

Mk 1:4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Mk 1:9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

MORE THAN JUST WORDS

Dear Friends in Christ,

In 2014, the federal government imposed 75,000 pages of new regulations. That is an entire new page every 7 minutes – if they are writing 24 hours a day. But if the writers are putting in 8 hour work days, it's a new page every 140 seconds. No wonder we're having trouble keeping up with things!

Part 1

Well, not only governments, but also every good human religion loves rules. And if you know anything about the Jewish religion at the time of Jesus, you know they had lots of rules. Like many governments, the religious leaders kept on debating and fine tuning and adding to the religious regulatory burden. They had rules about eating and drinking, what and how and with whom – just to sit down for a meal! There were rules upon rules for the Sabbath, the day of worship. And hundreds more which we don't have time for.

Which might explain why ***"the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to [John the Baptist]."*** You see, these people, oppressed by the regulatory burden of their religion, heard a voice out in the desert proclaiming freedom. So they went, walking, the 20 or 30 miles to listen. This man's voice had the ring of authenticity. He wasn't one of those preachers or regulatory overlords driving a fancy car, sending his kids to elite universities, living in huge houses with parking garages and the like. No this preacher wore camel's hair, had a belt without a buckle and ate things you could find foraging around in a desert: grasshoppers and wild honey. The people went to him because he was ***"baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin."*** Oh, the sweet taste, not of wild honey, but of forgiveness!

Perhaps some people had been well-intentioned with their religious regulations. Perhaps they were making rules that made sense to the people of that time and place. But these rules couldn't help anyone be right before God. In fact, they only burdened the conscience of the conscientious and made the free-spirited more want to rebel. So when John appeared preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, thousands came to him. It was free forgiveness from all the sins of life. Freedom, not by keeping all the rules, but simply through trusting that God had forgiven them. Like death row inmates receiving pardons, like oxen unyoked from the plow, like drowning men suddenly plucked from the cold deep waters, these people felt relief when the guilt of their sins was washed away from them.

Which is just what Baptism has done for each of us. Baptism is ***"for the forgiveness of sins"*** as

John the Baptist proclaimed. The apostles said the same thing to crowds who came to them (Acts 2:38). It is written in the Bible in other places, "*Baptism saves*" (1 Peter 3:21).

But many, even Christians, would have it otherwise with Baptism. Since this is my first time to talk about the teachings of other Christian denominations, I think you should understand something about me if I should do this. When I talk about the wrong things other Christians teach, I must do this out of love for God's Word. When someone teaches something that God's Word does not teach, those words must be opposed. Having said that, I want to be clear that I rejoice in the fact that others speak of Jesus as the Savior of the world. And I rejoice that people come to know their Savior through these other churches. As long as they preach about Jesus as the Savior from sin, I do not look at them as less than Christians. They too will be in heaven one day. What saves is faith in Jesus Christ, not getting a 100% on a Christian Doctrine test. As Paul said in Philippians, "*The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice*" (Philippians 1:18). On the other hand, the Bible tells us to oppose those who teach contrary to God's Word. It is unfortunately messy. We live in a fallen world.

Having said that, it is good for us to find out where so many people go wrong about Baptism. What is the point of Baptism? "***Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins***" is where it is at. Now if you open one of the most commonly used study Bibles (one I also own) it comments on "*for the forgiveness of sins.*" It says, "Not that baptism effects forgiveness." (NIVSB, Acts 2:38) Guess that settles it, right? If the commentators who wrote the Study Bible notes said baptism doesn't give the forgiveness of sins, it must not. Except that the original Greek says the exact opposite. The Greek language here has this sense: "baptism of repentance *for the purpose of* the forgiveness of sins" (*Greek-English Lexicon*, BAGD, p.229). In a sermon, I don't like to get into the foreign languages in the Bible too much, but when commentators say, "No, the Bible doesn't say what you think it says," you need to know that it *does* say what we think it says. I mean, who is going to contradict what the smart guys wrote the notes in the Bible? So we have to look at these things. The Bible does say, "baptism *for the purpose of* the forgiveness of sins."

