

The Baptism of John in Light of Our Baptism

It has happened on several occasions since I have been here that folks have asked me “How is the baptism of John to be understood related to the baptism done in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit as commanded by Jesus?” Which is to say, is the baptism of John the same as the baptism commanded by our Lord before he ascends into heaven? The answer is **Yes and No**.

Mark 1:4—11 helps to answer the question, but there is also an aspect of it, if not properly understood, that can muddy the waters. So we must proceed carefully so as to understand the preaching of John the Baptist in a right way.

In answering this question as to whether or not John’s baptism is identical to Jesus’s baptism, we must first answer the following questions: What is baptism? What benefits does baptism give? Who receives the benefits that baptism gives? If you’ve regularly been attending adult Bible study, this will sound very familiar to you, but it is good to model teaching and preaching after St. Paul’s words to the Philippian Church, where he says: **To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you**, (Phil. 3:1). Therefore, the saying **Repetition is the mother of learning** is appropriate.

What is Baptism?

In the first place, then, the question **What is baptism?** is answered most simply by Luther in the Small Catechism. There he writes: **Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word**. Here Luther helps us to understand that Baptism is first of all *an institution of God*. This is to say, man did not invent it, and it does not belong to man. Rather, God commanded it and gave it to man for his benefit. Additionally, baptism is water included in God’s command to baptize and combined with the word he commanded it to be combined with.

Luther goes on to ask **Which is that word of God?** and answers **Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Matthew: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**. Thus, baptism is an institution of God by which water is poured over, sprinkled upon, or a person is immersed into along with the name of God. Therefore, the baptismal formula combined with the water is **I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**.

What benefits does Baptism give? Who receives the benefits baptism gives?

In the second and third place, we must also know what benefits baptism gives and who receives such benefits. Again, a simple answer to these questions is provided by Luther in the Small Catechism. He writes, **It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare**. Thus, simply put, baptism gives the forgiveness of sins. However, you receive such benefits when you believe the promises given in Holy Baptism. It is as the death and resurrection of Jesus, which took the sins of the world away. A person receives the benefits of that work when they believe the gospel promise that their sins are forgiven for the sake of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Furthermore, Luther writes that the benefits of baptism and who receives such benefits is attested to according to the Word of God. He asks **What are these words and promises of God?** Answer: **Christ**

our Lord says in the last chapter of Mark: “Whoever believe and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” This passage from Mark 16:16 clearly states that baptism offers salvation to the one who is baptized and believes the promises given in Holy Baptism.

Again, to answer our questions in short: (1) Baptism is a divine institution; water included with God’s command and combined with God’s Word; (2) it gives the forgiveness of sins; (3) the one who receives such benefits is the one who believes the promise of what baptism offers.

With this foundation laid, we return the question as to whether or not John’s baptism is the same as the baptism commanded by Jesus before his ascension. Again, I said the answer is **Yes** and **No**. With regard to the essentials, that is, the questions **What is baptism? What benefits does baptism give? and Who receives the benefits that baptism gives?** the answer is most definitely **Yes**.

For in the first place, if we consider what baptism is, and answer that it is a divine command and institution of the Lord, we see John the Baptist treating as such. This is evidenced by the fact that he is *preaching* baptism. **Preaching in the Biblical sense is merely to announce clearly and distinctly exactly what God in his Word orders us to announce.**¹ Thus, John the Baptist would not be preaching baptism if it was not commanded and given by God.

In the second place, if we consider the benefits baptism gives, it is very clear that the baptism John was offering to those who came out from Judea and Jerusalem gave the very same benefits the baptism Jesus commanded gives, namely, the forgiveness of sins. This is clear from what Mark writes, that John was preaching a baptism of repentance *for the purpose of the forgiveness of sins*.

And finally, in the third place, if we consider the question as to who receives such benefits, it turns out, yet again, that John agrees with the definition given by Jesus in Mark 16:16. For the baptism he preached was for the forgiveness of sins, but it was also for repentance. Although repentance, that is, a turning away from sin, ought to exist in the life of every Christian, in this context, repentance ought to be understood as the conversion of one from unbelief to faith. John is calling the people not only to believe in the promises given in the baptism he offers, but also to believe in the promises offered for the sake of the coming one, the one Mightier than John, Jesus Christ our Lord.

