

The Baptism of the Son of God

Matthew 3:13-17

This is my beloved Son...

In chapter three Matthew begins the record of the launch of Jesus' public ministry. In it he includes the account of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. With the exception of Luke's account of the time Jesus was in the Temple at the age of 12 (Luke 2:41-50), the so-called "silent years" of Jesus are not commented on in the other Gospels. His public ministry is the focal point.

The first part of chapter three (vv. 1-12) tells about John the Baptist. Matthew describes John and explains that he was the one prophesied by Isaiah (40:3). If John was the forerunner, then of course Jesus is the Messiah, the one Isaiah described in that chapter as "your God" who will come as a "shepherd."

The record of Jesus' baptism is extraordinary not least of all because he was baptized in the first place. It is remarkable that the Son of God should submit to John's baptism; a baptism of repentance. But Jesus underwent baptism not because he was in need of repentance, for he was not. Rather, he submitted to John's baptism precisely because he had come to identify with a people who did need to repent.



El Greco's Saint John the Baptist

Main Idea: Jesus' baptism was an act of humble identification with sinners and was part of the righteous requirement to reconcile sinners to God.

1. John's Objection

Vs. 14 – "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"

- John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. The cousin of Jesus, God raised John up after some 400 years of prophetic silence. That is, while the temple continued to operate and sacrifices continued to be offered, there had been no prophets for many generations. The purpose of John's ministry was to prepare the people for the arrival of the Messiah.
- Given the fact that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance it is understandable why he initially resisted Jesus' request to be baptized. We must remember that this was before the institution of Christian baptism (Matt. 28:19). Circumcision was still the sign of the covenant. John baptized people as an outward symbol of their repentance and desire to be faithful to God. John knew the identity of Jesus. He possessed at least some understanding of the Lord's divinity. So the thought of baptizing him was scandalous.

* A word about Christian baptism:

a) The purpose of Christian baptism

- Christian baptism was instituted by Jesus at the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18ff) as the new sign of the covenant of grace (Col. 2:11-12). Baptism is symbolic of the washing away of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God. Similarly, circumcision symbolized the removal of sin through the shedding of blood. Baptism is also symbolic of the believer's union with Christ (Matt 28:19; Rom 6:3; 1 Cor 10:1-4). Baptism serves as the public initiation rite into the church just as circumcision was the rite of initiation into Israel.

b) The setting for Christian baptism

- Since baptism is symbolic of cleansing from sin, union with Christ, and inclusion in the covenant community, it ought to take place in the setting of the church's public worship.

c) The proper recipients of Christian baptism

- Similarly to the application of circumcision, the church baptizes converts and the infants of believers since our children are the Lord's from birth. This has been the practice of God's people since God made his covenant of grace with Abraham (Gen. 12, 15, 17). While some practices changed (sacrifices, dietary code, etc.) God never told his people to cease giving their infants the sign of the covenant and welcoming them into the covenant community (Gen. 18:19; Acts 2:38-39; 16:15; 1 Cor. 1:16). Like circumcision, baptism is not about our commitment to God but a seal of God's commitment to cleanse from sin all those who believe in him. And just as those circumcised in the Old Testament were expected to have faith in God's provision of a Deliverer, so those baptized in infancy have the responsibility to believe in Christ for salvation.

2. Jesus' Explanation

Vs. 15 – "But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'"

- In verse 13 the name of Jesus is employed for the first time since 2:1 reminding the reader of the Messiah's mission for *Jesus* means "The Lord saves."
- Jesus insisted that John baptize him. He explained to John that his baptism was necessary at that point in history "to fulfill all righteousness."
- This was so primarily for two reasons. First, in order to fulfill the righteous requirements of God's eternal purposes the Messiah had to be baptized to identify with his fallen people. The nation was in desperate need of repentance. Jesus, of course, had no such need. But in submitting to John's baptism of repentance the Son of God was standing in solidarity with sinful people. He was named among the transgressors even though he was no sinner. Another way of looking at it is to say that Jesus was baptized for the same reason he was circumcised. Though he did not need what circumcision symbolized (the removal of sin) he took the sign in order to fully identify with his people. All that sin made necessary for us, from circumcision to death, he took upon himself and on our behalf.
- Secondly, Jesus' baptism functioned as a public inauguration of his ministry. At his baptism Jesus was announced as the Lamb of God; the one who would fulfill all that the generations of sacrifices had anticipated. Jesus' baptism was also the occasion of a spectacular unveiling of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Spirit descended and the Father spoke in public affirmation of the Son's identity. It was in the Jordan River that the incarnate Christ was empowered by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by the Father to accomplish his redemptive purposes.

3. The Father's Affirmation

Vv. 16-17 – "And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, 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, with whom I am well pleased.'"

- In this remarkable moment the Father speaks in affirmation of the Son. Jesus is the Divine Messiah. He is not a second god or a mode of God's existence. He is God in the flesh; the I AM made visible to sinners. The Father's affirmation of the Son indicates that the incarnate Christ has fulfilled the divine expectations perfectly.
- In similar terms the prophet Isaiah had prophesied the effect of the death of the Messiah: "It **pleased** the LORD to bruise Him" (53:10). That does not mean that the Father took delight in the pain of the Son. It means that the suffering and death of the Messiah fulfilled the plan of God to provide salvation for sinner.
- Here, at His baptism, Jesus began His work as the Suffering Servant, and God the Father was pleased with that commitment; and so at the fulfillment of this commitment, namely His death, God the Father would be very well pleased.