



The baptism of John

D. Hart

THE OBJECT of this article is to establish the standing of the baptisms carried out by John the Baptist. What was their meaning and purpose? The reference to “the baptism of repentance” (Lk. 3:3) might be taken to imply that this rite was simply an outward sign of a personal resolve to turn over a new leaf, to do a bit better, to prepare to be more worthy to greet the Messiah, whose arrival was expected about that time.

In Acts 19 there is an account of how Paul found twelve disciples at Ephesus who said they had been baptized “Unto John’s baptism”. We read: “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” (vv. 3-5).

Many have reasoned from this that John’s baptisms were not the same as Christian baptisms because, when it was found that these twelve believers had only been baptized “Unto John’s baptism” (notice that it does not say “by John”), they had to be baptized again in the name of the Lord Jesus. But I suggest that we should check that conclusion by looking deeper into the subject, examining other evidence and considering additional factors. I submit that it can be shown that John’s baptisms were essentially Christian baptisms, with all the meaning the New Testament gives to Christian baptism. The only distinction between the two is that John’s baptisms looked *forward* in faith to the saving work of the Messiah, as prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures, whereas Christian baptisms, which first took place on the Day of Pentecost, after Christ had died, looked *back*.

It should be noted that at the same time as John was baptizing Jesus was doing the same. He instigated ‘looking forward’ baptisms during his ministry:

“After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judæa; and there he tarried with them, *and baptized*. And John also was baptizing in Ænon near to Salim, because there was much water there” (Jno. 3:22,23);

“When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples,) he left Judæa, and departed again into Galilee” (4:1-3).

What was the significance of the baptisms carried out by Jesus or his disciples which made people his disciples?

John’s baptism and Christian baptism

We look at a number of things which support the case that John the Baptist’s baptisms were proper Christian baptisms. Firstly, notice that baptism was *not* an Old Testament practice. It was not to be found in the Law. There were washings to cleanse the body ceremonially, but not bodily immersion in water as a rite, as a significant ceremony in which a person took hold of the offer of salvation and eternal life. When the Pharisees asked John that pertinent question, “Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ . . . ?” (1:25), they were saying, in effect, “What right have you got to institute a new religious ordinance when you are not the anointed one, the Christ?”

The statement in Luke 3:3 that John’s baptism was “for the remission of sins” is *exactly* the phrase used in Acts 2:38 about baptism into Christ. The purpose of the two baptisms was exactly the same: for the remission of sins. Remission of sins means the forgiveness of sins, and Scripture clearly teaches that there is no forgiveness possible without faith in Christ. So the two baptisms were the same. John preached the imminence of the coming of the Messiah; in

fact he said that he had already come. He baptized people who believed that in the Messiah who was about to be revealed their sins would be forgiven—not just covered, as by the sacrifices of the Law, but remitted.

In Hebrews 6 the writer says: “Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit” (vv. 1-3). Here we have an unusual expression, “the doctrine of baptisms”, and it is definitely plural: “baptisms”. This phrase is referring to two baptisms:

- those prior to Christ’s death, which were conducted by John the Baptist and by the disciples of Jesus, and *anticipated* his life-saving work
- those carried out after Christ’s death, *looking back* to his sacrifice.

The same belief was required for either to be effective; so there were two baptisms, but they were essentially the same in their effectiveness in obtaining the remission of sins. Of those Hebrews to whom the epistle was written, some would have been baptized by John the Baptist or Jesus’s disciples *during* his ministry, and others would have been baptized by the apostles and disciples *after* the resurrection. It did not matter whether it involved looking forward before the sacrifice of our Lord or looking back after it.

The new dispensation

The beginning of Mark’s Gospel has an important bearing on the matter being considered. It says: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). We rightly expect that the writer will tell us, not of the Law of Moses, the Old Testament, but of the new dispensation. So what *is* the beginning of this new dispensation, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ? It is the work of John the Baptist.

Verses 2 and 3 refer to the prophecies of him by Malachi and Isaiah, and then we read:

“John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judæa, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. And John was clothed with camel’s hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat lo-

custs and wild honey; and preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (vv. 4-8).

That was the beginning of the preaching of the gospel, the good news, and it concerned “the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins”.

John did not come to prepare the nation of Israel to receive their Messiah. If he had he would have said so, something like: “I’ve come to tell you that God requires the whole nation to repent”. He did not say that or anything like it. What he did say was: “This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water” (Jno. 1:30,31).

That was not a call to national repentance. The Messiah was going to be manifested to all Israel, but the call was to individuals to believe on him and be baptized. What he was saying was, “I have been telling you that one was coming who is much greater than I. I did not know who he was, but I did know, as I told you, that he would be manifested to Israel to save you from your sins if you will but believe in him. That is why I have been teaching you and baptizing you with water into that belief. Well, now he is here!”.

Jesus, disputing with the Pharisees, said to them: “The law and the prophets were until . . .”. We might expect him to have continued by saying something like, “. . . the son of God is sacrificed as the perfect Lamb”, but he did not. He said: “The law and the prophets were *until John*: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it” (Lk. 16:16).

