

The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? (Mat 21:25)

I got similar questions recently from a couple of different people asking about the difference between the baptism of John and baptism into the body of Christ, and how those differences may apply to us. So today, I hope to undertake what I believe the answer to that is.

We'll begin dissecting this by examining two separate, but related events told in Acts that sparked the questions:

“And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly. And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace: For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ. And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” (Act 18:24-19:5)

What we find in this passage is remarkably interesting to me. This is dramatic evidence of the effectiveness of John's preaching, and how impactful it ultimately was. Remember that John predominantly preached in Judea, baptizing in the Jordan

“In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,” (Mat 3:1)

“These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.” (Joh 1:28)

John didn't travel the world the way the Apostles did. He was a local preacher not even engaging in the synagogues directly, but preaching in the wilderness, with such a moving and soul-pricking message it caused the people to come to him

"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan;" (Mat 3:1-5)

John's preaching had caused such a stir with its forcefulness and adamant claim that the Messiah foretold throughout all scripture was coming, that indeed He was at hand, that even this young man Apollos, who was born in Alexandria Egypt, a visitor to Ephesus, had heard of it. We don't know what drew him to Ephesus, but here he is, nonetheless. We don't know exactly where he learned about John and his teaching, whether on the road or not until he got to Ephesus, or if he had heard of it while still in Alexandria. Not only did he know about John, but he knew what his overall message was and how it could be validated as truth through the scriptures. He was so moved by the message that he took up preaching it himself, even though he hadn't by any evidence known John, and though a disciple in action, not a disciple in the sense he learned at John's feet. Here we find him in Ephesus, far from home, preaching and spreading John's message farther. As a preacher he was very, very convincing to some of the most stubborn and difficult to move people on the earth – the Jews.

His message is not completely aligned with the full gospel, however, and though drawn to the eloquence and power of his speech, Aquila and Priscilla can't let him preach this incomplete, imperfect message, having a more perfect understanding of it themselves. And they do what any true Christian would do – they help him. They see him using the talent he has been given and invest their time and energy to help him use it more effectively, to gain a better ROI on the effort, as it were. They don't dismiss him, they don't berate him, they don't dispute with him in the synagogue or try to embarrass him. They took him into their home and showed him how to perfect the message he delivered to be the best servant he could be. They used their talent wisely. Apollos' message was incomplete in that it only focused on the baptism of John, that is to say the baptism of repentance as a preparatory step to receiving the Messiah. John's message was very clear – "I come to prepare the way" but that wasn't enough anymore.

John's preparation was critical to God's people whose only exposure to Him for hundreds of years now was His preserved word. Consider this idea for a second – there had been no prophet in Israel since the deaths of Malachi, Haggai and Zechariah. There was no one who had said "the word of the Lord has come unto me"

for hundreds of years. It had been a waste, howling wilderness, destitute of the Shekinah glory of God manifesting itself before His people. That was about to change. Pre-work is necessary. Sweeping out the leaven, changing hearts, aligning to His ways is necessary before he comes!

John was sent explicitly as the herald of the King of Glory to prepare the people to receive Him, to warn them to turn away from the slothful and whorish ways of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and to remind them there had been only silence from their God since the prophets ceased in the earth. What must be done to prepare the way of the Lord then? John delivers the message succinctly:

“Repent ye” (Matt 3:2)

Repentance is necessary to prepare the heart and spirit, to change them and align them to the Lord; that is the way that is being prepared – the way of The Lord. They had walked in their own way with no direct intervention or correction, and now John called especially the faithful to return to His ways and His statutes. Note John did not call them to atonement through sacrifice. That was not the message he was sent with. This was a new message and a new approach he taught.

He brought to them the idea of baptism. Bear in mind the idea of cleansing was clearly not new to the Jews, the lavers and the sea of brass were well imprinted into their theological psyche, and the Pharisees especially had manipulated that concept into all kinds of rules and regulations around dietary laws, new laws of cleansing with the mikvah ritual bath, and others, so much so Christ explicitly calls them out on these ideas of external cleansing

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.” (Mat 23:25-26)

But baptism is not about cleansing in the sense of washing the blood of sacrifices off the priest, or a ceremonial cleansing from uncleanness. It is about regeneration and renewal, about being born again. Baptism is about preparing His way in ourselves. It is the public confession that you have put off the old man and are born again into the new

“Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (Joh 3:3)

John wasn't there to expound all the issues and explain all the ways Christ would fulfill the law and do all the things Christ Himself did. He was there for a singular purpose,

and that's why you see him still doing that same thing even as Christ began preaching, and His disciples were also baptizing.

