

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
The Baptism of Christ

Luke has spent the beginning of his gospel intertwining the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. He has related the stories of the announcing of their coming births, prophecies regarding each, and the events of the births themselves. In this passage Luke brings not only the two stories, but the two men themselves together. We do not know that this is the only time these two met, though it is the only meeting recounted in Scripture. What is clear is that this passage marks a transition in Luke's narrative; from this time on the focus will be on Jesus as the Messiah.

The scene is the baptism of Jesus. Baptism is a fundamental Christian practice, but its universal use has led to many different interpretations as to its fundamental meaning and purpose. Christ clearly had a high view of the occasion, and it is worth our time to try to understand what this passage can teach us about this ordinance of the Church. Also, this passage contains a beautiful manifestation of the Trinity. Again, a doctrine fundamental to our faith, but one often misunderstood. As believers, we must have a right view of these things to properly participate in and understand our faith.

A Right View of Self

John's preaching and teaching had attracted attention. But more than that, it had caused people to be in "a state of expectation and all were wondering" (v.15). We should never underestimate the power of ministry to get people thinking. Christianity has nothing to fear from inquiry. Our faith is not one of blind belief and mindless ritual. Our faith is a relationship and that means, among other things, that it has an intellectual component.

It is clear from this passage that the people had a high opinion of John. They actually wondered "whether he might be the Christ" (v.15). The Messiah had been prophesied for centuries, and no doubt there were at least some who remembered the events of some thirty years before - the shepherds telling of the angelic host, the words of Simeon and Anna at the temple, perhaps even the interactions between the young boy Jesus and the rabbis at the temple. There must have been those faithful Jews who anticipated the Messiah and took these events as what they were - signs of His coming. But if the Messiah had indeed come, then who was he?

John the Baptist was doing something unusual. When John the evangelist recounted this episode in his gospel he noted that people sent by the Pharisees asked John the Baptist, "Why then are you baptizing?" (John 1:25). To baptize a Jew as if he were a Gentile was clearly innovative and might be a sign that this was the Messiah.

It would have been easy for John to take to himself some of the accolades. He could have pretended to be the Messiah, or at least been ambiguous enough in his answers to keep the attention focused on himself as a possibility. After all, the Messiah was to be the king. The potential rewards were great and, while we know that the Messiah came to suffer and die, there is no sense that everyone else expected that to happen. The Messiah was coming to rule.

But, John had a low opinion of himself. Perhaps better stated, he had a proper opinion of himself. He did not deny his own ministry, nor did he offer the pretense of self-abasement. He acknowledged the role

God had called him to pay and then used his influence to direct others to Christ. “John answered and said to them all, ‘As for me, I baptize you with water; but He who is mightier than I is coming’” (v.16). In fact, John pushed the point further by stating that he was unworthy to do the simplest, most menial act of a slave for the Messiah, “I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals (v.16).

A lesson to be learned is that the right goal of any ministry is to magnify Christ, and a faithful minister will always exalt Christ.

A Right View of the Church

There are two metaphors in verse 17 - the metaphor of fire, and the metaphor of the Church. In Scripture, fire can refine or destroy, but in this case the emphasis is on the latter. “He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (v.17) clearly does not describe some Purgatory where souls are prepared for paradise, but rather points to the eternal fire of damnation described by Christ in Matthew 25:41, “He will say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.’” This fire is not cleaning, but punitive. It is not temporary, but eternal. It is not for those destined ultimately for Heaven, but for those in Hell.

The metaphor of the Church is equally illustrative. A threshing floor was either a large flat rock in a hilly area exposed to the wind, or it could be artificially created in a similar breezy area. It was usually about thirty feet or so in diameter and had a border of stones at the edge. The gathered grain would be placed in the middle of the area and oxen would pull a sled-like vehicle across it. This would separate the kernels of grain from the stalks. The chaff (husks, dirt, straw, etc.) that still clung to the kernels needed to be removed, and that was done by hand. This process was called winnowing and the grain would be tossed up into the air with a fork-like tool (think of a pitchfork but with tighter tines) and the wind would blow the needless material away. The clean kernels of grain would then fall to the floor to be gathered.

This illustration of the Church reminds us that the visible group of people in a church congregation is a mixed body. Church attendance does not save. Neither does obedience to the ordinances of the Church such as baptism or communion. Neither does the giving of time, money or talent to the body of Christ. Neither do acts of kindness to others. Neither does being a good husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter. Nothing we have ever done, or ever could do, can save us. We are saved only by the substitutionary death of Christ on our behalf. There is no reason to assume that we cannot evangelize within our own doors.