So Jesus was showing clearly that John was part of the new dispensation of God, not the old. John was performing priestly work, though having nothing to do with the temple or the Law. If repentance for the nation *only* was what he was preaching, what difference was there between him and the prophets of old who had preached just that? Had there been no difference Jesus would not have said, “The law and the prophets were until John”, he would have said, “until *after* John”, or something like that. And it was baptism into Christ in advance of the final great sacrifice that was new and world-shaking—a

whole new dimension that he was introducing for God. Remember that John was sent by God for a special purpose which had been prophesied: the starting off of the new dispensation.

Again, when John the Baptist was to be circumcised and named, "his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying . . . thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of their sins" (Lk. 1:67,76,77). Only in Christ, and him crucified and raised again, can there be remission or forgiveness of sins.

Christ's own baptism

John 3 says that Jesus and his disciples were in Judea baptizing, and then adds: "And John also was baptizing in Ænon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized" (vv. 22,23). This is not contrasting the two baptisms but equating them. It says Jesus was baptizing, and "John *also* was baptizing".

Earlier in that chapter Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"; and: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness" (vv. 5,11). Who were the "we" he was referring to? It could not have been Jesus and his Father, for verse 11 is not appropriate to God speaking. It was not the disciples, for at this time their role was only just beginning and they had not seen the Holy Spirit descending on the Lord, nor had they testified at all. So clearly it was John, whose preaching was all about Jesus and at one with his.

What greater testimonial could be offered as to the propriety and importance of John's baptism than our Lord's insistence on undertaking it, saying: "for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15)? Christ needed no baptism of repentance, for he had no sin to repent of; but he was a man, his body was flesh and blood, which, being inherited from his mother, contained the potential to sin. Hence the temptations, and his defeat of them. He could have sinned, but he did not. He had sin in the flesh but allowed it no outlet whatsoever. But sinful flesh cannot be perpetuated forever in the Kingdom of God, so his body had to die at some time like all of Adam's line. So Jesus needed the benefit of his own future sacrifice and the work God

would perform as a result of it. That sacrifice was foreshadowed here, in burial in water, and in resurrection in coming up out of it. Just as we visibly proclaimed our faith in God's purpose when we were publicly baptized, so did the Lord Jesus, and thereby the baptism administered by John was given the seal of approval.

There is no record of any of the twelve apostles, some of whom are recorded as first being disciples of John, being rebaptized. Yet Jesus spoke of them later as being already washed (Jno. 13:10), already clean (15:3), and he also describes them as children of his Father, in contrast to the Jewish nation who were strangers (Mt. 17:26).

When we add all these points together we see that John's baptism was a true baptism in advance of Christ's sacrifice, for the remission of the sins of many. When we search for any evidence to the contrary we can find none.

The disciples of John at Ephesus

What then of those disciples that Paul found at Ephesus, who had been baptized unto John's baptism and who were then rebaptized in the name of the Lord Jesus? It is important to read the incident carefully:

"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 Spirit since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Spirit. 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. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied" (Acts 19:1-6).

Note especially what Paul said about John's baptism, that it was the baptism of repentance, and that those baptized by him should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. These disciples of John did not know this. They had not even heard of the Holy Spirit, yet John's preaching included the important facts that this coming Messiah, whom they were to

believe in, would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Quite obviously they had not heard John preaching, they had only heard about it second hand, and that very sketchily. In other words, they were seriously lacking in their knowledge of what their faith had to comprise for them to qualify as Christ's disciples. It was like someone coming into our midst stating that they had been baptized, only for us to find that they had not even heard of some key doctrines. Of course, we would want to correct their misunderstandings and, when they believed the true faith, to rebaptize them.

So these twelve men, who thought they had been baptized unto John's baptism, had not been, for they did not know properly what John had taught the people. Their ignorance of John's preaching does not therefore indicate that John's preaching was anything other than what the evidence shows it to have been. The fact that they were rebaptized into Christ after they were instructed in no way invalidates the truth of John's proper baptisms.

Finally, the case of Apollos is considered. Acts 18:24-28 records:

"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 publickly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ".

Apollos, knowing only the baptism of John, was fervent in the spirit, taught diligently the things of the Lord, but did not know it all (and which of us does?), so Aquila and Priscilla instructed him further. Nowhere is there any indication that, knowing only the baptism of John, he needed to be rebaptized into Christ. That is because he already had been baptized into Christ by John.

The baptisms carried out by John the Baptist were therefore valid Christian baptisms, looking forward with a full understanding that Jesus was the Christ, the anointed of God, and that he was going to be their Saviour, as prophesied in the Law and the prophets.



Principles, Preaching and Problems

Demons (3)

Andrew Perry

IN THE FIRST two articles in this short series we have endeavoured to argue the following points:

- 1 The written records of the demon miracles are carefully crafted accounts, which embody a symbology that associates the demon-possessed with the historical situation of Israel's idolatrous past. In this symbology the demon aspect stands for the nations and their gods. Such a symbology is a powerful argument against a belief in demons.
- 2 The recorded fragments of what Jesus said that include demon language do not show he believed in demons. In some cases he is op-

posing demon beliefs; in other cases they are part of a natural conversational response; and in some cases he may be accommodating the beliefs of those to whom he is speaking.

In this final article we want to consider the Old Testament.

Systematic Theology

Systematic Theology is a scholarly discipline that endeavours to set out the fundamental doctrines of Christianity in a coherent and systematic way. The subjects of whether there is one God or many, and where natural evil comes from, are part of Systematic Theology.