“After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized. For John was not yet cast into prison. Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him. John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him.” (Joh 3:22-28)

I think there's a really important lesson here. John didn't join up and travel around with Jesus after he baptized Him in the Jordan; he kept about the task he was given to do. John understood his task and he kept to it. He didn't seek some other role. He didn't look to gain something from the work he'd done, he just kept doing it until it was time to stop. Jesus didn't call John Baptist to physically follow Him like he did the men who became His Apostles, and John recognized that, I think. At the same time, he didn't just quit, assuming from a fleshly view that since now the Christ was on the scene, he's free to take up some other message or assume some other task, declaring “Mission Accomplished”. No, that's not how God's messengers roll.

You also see here the manifestation of what we run into later with Apollos and the twelve men Paul encounters in Ephesus. It's what I'll call “Johnism”. To put it as nicely as I can, these guys didn't get it. They were full of a zealous fervor for what John was preaching, but they weren't seeing the forest for the trees, as it were. John understood that he would be directed to stand down in some fashion at some point as he says a few verses later

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” (Joh 3:30)

And later, after he has been imprisoned, John sends his disciples to Jesus on a fact-finding mission, not for his benefit, but for theirs, to define for them the proper understanding and state of things

“Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? “ (Mat 11:2-3)

John had seen the Spirit descend like a dove, had heard the Father's testimony of Him, and had told others that Jesus was the one he was forerunner to. He got it. I won't

however, rule out that John needed a boost of faith due to this language from Christ found in Luke's account of the errand:

“And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.” (Luk 7:23)

It seems that John's disciples suffered from some of the same lack of comprehension the Apostles did and needed some explicit explanation. Not that I fault them for that. They were immersed in the idea, just like the Apostles, that the Messiah was coming to establish an earthly political kingdom, and even when a thing is staring you right in the face, it is not always easy to see. That should keep us vigilant in our watching, always cross-checking against the scriptures to determine if we are seeing things in the proper scriptural light. It is easy to become so used to a specific way of thinking that even in the face of overwhelming evidence you hold onto a wrong idea. They were really focused on the idea that they were “disciples of John”. You see Paul dismiss this behavior in his letter to Corinth

“Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.” (1Co 1:12)

We are members of the body of Christ, not of the church of Paul, or John, or Apollos, or Cephas. The Bride is a unified body, not a patchwork of factions and sects and orders, all following different men. The disciples of John were stressing out about the fact that Christ was, through His disciples, baptizing in greater numbers than they were, and they weren't joined up with John, as it were. They wanted to get into some discussion about whose organization it was, and where in the pecking order this Jesus really fell! “It's not right!” they say. “You've been out here in the wilderness eating locusts for crying out loud, dealing with these mean, spiteful Pharisees all this time, and when did you tell him that it was okay for him to go off doing his own baptisms! It's not right!”

The flesh makes some really crazy arguments sometimes, that if you listen to the words coming out of your own mouth, the silliness of the words becomes apparent. Though not always, because, well, it's the flesh. It sometimes takes someone pointing it out most directly to you to see where your personal silliness is, and John of course tries to do that here by sending his disciples to the source.

You also see in this account what the root of John's real problem with the Pharisees was. They had come out to see this event of John baptizing and created an argument by raising “...a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying”. I am confident that John wouldn't have had the first problem with a Pharisee coming out and declaring an honest desire to repent. But that's not what he was getting, which is why you get this reaction from him:

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Mat 3:7)

John was having no part of it. He knew what they were about, and cut straight to the heart of the matter – who warned you? What are you doing out here if you didn't hear the warning? Nothing you've got to offer here is going to help these people or further the cause of truth, so butt out! So they went after the disciples, looking to shroud their judgment and castigation in “questions”. How many times have we heard that smarmy, fang-riddled, poison of asps dripping from their tongue, simple-sounding “can I ask you a question?”

These Pharisees and Sadducees were numbers men, and they saw a lot of numbers leaving their way of thinking, their synagogues, their coffers, headed out to follow this guy in some shabby clothes made of camel's hair of all things. They wanted to develop a plan on how to make this ‘baptism thing’ into a ritual! Like everything in Judaism from then to now, they must shroud it in some kind of labeled mysticism, trying to make everything harder than it is.

They wanted, desperately, to keep control of these folks – their money, their value as citizenry, the power their following provided, etc. Anything that drew massive numbers of people out of the city to the Jordan had to be a tool they could use to enhance their power base, and they thought ritual cleansing, or “purifying” was their hook to make John's truth compatible with their idolatry. Think of this in terms of Xmas and Saturnalia and the method becomes clear. John didn't just go off on these fellows for no reason. They were heretics working to infuse his gospel with their heresy.