Most "Evangelical Christians" look at Baptism like that footnote. They look at Baptism this way: "I am declaring myself on God's side by doing this." Essentially for them, baptism is about me obeying the religious regulations. In Baptism, however, we don't look at ourselves, but at God. God is doing something for me. That is why Lutherans so love Baptism. Baptism does not tie me down by "*do and do; rule on rule*" (Isaiah 28:10). In Baptism I receive a pardon straight from the Oval Office of heaven, not more pages of regulations.

That is how we can baptize children. If Baptism were me doing something for God, I would have a problem with children being baptized. Can that child make that decision? Does that baby believe? All these questions come up when we think of Baptism as me offering something to God. But when we realize God does something for us in Baptism, then we do like the jailor's family did in our second reading. After they learned about their Savior Jesus, "*then immediately he and all his family were baptized*" (Acts 16:33). He couldn't wait until morning, he had to be baptized. After prisoners, who could understand the free pardon in Baptism better than a jailor?

In Baptism, a voice from heaven declares over each baptized child and adult, "This is my child whom I love."

Part 2

But then what about Jesus getting baptized? That was the second part of our reading. If Baptism gives forgiveness of sins, then why did Jesus have to be baptized? As some children might say, if I'm not dirty, why would I ever take a bath? Just because? Well, that is never a good reason when it comes

to something important – “Just because.” If Jesus didn’t have any sin, then why was he baptized?

And if Jesus did not need forgiveness, then maybe Baptism *is* only a rule, a law. If Baptism is all about saying to God, “Yes, I am serious about your rules,” then I can see why Jesus got baptized – just to obey the rules like all the other rules. Baptism as nothing more than a rule starts to make sense, until we go back to those stubborn words in verse 4 that won’t change no matter what we do. ***“Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*** These words remind us that Baptism is not primarily about obedience.

Then why did Jesus have to be baptized?

This question has come up often. Back in Zambia, I supervised several congregations. One of the meetings I had was monthly meetings with the lay preachers from the churches. On a given weekend I could visit three churches. But the other half dozen had laymen read sermons. Every couple years this question would come up from the lay preachers. I must confess that I have not yet reached the bottom of it. Not that I have doubts, but I don’t have complete answers either. Maybe this is one of those “mysteries” that just can’t be answered on this side of eternity. Or maybe I am really dense and can’t see what others can.

But there are two things that we do know about Jesus’ baptism. Listen to our text: ***“As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”*** (10-11). The clearest thing we can see is that God formally declare Jesus to be the Son of God. This was God the Father’s formal declaration about the Son. “Listen to him. He is God the Son.” The Holy Spirit was saying the same thing by his descent in the form of a dove and lighting upon Jesus. Which, by the way, is instructive about the Holy Spirit’s role. Whenever we see him in the New Testament, he is doing just this – drawing attention to Jesus. By this public display God added a sign to the message: Jesus is the promised Savior.

The second thing we know about Jesus’ baptism is that it is somehow wrapped up with our salvation. The Gospel of Matthew describes this same event. We read that when Jesus came to the Jordan River, John did a double take. John looked at Jesus and knew something was wrong with this picture. When he saw Jesus he said, *“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”* Jesus replied, *‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness’* (3:14-15). Jesus said that he needed to be baptized *“to fulfill all righteousness.”* How that can be, I do not fully understand. But somehow our salvation is wrapped up in Jesus’ baptism.

In Jesus’ baptism, God could say, “You are my Son, whom I love.” In a slightly different, but equally true way God says in each baptism, “This one is my child, whom I love.”

Baptism is God’s undeserved love, we call that grace. God gives us forgiveness in Baptism. But there is something else special in Baptism. God knows how we humans act. We want more than just a word, we want people to do a little more to show that they are serious. We want a handshake, a signature, the blood brother ritual, the wedding ring. These things don’t actually add anything to the deal, they are part of the deal. There is a Bible passage that says, *“As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he remembers that we are dust”* (Psalm 103:13-14). God knows our weaknesses, our need for signs. In Baptism God appeals to his children’s desire for a promise, but also that which is seen and felt. The water of Baptism. Thank you God, for your grace in Baptism. Amen.