A Right View of Baptism

There have been errors high and low about baptism. Catholics, and others, argue that it is the first sacrament that must be received and that if one died without being baptized they were damned. Infant baptism has therefore been practiced by most believers throughout Church history. The great Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne, insisted that any Germanic tribes he conquered submit to baptism *en masse* or be put to death. Faith could then come later. Clearly these do not demonstrate a right understanding of baptism.

“When all the people were baptized” (v.21) cannot mean that everyone who went out to hear John the Baptist preach was baptized. In speaking about John later during His ministry, Christ said “the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John” (Luke 7:30).

The phrase simply means that Christ was baptized as all the others who received John's preaching were being baptized. This was a public event.

But why was Jesus baptized? Luke 3:3 shows that John's baptism was "a baptism of repentance" which a sinless Savior would not need. In fact, Matthew points this out clearly in his gospel, "But John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?'" (Matthew 3:14). John understood that Jesus was no sinner Who needed John's baptism.

The Catholic Church, and some Protestant denominations, argue that baptism removes original sin. But then again, why did Christ need to be baptized? Surely being conceived by the Holy Spirit (God, Himself) He was free from original sin. It is a basic tenet of our faith and the very reason behind the Incarnation as God's plan of salvation.

Clearly, Jesus did not *need* to be baptized for these reasons. So why then? The answer is given by Christ, Himself, in Matthew 3:15, "Permit it at this time, for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Christ was baptized simply because it was the righteous thing to do.

For practical reasons, it could be argued that Christ submitted to baptism because it fulfilled the Law regarding priests (Exodus 29:4). It also established a precedent. But simply put, Christ chose to be baptized because it was the right thing to do in accordance with God's perfect plan of salvation. He was baptized for the same reasons He taught others how to pray. It was for our benefit, not His.

Another issue related to baptism is the person who does the baptizing. Donatism was an early Church heresy based on the teachings of Donatus (d. 355). He lived in North Africa and insisted that any who had lapsed during times of persecution were forever banned from the Church. The congregation, according to Donatus should be made up only of the elect. He believed that if a priest or bishop had stumbled when threatened with persecution, they could never again hold the offices they had held, and any sacraments they conducted were invalid. That is, the value or quality of the sacrament was dependent upon who administered it. We understand, however, that the power of baptism is not in the man who does it but in the God Who ordains it.

A final point to emphasize is that baptism should not be entered into lightly. Notice that Christ prayed, "while He was praying" (v.21). Christ is shown to pray regularly before any significant event. Only a few examples include:

- before choosing the twelve disciples (Luke 6:12)
- when feeding the five thousand (Mark 6:41)
- before the transfiguration (Luke 9:28)
- at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:41)
- during the Lord's Supper (John 17)
- in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32)
- on the cross (Matthew 27:46)

A Right View of the Trinity

Verse 22 is an elegant demonstration of the Trinity, “and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, ‘Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well pleased.’”

In the early church, there was a belief taught by Sabellius called modalism, or Sabellianism. It argued that God does not exist eternally in three persons, but rather one person who appears in different forms at different times. That simply cannot be the case because in this passage, all three members of the Trinity are simultaneously present - Christ is being baptized, the Holy Spirit is descending, and the Father is speaking.

That the Holy Spirit descended on Christ at His baptism has been misinterpreted by some to suggest that it was at this point that He *became* the Messiah. That is, Christ was simply a man who at this time was chosen by God to take on the role of Savior. This denies the unity of the Trinity. The Trinity has always been and has always been in union with each other. The descent of the Holy Spirit, like baptism, is a symbolic act to publicly demonstrate the empowerment of Christ for ministry.

This empowerment can best be understood in the *kenosis* of Christ. When Christ became incarnate, He “emptied Himself” (Philippians 2:7) of His divine attributes. That is, while retaining full understanding of His divinity and retaining all the fulness of His deity (Colossians 2:9), Christ voluntarily surrendered to the Holy Spirit the independent *use* of His divine attributes. He did not surrender the attributes themselves, merely the independent use of them apart from the will of the Father. The descent of the Holy Spirit was a symbolic gesture of the empowerment of Christ to conduct His ministry on earth in conjunction with the Holy Spirit in this way. He performed His miraculous deeds through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Take Aways

Is the main emphasis of your ministry, whether in a church setting or within your family, to exalt Christ?

Let us remember that in Christ the Father is pleased; no other way.