Apollos and these twelve disciples of John were fervent preachers of this doctrine of repentance and a person declaring that repentance publicly through baptism. But as we know, that isn't the full message to be preached, and it is apparent that these individuals were not connecting all the dots. Apollos had Aquila and Priscilla to help him connect those dots and he readily took in that instruction, made the truth his message and became a well-known evangelist that Paul comments on more than once as he does here:

“I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.” (1Co 3:6)

Apollos worked diligently to continue the work that Paul had started, following him a number of places, including Corinth, obviously. Which brings us back to my original starting place.

After Apollos departs to go to Corinth, Paul returns to Ephesus, and there finds these twelve men preaching John's baptism. These were disciples of John, likely they had spent time with him in the wilderness of Judea, and were personally, intimately

involved in all the aspects of John's preaching it seems. Why they didn't get the same instruction from Aquila and Priscilla isn't clear. Maybe they weren't as entreatable, maybe they weren't in the synagogues the same way, who knows. What we know is that Paul encountered them and takes occasion to inquire of them what it is that they really believe. This was a legitimate and even necessary line of inquiry.

"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." (1Jn 4:1)

If your mission is to go into the world and deliver the gospel as Paul did, you want to know where your friends are and where you can help one another. Paul digs into things with them, and hearing them preach so specifically John's baptism, decides to ask some questions. There were some things he wanted clarified.

"He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost."

Now you might wonder, "how in the world is it possible these men could not have heard of the Holy Ghost, that the Comforter had been sent?" And it's a good question. Just logistically, if they fled Judea after the death of John, or they had gone forth spreading his message even before his death, which it seems reasonable to assume either had happened in order for Apollos to have heard of John and baptism unto repentance, it's not hard to imagine how the message the Apostles were spreading hadn't gotten to them. News was not an instantaneous thing in those days. Add to that if there was a lot of this "Johnism" in play, they wouldn't have traveled in the same circles, using the same methods in the same places that the Apostles did. Remember, John didn't dispute in the synagogues the way Paul and Peter do. He wasn't sent to dispute in that forum and work that work. And if his disciples didn't yet grasp that the preparation of the way was done, that John had decreased as he told them he would, they hadn't encountered the Apostles and their message, etc., then they wouldn't have known and wouldn't have shifted gears yet.

It's the difference between being motivated to preach from the flesh and being driven to preach by the Spirit, quite literally. That isn't meant as a slight to these men, and it isn't meant to say John didn't operate in the Spirit; these guys were in a flesh mode, though. As we know from the Apostles, wrapping our heads, hearts and thoughts around these crucial matters can be hard, *even when you have the Son of God in your presence every day*. Until He removes the scales from our eyes and the light is allowed to enter in, we will not understand. No matter how much we study. No matter how much we want it zealously, it isn't going to happen. That should not discourage us from study. That should not discourage us from preaching with the light we have today. What it in fact should encourage us to do is diligently seek greater light, that today's scales might be removed that we have greater understanding tomorrow, and

tomorrow's scales be removed that we have greater light the day after, and ever praise and thank God that yesterday's scales were removed for us so that we have any light at all.

These men simply had no understanding that the baptism they preached was incomplete, that Christ had brought fullness of the ordinance to include not just repentance (which it still does) but the necessary regeneration of His sheep from the old man to the new. He tells the Apostles directly

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:” (Mat 28:19)

John had explicitly told his disciples and those who came to be baptized by him that he was only baptizing them with water, but that there was more to come, as we see here

“I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.” (Mar 1:8)

I submit to you that these men simply didn't understand that.

Those words *“baptize with you with the Holy Ghost”* cannot only be a reference to the day of Pentecost as many try to apply them. This isn't just about speaking in tongues. And as a reminder, that doesn't mean flailing around with a bunch of gibberish coming out of your mouth that literally no other human understands. How would that glorify God? How would the Holy Ghost be comforting His people by having you sound like you're having a seizure?

To apply this baptizing with the Holy Ghost only to the day of Pentecost would greatly lessen its importance to all those who believe. It has to mean more than that. Being baptized with the Holy Ghost has application to our daily lives and how He, as the Comforter, provides us words to speak, patience, understanding, and all the things we need to walk in the way.

John is referencing what Christ delivers in His commandment to baptize *“in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”*, demonstrating that while his disciples may not have, he had an understanding of things to come and how he fit into that schema. The words *“in the name of”* do not mean “by the authority of”, but the word “in” might have more appropriately been translated “unto”. So we baptize unto the Father, the Son and Holy Ghost.

