II. John's baptism was associated with an escape from God's wrath. (v.7)

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Matthew 3:7)

Now these Pharisees and Saducees came out to John's baptism. I'm sure they were curious about the revival that was taking place. They were curious about this wild man John who was preaching in the wilderness. And they were probably wondering about this new baptism. And perhaps they even considered joining in and being baptized themselves. Surely they were entitled to be baptized since they were Abraham's children and religious leaders at that.

But John called them vipers and he told them to beware the wrath of God.

The wrath of God – it is a most terrifying thing. And the Jews knew that there was a terrifying hell that awaited the wicked Gentiles. But John came preaching that the wrath of God is not for the Gentiles only, but for the Jews also. And so the Jews were flocking to hear John who was telling them to flee the wrath to come. Only personal repentance would do. And if a man repented, then, John would baptize. (See v. 8) And so baptism was associated with salvation and an escape from God's wrath.

III. John's baptism was disassociated from mere Jewishness.

Now when the Pharisees and Saducees came to him to be baptized John called them vipers. Obviously, they came to John on the basis of their Jewish positions expecting to join in John's baptism and John would not baptize them.

They thought they were accepted by God by virtue of their Abrahamic lineage. (v.9) I am sure they gloried in the Abrahamic covenant thinking they were God's people because God had given them a land and the Scriptures and the ceremonies and many other blessings. They thought they could be baptized because they were circumcised and circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God had made unto them.

But no, John would not baptize them for they did not bring forth fruits meet for repentance.

God never intended to save anyone who remained hardened in sin and self-righteousness. And John told these Jews that God could raise up children unto Abraham from these stones. (v.9) You see, God could take even the stony hearts of Gentiles and bring them to repentance. He didn't need the physical descendants of Abraham who would not repent. And of course, this is exactly what was right around the corner. The gospel would go to the Gentiles. And so, John's baptism was disassociated from mere Jewishness.

IV. John's baptism was performed in the Jordan river. (v.6) It seems so obvious to me that John baptized by immersion because he baptized in the river. Notice that he didn't baptize with the Jordan or by the Jordan but in the Jordan.

V. John had the great privilege of baptizing Jesus. Now the baptism of Jesus was necessarily and fundamentally different from the baptism of all others, because Jesus had no need of repentance. Jesus had no need of salvation. Jesus, being born without imputed guilt and being perfect in his obedience under the law, was not under the wrath of God. But Jesus insisted that he also be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. That is, to fulfill all the commandments of God as all other human beings are required to do. And Jesus went down into the water of the Jordan river and was baptized by John.

Now, as you know, there is great controversy in Christendom about the question of infant baptism. And, I want to draw some conclusions from John's baptism that will help us understand why we disagree with infant baptism.

1. It appears that all those who were baptized by John and the apostles were penitent sinners. That is, there was sorrow for sins. They were baptized confessing their sins. (Mt.3:6) The self-righteous Pharisee would never have been a candidate for baptism, but the poor publican who beat on his breast and said be merciful to me a sinner, could have been ushered to the baptismal waters.

Confession of sin and repentance of sin was central to the baptism of John. John told the Pharisees to bring forth fruit meet for repentance. (Mt.3:8)

After Jesus ascended, the very first sermon by Peter resulted in many being pricked in their hearts and they said what shall we do? And Peter told them to repent and be baptized. (Acts 2:37, 38)

To have baptism without repentance is impossible. Repentance is the basis and the foundation and the prerequisite for baptism. And therefore, baptism of infants is not John's baptism and it is not the apostles' baptism. And it is not the baptism that we employ today.

And in fact there is no record of John or anyone else baptizing infants in the Bible. To suggest that infants were baptized is mere speculation and it is an argument from silence.

But we stand on strong ground when we argue that John's baptism was a baptism of those who were repentant.

2. John's baptism is upon those who have been born again, for no man can repent of sins unless he is born again. Jesus said, "No man can come to me except the Father draw him." Blindness cannot be overcome except Jesus grant a man sight. And no man can see his own sinfulness unless he is born of the Spirit.

Example: Paul was saved on the road to Damacus and God blinded him temporarily. And the scales on his eyes were an emblem of his former blindness and unbelief and ignorance. And when God removed the scales form Paul's eyes, signifying spiritual sight, Paul arose and was baptized.

Again, this requirement precludes infants from the rite of baptism.