If John and Jesus’s baptisms are identical with respect to these essential questions, how do they differ? The major difference between the two is with respect to their *relation in time* to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Which is to say, John’s baptism was done before Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead; the baptism commanded by Jesus was and is done after his death and resurrection. One commentator notes that **The Baptist’s [baptism] made followers of the Christ to come; that of Jesus[’s baptism] followers of the Christ already come. Thus the baptism of John was preparatory for Israel [or the Jews] alone, Christ’s permanent for all nations.**

This is in keeping with our Gospel text where we see that it is all of *Judea and Jerusalem*, namely, the dwelling place of the Jews, who were coming out to John. Thus, again, while John’s baptism was in preparation of Jesus who was to come and was given to the Jews; at his ascension, Jesus commands this baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to be for all nations.

¹ Lenski, *Interpretation of Mark*, 28.

Now, with respect to the part of the text I said could muddy the waters if not properly understood. This was in reference to what John says in verse 8 **I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.** Many people understand John here to say something like **I merely baptize you with water, and nothing else, but Jesus gives the real baptism; the baptism of the Holy Spirit.** Such a reading of John would be insincere and a putting-into-the-mouth words that John does not say.

We know from St. Paul in Ephesians 4 that there is only one baptism (Eph. 4:5). Thus, the so-called Baptism of the Holy Spirit apart from water taught in many charismatic churches is not a biblical teaching, but an invention of some who misunderstand this text and its parallel in Matthew 3, in which John says that Jesus will baptize with **the Holy Spirit and with fire.** So, what is John here saying?

It seems that John is referencing a point in time to come wherein Jesus will give the Holy Spirit *in a way and for a reason that it has not been given up to this point.* It cannot mean that until Jesus came, the Holy Spirit was never given. If that were the case, then no one up to the time when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit would have been saved, because it is the Holy Spirit who creates faith in the hearts of man through the preaching of the Word.

Therefore, St. Paul says **the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned** (I Cor. 2:14). He further asserts **no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit** (I Cor. 12:3). Thus, Luther teaches this in the Small Catechism under the Third Article of the Apostles Creed wherein he writes: **I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.**² Even in the Old Testament we see that faith is the work of the Holy Spirit when David pleads with God in Psalm 51 **Take not your Holy Spirit from me.**

The point in time to come wherein Jesus gave the Holy Spirit *in a way and for a reason that it had not been given up to this point* is the day of Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit is given with tongues of fire to the apostles in order that they be enabled to preach the Gospel to all nations. Jesus himself reiterates this preaching of John in Acts 1, where he says **You heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.** It is likewise recorded in the Gospel according to St. John that Jesus says to his disciples: **I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you,** (John 16:12—14). It is clear that while the Holy Spirit is most assuredly sent to create faith in our hearts, he is likewise sent for the purpose of aiding the Apostle’s in their ministry; to preach the Word faithfully and to write for the Church God’s Holy Word.

And so they were enabled to do on the day of Pentecost when the Lord Jesus **baptized them with the Holy Spirit and with fire.** This is not something every Christian ought to look for or expect to happen to them. For the word “baptism” here is understood in a different sense than it is usually used. This likewise happens when Jesus refers to his death as a baptism (Matt. 20:22; Mark 10:38). Thus, Christians ought to view the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (called the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire) with

² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism, 1986 Translation*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 9.

thanksgiving, for this so-called baptism with the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the apostles, enabled the preaching of the Gospel to go out to all nations. Further, it is clear that this so-called baptism with the Holy Spirit did not replace or nullify John's baptism or the baptism commanded by Jesus at the end of Matthew.

For immediately following Pentecost, Peter preaches a sermon and in Acts 2:38 he says to those who heard his preaching **Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** We see here that the Holy Spirit is not the *means* by which people are baptized, but rather that which is given *through* the means of Holy Baptism; water combined with the name of God. Therefore, on the day of Pentecost we see the very same baptism with water carried out by John, in turn commanded by Jesus, finally done by the apostles. And this baptism done on the first Pentecost was water combined with the name of God and it bestowed upon those people the promise of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.

And thus, we Christians rejoice in the baptism of John, which gave the forgiveness of sins and was preparatory for the Jews, but was later given to all nations by the Lord Jesus. And that for the benefit of which Paul speaks when he says that we ought not to live in sin any longer, for we have died to it in Baptism. **Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life.**

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