Being baptized **unto** the Father means we adopt His way, His ordinances, His demanded methods of religion, acknowledging Him as Sovereign Creator over all; being baptized **unto** the Son is to acknowledge His Sonship, His deity, His obedience and role as the Messiah, to know him to be the kinsman-redeemer, the Lamb who is

worthy to open the seals and judge the world and then to openly devote yourself to Him as the way to the Father; being baptized unto the Holy Ghost is to see Him as the Comforter, seek His guidance, help and comfort for the spirit, to look to Him to help us put off the carnal and to be Spiritual. To be baptized **unto** these is to confess them.

These disciples were “baptized unto John”. They were about the business of delivering John’s message. That’s not to slight them or fault them. I will say it again, they were dealing with what they understood, and it seems they were putting all they had into it, which is good. But they were doing it with the wrong motivator and driving factor. They don’t appear to have understood that baptism is not enough by itself, and it does not gain you entrance into everlasting life. They were, I believe, treating baptism like that ritualistic object the Pharisees wanted it treated as, though not for the same reasons. Like so many things, the spirit in which you do a thing is important. Remember Christ said

“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” (Mar 16:16)

You’ll note He does **not** say he that “believeth and is baptized not”. Belief is the necessity; baptism is the confession and declaration of belief. It is possible that a believer walks the earth with no ability to be baptized. I don’t want to throw out there that it’s a common thing, but the thief on the cross who believed wasn’t baptized, remember.

In our passage, Paul reminds these twelve that

“...John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.” (Act 19:4)

And **that** was the ‘aha’ moment for these souls. It took all their time with John and seeing those events, their own travels and works, the hardships they undoubtedly faced at the hands of the Jews and Romans, and this terse lesson from Paul to cause the light bulb to come on. But don’t be hard on these guys. I remind you all that we have been through in this house. We have been there when something became so obvious for us we wonder how we were ever so ignorant. It’s the way of believers. God provides all things for us in His appropriate time – including knowledge and understanding. That is a thing of great comfort and hope for me many days.

In that ‘aha’ moment where it clicked for them, they saw that their baptism was not one of faith in Christ, and were baptized not again, but unto Christ for the first time. So many expositors and theological writers want to make this massive Federal case about how this cannot possibly mean that these men were re-baptized; whole books are written about this. It is a deep-seated topic of great passion amongst many of our

favorite expositor friends, and I'm sorry to say most of them get it wrong, in my estimation.

You have to wrangle these words (if you want to see an example of how this looks, go look at Gill's exposition of verses 4 and 5) to make this not mean what I think it means plainly on its face – they heard Paul's explanation and were baptized. If they did not confess the Father, Son and Holy Ghost in their baptism under John, saw it not as a regenerative element of worship but only as a declaration of repentance, then they hadn't been baptized unto Jesus Christ. And I'm not trying to be formalistic that those words had to be said, but the manner and rationale of baptism matters. Therefore, they were not 'baptized again'. Baptism is not some dude who claims to be holy dunking you in a tank of water, or a river or a pool or a bathtub. By this logic, every time someone pushes you into a swimming pool you're baptized. The form and spirit of the ordinance matter.

So a natural question comes from this then – was the baptism of John of no effect? Absolutely not. Jesus was baptized by John as were His Apostles. Again, the reason and rationale for why you are doing it matters. What's in your heart? Are you, as these twelve did, doing it as a formality, perhaps to pledge yourself to some man's message or cause? Or are you doing it to declare your loyalty, allegiance and faith in the Father, Son and Holy Ghost? There are baptisms that are of no effect – think Catholic sprinkling or any of the whorish so-called churches in the world that use that hellish theatrical farce to make themselves look somehow religious. But if a person showed up here saying they were baptized previously, and they believe it was a legitimate confession of faith, I am not going to burden them with a need to be baptized again, because baptism is not about local church membership. These twelve, being baptized with John's baptism clearly felt it was ineffectual based on their new knowledge. If someone came to us in that state, I'd consider their baptism. These are heart matters between a person and God, not strictly a functional task being performed.

The event (and the question) gives us an opportunity to look at ourselves and inspect. It has given me moments of great reflection on the meaning of being baptized unto the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and how faith in each of these members of the Trinity is critical to my daily walk, my thinking, my words, my actions, and whether I have lived according to that. Have I been obedient, faithful, and waiting contentedly within the bounds of my habitation? How do I do better at that tomorrow? How can I continue to make that public confession of my faith clear and thereby glorify my God? All these (and more) are questions that we should ask every day to help assess our state as we lay heads on the pillow and when we rise up to help frame each new day.

Thank you for the question, and I hope this has been of help to you.