“***Why the Baptism?***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Jan. 10, 2021

**Luke 3:7–9**

7 John said 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? 8Bear fruits worthy of repentance. . . 9Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

**Mark 1:4–15**

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”. . . .

14Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The Jewish audience that listened to John would have been excited to hear a prophet speak. John’s reputation preceded him. His camel’s hair and leather belt would have reminded people of Elijah (see Matt 11:14), a favorite prophet from the historical books of the Hebrew Bible. One of the later prophets, Malachi, had said “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (Mal 4:5). John was like a latter-day Elijah, an eccentric but widely respected and dynamic figure. Part of his message was to speak about one who was to come after him, the Messiah, who is going to baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit. He heightened expectation and excitement for the coming of the Messiah, but he was so popular that he had to go out of his way to stress that he himself was not the Messiah, and that he was a lesser figure than the Messiah.

Why did Jesus submit to John’s baptism? If he was as superior to John as John himself said, and if he had no need to repent from sin, why did he *want* to be baptized? I will seek to answer that question in a moment.

First I want to note the ways in which John and Jesus are opposites. John stands for the old era. He speaks of judgment, of “the axe lying at the root of the trees,” ready to chop them down (Luke 3:9). The emphasis is on judgment, sin, and repentance. We should fear God’s wrath! Jesus represents a new era, and his religious message is very different. He says the kingdom of God has already come (Mark 1:15), and people need only to repent and believe. John is severe and moral. Jesus emphasizes love and mercy. He embodies it. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

What does Jesus say about John? In Matthew, we hear him saying “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt 11:11). What a paradoxical statement! How can anybody be greater than the greatest? We have to look into that. So far we’ve noticed that there’s a contrast between John and Jesus, and another contrast between John and believers in Jesus’ kingdom. How do we solve these problems?

Let’s look at the last statement first.

“Greatness” can have more than one meaning. Is Jesus looking to do a ranking of people’s greatness compared to John’s, or could he intend something else? Sometimes greatness is a matter of living up to one’s potential, and some people have been given more potential than others. I would suggest that “greatness” here refers to having greater spiritual capacities, due to having *received* a greater revelation and a greater Spirit. I doubt that any of us has a stronger character or more courage than John the Baptist, but every one of us has received a greater revelation and a new Spirit, and therefore has greater spiritual potential, if we have heard the message of God’s love, and received the Spirit. That is amazing! To have greater potential than John the Baptist.

Even though they had spent three or four years working with Jesus, it was hard for his closest disciples to fully accept and internalize the message of God’s love. They still wanted to bring down fire upon Samaritans, or have the power of sitting at Jesus’ right or left hand in his glory (Luke 9:54; Mark 10:37). He had to reject their requests, and they were momentarily crushed. They had grown up with the old ways as their foundation. They carried some of their old ideas with them, and even imported them into the gospels, but we see from the *whole* of the gospel record and from the character of Jesus that emerges, that there is a new approach to God that is love-based rather than fear-based. Jesus often was surprised at how little his disciples understood him (Matt 6:30; 17:20; Luke 12:28). Just like with some of us, old habits and opinions can be hard to relinquish. Jesus was bringing a whole new way of living, and a whole new concept of God—God as loving Father.

Here’s a major point: Jesus inaugurated a new age of spiritual living. He imparted strikingly original teachings, ones that focus on God’s generosity and mercy. Further, Jesus told them he would send a new spirit after he left. His disciples could have a relationship with God that was not based on law-following but on personal trust and love—a personal *relationship—*with help from a Spiritual presence. We are taught to stop fearing God, but instead, to love God. We will have help in walking this path, living this new life. “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). We have to be open to what is new and surprising.

So why did Jesus submit to John’s baptism? I think the reason was not because he needed to repent from sin, but because he wanted to *affirm* John’s ministry. Submitting to baptism, Jesus really ended the old covenant and inaugurated the new covenant. The grace and power of the new covenant is shown by the Spirit descending and by the Father’s voice speaking. These heavenly signs mark the new era on earth.

When you have a transition from one era to another, you could either emphasize the contrast between the eras, or the continuity. Jesus emphasizes the continuity. He could have made a sharp contrast between his teaching and John’s, but he doesn’t. He honors John’s work and does not dispute any of his teachings, even though his own theology differs significantly. It is important that his movement succeed John’s, and that he inherit the momentum of John’s work. Jesus is going to pick up on the moral teachings of the Jewish prophets, and seek to fulfill their transcendent hopes. In Luke, he says that he is fulfilling the prophecy about bringing good news to the poor, releasing captives, and healing the blind (Luke 4:18, 21).

He wants people to see that he is not picking a fight with the previous covenant or with prophecy, but he is fulfilling it and expanding it in ways that people could never have imagined. He says “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15). The time is fulfilled means the time has come, and anticipation is to be fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come. In the next chapter of Mark he will say that believers need to stretch, like new wineskins, to receive new wine (2:22). New wine expands, and it can explode a container. All of this means we need to be able to stretch our minds to receive the new message, which has expansive power.

With Jesus comes a new age of spiritual possibilities. The early church realized some of those possibilities. They discovered hope in a way people had never done so before. They set up charitable practices that were unparalleled in the ancient world. Jesus told his followers that people would know they are his disciples by their love for one another (John 13:35). They fulfilled that promise. Then Christianity became the religion of the empire, which got it entangled with the empire’s values, and Christian theology and values suffered a setback from which they have not recovered, to this day.

But we can get a taste of those early, miraculous days if we return to the message of God’s love, and the astounding new revelation that Jesus brought. Just be ready for the newness, and practice stretching your mind to receive it. The new truth expands, like new wine does. You have a greater revelation than John ever had. The new era is made easier to handle by virtue of the new Spirit poured out on you. Can the caterpillar imagine life as a butterfly? How different our lives will be if we stretch our mind to the possibilities! You know now that God is love. The possibilities are endless and the choice is yours.