3. Faith in Christ is a prerequisite to baptism. (Mark 16:16)
 - a. John baptized on the basis of faith in Christ. (Acts 19:4)
 - b. Phillip told the Ethiopian Eunuch, *If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest be saved.* (Acts 8:36)
 - c. Acts 8:12 They believed and were baptized.
 - d. Acts 18:8 They believed and were baptized.

Now if faith is a prerequisite to baptism, then infants are not candidates for baptism.

4. Nowhere in the Bible is there any command to baptize infants.
5. The Great Commission, which commands baptism, does not contain any authorization to baptize infants.

In fact, the apostles were to baptize those whom they had made disciples. This would in itself seem to preclude infants who could not possibly be made disciples.

6. There is no record of any infant being baptized in the Scriptures.

There are a couple of instances where it says so and so was baptized and his house. But, in those cases there is no reason to believe that there were infants in the house. And there is no specific indication that infants were baptized. And the Bible is otherwise silent about infant baptism.

Of all the hordes of people who came to John, there is not one mention of an infant being baptized.

And the disciples of Jesus baptized even more people than John and there is not one instance recorded of an infant being baptized.

There were 3000 persons baptized at once at Pentecost and not one account of an infant.

And in the book of Acts which gives an account of the early church, there is not one record of an infant being baptized.

So, where do those who defend infant baptism get their doctrine?

They often appeal to the sign of circumcision. Now circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. And God told Abraham that he would make a great nation from him. And as a sign of that covenant, God told Abraham that all infants that are eight days old shall be circumcised. And all infants were circumcised in Israel.

And so, they say, this shows that infants were included in God's covenant with Abraham. And the principle holds true with baptism that all who are under the new covenant should be baptized. And therefore, they say, children of saved parents are in the new covenant just like children of Israelites were in the Abrahamic covenant, simply by birth.

Listen to the Heidelberg Catechism of 1562 which was an expression of the faith of the reformers who broke away from the Catholic Church. Question 74 of the Catechism asks, "Are infants also to be baptized?"

"Yes, for since they, as well as their parents, belong to the covenant and people of God, and both redemption from sin and the Holy Ghost, who works faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to their parents, they are also by Baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be ingrafted into the Christian Church, and distinguished from the children of unbelievers, as was done in the Old Testament by Circumcision, in place of which in the New Testament Baptism is appointed."

This was the understanding of men like Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon and John Calvin – men who we admire in many ways. And this position has been maintained by Presbyterians and Methodists and Lutherans and others through the years.

But as Baptists, we believe that Christian baptism is not like circumcision which was administered routinely to every male born into the nation of Israel. But, Christian baptism is inextricably linked to repentance and faith. We don't baptize all infants of Christian parents, because baptism is unto repentance.

And I would assert that John's baptism was in fact an indictment on those who relied on circumcision. Those who relied on circumcision came to John's baptism and he called them vipers and he would not baptize them. Baptism was in no way a continuation of circumcision. It was not the new circumcision. Baptism was a sign of repentance. All infants in Israel were circumcised. But they were circumcised before they had any ability to repent. And it is clear that they were not saved by circumcision. All infants who were born to Jewish parents were in the nation of Israel by birth and by circumcision, but baptism signifies those who are in God's spiritual nation by repentance and faith.

The way of participating in the Jewish religion was by birth from Abraham's loins and by circumcision. But the way of participation in salvation is and always has been by repentance and faith in Christ. It is not by ethnic identity or by birth to Christian parents. Regardless of who our parents are or what ritual we received when we were infants, God calls us to repentance and he calls us to believe on Christ alone for salvation and to receive the sign of the new covenant that he has made with his spiritual people – and that sign is baptism.

Example: I was born to Christian parents back in 1951. And at that time they belonged to a Methodist church. And they took me up to the front of the church and they sprinkled my little head with water and they pronounced that I was in the church by covenant and by water baptism. But, when I was 16 years old I became very conscious of the need for repentance and faith in Christ. I was very aware that being born to Christian parents did not save me. And I was very aware that baptism as an infant did not save me. And I knew that the only thing that could save me was the grace of God through Christ and that would be demonstrated by repentance and faith. And when I expressed my repentance and faith in Christ, that Baptist church baptized me with true baptism. It was a baptism just like John's baptism. It was a baptism due to repentance, not a baptism due to my birth.

And so, we believe that the only true baptism is a baptism that is administered to a repentant sinner. To our knowledge, John never baptized an infant. And if he ever did, it would have been inconsistent with his entire message which was, "Repent and be baptized."

Now the invitation of the gospel is always to sinners and it says, "Come ye sinners, repent of your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." And when a person repents and believes then Christ says, "Baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost."