

John's Baptism for the New Israel (Lk 3.1-20.pt2)

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Pastor Ostella

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In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." ⁷ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹ And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." ¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Introduction

It is reasonable to conclude that John's baptism has implications for Christian baptism, including the relation of baptism to the children of the church (that is, to children growing up from infancy in the church). Accordingly, the important point in our text (Lk 3.1-20) is covenant identification by entry into the covenant community through baptism. This involves a natural shift from John's prepared people to the church. Our topic therefore is "John's baptism for the new Israel." We have two points: repentance-baptism is the entry-way into the new covenant community (through John), and repentance-baptism is the entry-way into the church of the new covenant (from Christ through His apostles).

1A. Repentance-baptism is the entry-way into the new covenant community

Turning our attention to the new covenant people of God, we should note the immediate ambiguity of the language of "covenant children." In the text before us, the children in view are adult children of Abraham: **do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham** (3.8). The point is not that no infants or young children are mentioned. True, they are not mentioned but the real and deeper issue is that of covenant standing. Thus, the question is "how are we to identify the new covenant people of God, the new Israel, the new children of Abraham?" The answer comes from John's explanation regarding the formation of this new people. By saying that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones, and that these children of Abraham are not to speak to themselves about being Abraham's children, John makes it clear that God does not depend on physical descent from Abraham to form the new Israel. How then will God form the new Israel? He will do so from all nations (3.6, **all flesh shall see the salvation of God**) by His sovereign power giving life to the lifeless (3.8, **from these stones to raise up children for Abraham**). Israelites are not excluded; they are included in those who need life from lifelessness.

The question here is “Who are the covenant people in the time of Messiah?” They are those who acknowledge their sins in a baptism of repentance and thereby enter the new Israel against the day of final judgment. A similar question is “How do we identify the children of God who have the blessing instead of the cursing of the Messiah’s baptism?” They are people who mourn and acknowledge their sins in repentance-baptism, which includes commitment on their part to a repentant life (to fruits of repentance in practical ways). To develop this more fully, we need to discuss baptism and then repentance.

1) Baptism

John’s washing rite stands in contrast to birth as the entry-way into the covenant community. Notably, the old covenant community was formed by birth to Abraham through Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. It is not simply birth to Abraham, but birth in a particular pattern that is not by Hagar, not through Ishmael, and not through Esau, but through Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob by God’s election within Abraham’s family. Thus, it was bad for Israelites to trust in the flesh and not acknowledge God’s electing grace for their very status in the covenant community, as the family from which the Messiah would come. Nonetheless, they were God’s covenant people as the physical descendants of Abraham through Jacob. That standing brought with it the promises of salvation in OT symbolic signs as gospel signs. They were to embrace the gospel in these promises by faith, depending on God alone. In this they continually failed by unbelief and disobedience. They were characteristically a stubborn and disobedient people (Rom 10.21, a pointed summary of OT history). By grace, God continually saved a remnant through judgment; the remnant were the redeemed children of Abraham in contrast to the unbelieving children of Abraham.

At the time of John, the nation continued in unbelief on a large scale with believers among them on a small scale. The nation to which John came was a nation speeding headlong for judgment at the coming of the long expected Messiah: **16 John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire"** (Lk 3.16-17). Given the pattern of Israel’s conduct in the OT, it is not a surprise to find Israel again in radical disobedience, even at the very point when the light of her salvation was beginning to shine. However, John came to prepare a people for the Lord that would be ready for the Day of Judgment and receive Messiah’s blessing by the Spirit instead of cursing with fire.

Thus, in the time of Messiah, it is not the case that the special standing of Israelites by their physical descent from Abraham gives them access to the Israel of fulfillment. They now only have that standing by baptism. Now one might think that this involves a contrast between circumcision and baptism or a contrast between trusting in physical birth and baptism, but neither contrast is in view. To see how that is the case we turn now to repentance.

2) Repentance

The door into the new Israel is repentance-baptism: **[John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance** (Lk 3.3). One becomes a child of Abraham in the outward and visible community of the new people of God by confessing their sins in baptism, **they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins** (Mat 3.11). The water and the warnings show the visible side of things; John administered an outward sign of entry into the new Israel.

