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Sermon

Why was Jesus' Baptism Necessary

Mark 1:4-11; Matthew 3:13-15

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Why do we have this account now the Sunday after Epiphany? Well the season of Epiphany celebrates the revealing, the manifesting of Christ. Having heard of the Magi visiting him, having heard of Simeon and Anna in the Temple recognising that the baby was the longed for Christ, now we have the account of the announcement of the start of his ministry – his baptism.

However, we have heard and I have preached on the same event twice already since November. Last time it was the baptism service for Bella and Chara. Then, I also explored the passage we have just heard from Acts. But I did say I had a fresh insight into the baptism of Jesus. So today, I am going to focus on that one thing. To gain a fuller picture we need to draw from each of the four gospel records. First of all, Matthew tells us:

Matthew 3:13-15 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented.

My interest was captured by Jesus saying it was necessary for him to be baptised by John for them to fulfil all righteousness. On the surface, John the Baptist was quite right that Jesus should baptise him not the other way around. Jesus is the greater, John is only the messenger declaring his coming. And maybe John also wanted Jesus to baptise him with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So why would it fulfil all righteousness if John baptised Jesus? I have wondered about this in the past. Here are some of the usual ideas:

Obedience:

Dr Kenneth Barker, the senior editor of NIV Bible, wrote:

Jesus is seen as the Suffering Servant (Is 42). But the Servant's first mark is obeying God: he "fulfils all righteousness" since he suffers and dies to accomplish redemption in obedience to the will of God. By his baptism Jesus affirms his determination to obey that will and to do his assigned work. ¹

Matthew Henry also points to obedience as a motive. He makes the distinction that Jesus submitted to baptism because that was obedience to God's will. Conversely, when Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees

¹ Barker K. L. & Kohlenberger J., *NIV Bible Commentary Vol 2 New Testament*, 1994, Hodder & Stoughton, London, p18

because his disciples were not following their hand washing rules, he defended them because it was a rule of men not of God.

Matthew Henry also suggests that the ceremonial law had various washings which Jesus fulfilled in his baptism. By being baptised he gave value to baptism and honoured it in preparation for it being a gospel ordinance for the church.

Identification with sinners

Another idea is that by being baptised by John, he was identifying with sinners. Dr Martin Goldsmith wrote:

Various possible explanations have been given by different writers, but it seems most likely the words relate to Jesus' work of salvation for his people. ... As in his death he would bear the sins of his people, so now in his baptism he identifies with sinners and thus begins his ministry of salvation.²

It is obviously important that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit, which empowered him for his ministry. Yet being anointed with the Holy Spirit seems to be the next step for it follows on from his water baptism.

So the main ideas are: (1) Jesus identified with sinful humanity; (2) it represented the death and resurrection he was to undergo or (3) it was an act of obedience although it is not clear what command he was obeying. Frankly, I have never been convinced that these explanations got to the nub of it. Then the footnotes to Matthew 3:15 in the Passion Translation of the Bible opened up two ideas, which I had never heard before.

1. Washing of the Lamb

The first footnote read: "This was the presentation of the Lamb of God as the sacrifice for sins. It was important that John publicly wash the Lamb of God and fulfil the requirements of the law, proving to Israel that the Lamb that was soon to be offered was spotless and without blemish."

Those of you who saw the video we showed on the Christmas midnight and 8am services saw the story of a shepherd who brought a sheep which had a sore. That made it unacceptable for offering as a temple sacrifice. The Jewish Law specified that animals to be offered had to be without blemish or defect.³

In John's gospel, John the Baptist announces Jesus as the Lamb of God:

John 1:29, 31 The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ... [The] reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

The flocks were to be washed before being brought to the temple.⁴ So here was John announcing that Jesus was the Lamb of God and then washing him as the Law required.

The Christmas video ended with the shepherd who had just seen the newborn Jesus being asked, "Have you found a perfect lamb?" He smiles as he realises that he has indeed.

1 Peter 1:18-20 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

The Apostle Peter knew that they had found the true lamb.

2. Ordination of the High Priest

The second footnote read:

² *Matthew and Mission: The Gospel through Jewish Eyes*, 2001, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, p51

³ Lev 22:21

⁴ In the Old Testament, I can only find a requirement for the innards and the legs of the slain animal to be washed. However, the Talmud records that flocks would first be washed. (Babylonian Talmud Book 3 Appendix)

Jesus would have been about thirty years old, the age when Levitical priests were ordained and qualified to serve. This was his ordination as the High Priest over the household of faith. Jesus' baptism was a form of dedication.

Jesus came forward to be baptized of John because He waited until He was of age to be baptized into the sacrificial priesthood. Levites could minister from the age of 20, but priests had to be 30.⁵ Luke tells us Jesus was about 30 years old at the time of his baptism.⁶ So Jesus waited until he was 30 to be baptized into the sacrificial priesthood to 'fulfil all righteousness.'

Psalm 110 said that the Messiah would be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. He was the King of Salem which means peace and his name means King of righteousness. Melchizedek is mentioned in Genesis 14:18 when Abraham gave him a tithe and he gave Abraham bread and wine.

The Epistle to the Hebrews expands on this to show how Jesus is of a higher priestly order than the Jewish one. Abraham gave an offering to Melchizedek as Priest of the Most High God. Therefore Melchizedek was greater than Abraham. In turn, Abraham was greater than his great grandson Levi, the father of the tribe of Levites from which Aaron the first Jewish high priest came.

We are not told of the ordination ceremony for a high priest of the order of Melchizedek. It is clear from Psalm 110 that the high priest is called by God to the role. Just as Psalm 110 has God declaring the Messiah to be a priest of the order, so here in the gospel a voice comes from heaven saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

The ordination of Aaronic priests required a washing ceremony which is described in Exodus 29, 30 & 40. It was a full body immersion wash. They were then clothed with priestly robes and anointed with oil. There were sacrificial offerings for cleansing from sin.

Jesus was fully immersed, washed in the Jordan River. He was anointed with the Holy Spirit when he came up from the water. I guess he did not need the sacrifices since he was sinless.

In 1989, Helen and I visited Israel and stumbled upon the Temple Institute. This is a Jewish organisation which believes there has to be temple again for the Messiah to come. So they plan for the time when a temple might be built again. In particular, they had researched all the structures, furniture and implements with a view to remaking them in the future. In their display, they had a robe for the High Priest. I was startled to learn it was seamless. The Jewish historian, Josephus, described the high priest's undergarment as being seamless⁷. It was extraordinary because seamless meant no stitching at all. Everything was woven in a single piece. Even buttons were made by taking the warp threads and forming a thick knot like a turk's head before the thread continued on in the fabric. It takes considerable skill to create a garment this way without stitching at all.

So the high priest wore a seamless undergarment. I find that interesting in the light of the fact that Jesus also wore a seamless undergarment.

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. (John 19:23)

What we have seen is that the baptism of Jesus would fit the pattern of washings prescribed both for the priest and the sacrifice. And Jesus was to be both the priest and sacrifice at Calvary.

So why did he say he needed to be baptised by John to fulfil all righteousness? Do you remember that Jesus said of the Law, in Matthew 5:17-18:

⁵ Numbers 4

⁶ Luke 3:23

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3:161

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Some things are prophesied and must be fulfilled. Some things are ordered and must be enacted. Might he have meant this was the right and necessary way for things to be done as he embarked on his ministry? Might he have meant that it was necessary for him to be ordained into the order of peace and righteousness? Might he have meant that he must be washed to become the High Priest and the Lamb who would bring about the atonement which none else could achieve?

High Priest

In conclusion, we do know that Jesus was appointed by God as High Priest in this new non-Jewish priestly order. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us more about this over several chapters. The words of Hebrews 7:24-27 sum it up.

... because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need--one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.

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