

Baptism of Jesus

Deacon George Collins

Of all the religious movements in Palestine on the eve of Christianity, none is more directly connected to Jesus than the ministry of John the Baptist. This is due to the role John played as the forerunner of Jesus. John spent most of his life in the wilderness, because that is where the divine appearance of the Messiah was expected to take place. When John started his public ministry, he chose the most traveled part of the wilderness, a crossing at the river Jordan where most travelers and commercial ventures would pass. Multitudes flocked to the Jordan from all over, because people recognized the authority of John's preaching, something they had not heard for centuries. John was a teacher of a new kind of righteousness. He preached that the day of judgment was about to dawn, and that judgment would be administered by the Coming One, for whom John was preparing the way. "He who comes after me, ranks before me."

The type of baptism administered by John was a new experience in Israel. In the book of Numbers and Deuteronomy many prophets proclaimed the pouring of water which cleanses from sin. Ezekiel the prophet went so far as to associate the purification rite with the gift of the spirit of God. Ezekiel also promised that at the dawn of the new age, the God of Israel would purify His people from their sinfulness with clean water, and give them a new heart and a new spirit; His own spirit.

Jewish tradition multiplied the occasions of ritual washing, and they were carried to extremes among the Pharisees and others at the time of John. They became outward observances rather than inward disposition. This was evident when John admonished the Pharisees and the Sadducees who came forth for John's baptism. John said, "You brood of vipers, who told you to flee from the wrath to come? Give some evidence you mean to reform." Those who heeded John's call to repentance and accepted baptism at his hands would form the righteous remnant of the end time; the people prepared, whom John

was charged to make ready for the Lord. The traditional baptism and washing was a daily occurrence and an expression of one's endeavor for a pure life, and a longing for purifying grace. This ritual was a self-administered purification. The penitents who presented themselves to John, however, received baptisms only once, and from John's own hands. This was a new experience and a radical departure from tradition. John's baptism was also unique in view of his teachings of a need for repentance as a condition to receive it. His baptism implies a confession of sin and a turning away from sin as a condition of pardon. John's baptism also implies an acknowledgement of awaiting the Messiah, and upon accepting the Messiah, the sinner would be saved from the wrath of God to come.

Jesus accomplished many things in presenting Himself to receive the baptism of John. Jesus confirmed the ministry of John as just and righteous; that John was true and sincere. By this gesture Jesus recognized John as a prophet and acknowledged John's baptismal ministry as a work of God. The baptism of Jesus was also a hallmark in that John's ministry was drawing to a close and Jesus' ministry was just beginning. A passing of the old covenant and the starting of the new covenant. Secondly, in presenting Himself for baptism, Jesus submits to the will of the Father, and directs John to do the same when He said, "Give in for now, we must do this to fulfill all of God's demands."

Jesus did not confess any sins as all the others had to do, for Jesus was sinless; a lamb among wolves. But Jesus openly associated with sinners to signify His real union with sinful humanity, the humanity He had come to redeem from its' sins. These points were all the more confirmed by what Jesus experienced when He came out of the river. The baptism of Jesus by John is confirmed by the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove, and the proclamations of Jesus as divine son-ship by the heavenly Father. What greater affirmation could there be to bridge the gap between the old covenant the new covenant? John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. John belonged to the Old Testament and to the Old Israel.

The baptism of water for Jesus became the link that bridged the old and the new. The old covenant with Israel came to an end, as the new covenant of Israel, born in the blood of Jesus, of which we are a part, was about to begin. Jesus became the bridge between the old and the new; the bridge by which we have our roots in Abraham.