Of course, the old Israel was to be a community of faith. Their status as the children of Abraham and thus as the people of God brought them the gospel in OT gospel signs such as circumcision and sacrifice. The descendants of Abraham through Jacob were God’s people throughout the OT, even when they were “not His people” in times of judgment in the cycles on

record in the book of Judges and in the exiles recorded by the prophets. In the time of John, the nation is again in the status of “not my people.” They are God’s people *under judgment* and thus “not my people.” Now, through John, as the forerunner of salvation near at hand, a new covenant people are being formed from Israel (and somehow from the nations; cf. all flesh, 3.6 from Isa 40). This status will not be constituted by birth to Abraham but by repentance. So, though they were always to be a faith-community, now there is an emphasis on faith as constitutive of the very community in its very formation as a visible people of God. The new Israel is a household of repentance in its formation by repentance-baptism.

Furthermore, this does not mean that all in the new Israel are true believers. As in the old covenant, the visible does not tell us what is in the heart. Hence, John gives strong warnings that speak to the heart and conscience. Nevertheless, the outward community is constituted in a way that places an accent on repentance and faith because entry into that community is not by birth to Abraham (not by birth to a believing parent) but by the acknowledgment of sin in the reception of baptism. This acknowledgement is essential to repentance, and faith is the positive side of repentance. Thus, the NT church is the household of faith (Gal 5.10) in more ways than one.

2A. Repentance-baptism is the entry-way into the new covenant church

John’s formation of the new Israel anticipates the church of the Messiah. Paving the way he gives baptism to the new covenant people and thus to the church. Christian baptism is John’s baptism elevated and filled out by the Messiah and carried forward by His apostles. Accordingly, when the Day of Pentecost arrived and Jesus baptized the church with the Holy Spirit, John’s water baptism did not fade away. Instead, it blossomed into Christian baptism for Peter preached saying, **repent and be baptized...for the forgiveness of your sins** (Acts 2.38), which is reminiscent of John’s message: John came **proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins** (Lk 3.3).

This leads to some clarifying comments about Christian baptism in train with John’s baptism from the perspective of Peter’s preaching on the Day of Pentecost.

1) Entry is by baptism not birth

Such is the context for understanding Acts 2.38-40, particularly, for understanding the reference to children: **repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...for the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off**. We must be discerning in how we connect the promise to children here with the promises to Abraham of the coming day of forgiveness of sins through the seed of Eve, Abraham, and Jacob. We cannot simply infer from the mention of “your children” to the conclusion that this must mean that the status quo of including our children with us as members of the new covenant by birth continues. John’s baptism transitioned by Jesus through the apostles into Christian baptism lies behind these words of Peter. Thus, the entry-way into the new covenant church is now by repentance-baptism, not by birth. Therefore, we have a definition of covenant children: those who enter the visible covenant community by repentance-baptism.

Significantly, Peter’s repentance-baptism is defined by John’s repentance-baptism.

That means that the idea of birth for covenant status (a good thing in itself as the pattern of the old covenant) no longer applies in the formation of the new Israel. This does not mean that Abraham’s children in all their generations cease to have historical-redemptive significance because God continues in the present time to keep covenant with Abraham’s descendants, even under judgment as “not my people.” He keeps promise to them under judgment by blessing the Gentiles as He promised to Abraham and his offspring and by blessing a remnant from unbelieving Israel (we learn both of these things from Rom 9-11).

2) Baptismal entry is not analogous to circumcision

It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Peter's reference to children flows in a different direction than the idea that these words to these Jews calls them to the centuries old practice of including their infant children with them in the sign of the covenant of circumcision, say, now in the new form of baptism. This is due to the fact that in the OT male descendants of Abraham received circumcision on the eighth day *because they were already the covenant children of Abraham*. Circumcision was not an entry-way sign. It signified the covenant promise of the Messiah-Savior in mini-reiterations of the covenant in every circumcision as a mini-fulfillment looking forward to final fulfillment in the birth and circumcision of Christ. Circumcision promised the coming child that would be circumcised; thus, including infants in the sign of the covenant fell away in fulfillment.

Accordingly, in more than one way, baptism is not new covenant circumcision: a) a baptism is not a circumcision as the Lord's Day is a day in analogy with the OT Sabbath. Baptism is not a circumcision as communion is a meal that continues the Passover in a new form. b) Moreover, baptism does not promise what circumcision promised regarding the children of believers on a par with Abraham the believer. Christians do not have the promise of children as such, nor that from their children will come a multitude of descendants to form nations, nor that kings will descend from them, nor that the Messiah will come from them, and nor that they will be a people with whom God will deal throughout history in covenant fulfillment to them even through judgment upon them. In other words, there is historical-redemptive uniqueness to the children of Abraham through Sarah and Jacob that does not apply to believers as the new children of Abraham.

3) Children along with adults are called to repentance-baptism to enter the new Israel "Let everyone of you...repent...for the promise is to you, your children, and those afar off." Surely, the implication here is that all receive the promise of forgiveness by repentance that they embody in receiving the symbolic cleansing rite of baptism.

4) The warrant for entry into the new Israel is in the universal promise

The matter of warrant is another reason for the citation of children in this context (Acts 2.38-40) because the audience is composed of people who crucified Christ and in so doing called on God to curse their children. Now, knowing that they acted wrongly, they raise the question born of a vexed conscience: **what shall we do?** Peter's answer references the movement of the gospel from Israel to the nations in such a way that it does not exclude anyone including those who crucified Jesus and cursed their children in doing it. He reassures them saying, "You may yet enter the new covenant people of God, the new Israel begun in John's day. In repentance, you enter the new community through the door of baptism. Likewise, your children enter by repentance through the door of baptism, and so may those afar off. In all these groups, the underlying reality is the power of God who may raise children for Abraham from the stones on the banks of the Jordan. Ultimately, the promise is for all that God calls. This implies that He calls from all these groups; none are barred by sin (even the sin of sins: crucifying the Son of God), by curse (in placing the blood of Christ on the heads of their children), or by nationality (for the covenant promises now belong to all flesh and thus to those afar off).

In the end, no child is excluded from the promises of the new covenant gospel because it is for all nations and all families of the earth. All may be *covenant breakers* like old Israel, and all may be *the covenant people of God under judgment* (all are in the category of "not my people," which includes both Israel and the nations), but no children are excluded from the covenant promise because all have the promises in the universal offer. If all have the promises, if

the promises are for all in the free offer, then how much more must the children of believers have the promises of the gospel to be received by repentance manifested in baptism.

John prepared a people in the wilderness for a journey to the holy land of heaven to be entered beyond the final Day of Judgment. Therefore, his baptism was for the new Israel both in paving the way for the coming Lord Christ and as the foundation on which our Lord sends the gospel to all nations to the end of the age.

Concluding remarks

There are implications in these answers for understanding the new covenant people of God living under the Lordship of the Christ (under Christ the Lord). In turn, understanding the new covenant people has bearing on how we are to view our children, the children of believing parents, because our view of children is a question of their covenant status and the use of language that describes them as covenant children.

Baptism has a richness in its bond with repentance.

First, it is an acknowledgment of sin and the need for cleansing. This is the basic picture of this washing rite.

Second, it is a move from uncleanness to cleanness in the very obedience of baptism. It is an obedient and righteous act as it flows from a repentant heart.

Third, it teaches the gospel of forgiveness of sins that sinners receive by repentance of heart manifested in the obedience of baptism.

Fourth, as an entry-way into the new Israel, baptism leads to covenant identification and thus to the fact that one becomes a member of the new covenant community blessed by the Spirit and delivered from judgment by repenting as they go through the door of baptism into the visible church.

Fifth, baptism, that is, repentance driven and oriented baptism, expresses a commitment to live a life of practical repentance. In other words, those baptized not only receive a promise of forgiveness (the gospel promise in symbol; the gospel acted out in a ritual), but they also commit themselves to live a clean life. They embrace cleansing in two ways: a) God's promise of cleansing by His forgiveness, and b) their promise of cleansing by their godliness. It means embracing the promise to live for God by God's cleansing grace.

In the life of the church, baptism benefits us all by hearing the promises of the gospel in the washing sign, finding reassurance in it, and calling us to covenant renewal. Therefore, this very study ought to deepen our sensitivity to our duty to live clean lives that bear fitting fruits of repentance such as: acknowledgement of our sins with a deep sense of spiritual poverty and sorrow and pursuit of righteousness of life by the light of God's holy word. We do so as disciples of Jesus who cling to Him as our priest, learn from Him as our prophet, and who learn how to live under His authority as our king. On this path of discipleship, we find peace with God and rest of soul.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God whose gifts and calling are irrevocable; O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways in giving glory to Israel and light to the Gentiles to form a new Israel, the church, the new city that has foundations because its builder and maker is God. To Him be all glory, now and forevermore, amen.