

Second Sunday in Advent

A TALE OF TWO BAPTISMS

Mark 1:1-8

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

1The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" 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.

DIAGNOSIS: John's Baptism

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Returning to the Wilderness*

John's baptism was for nothing less than "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 4); but also for nothing more. This much is certain. And although even this certainty needs to be explained, almost everything else about John and his "baptism"

(meaning "immersion") is uncertain. Since John was not the "Christ" (Greek for Messiah, with implications of kingship), the question about John's baptism is, What makes sense, historically and theologically, in view of Jesus and his baptism "with the Holy Spirit" (v. 8)? The consensus is that John preached in "wilderness" area, broadly understood, using a water-baptism, possibly from a rock cave, in a dramatic reversal of the Sinai experience where Israel first sinned. The idea was for the people of Israel to "repent," that is, "to turn away from sins," so that God would once again "forgive the sins of Israel" (see Isa. 40:2 and Lk. 1:77) and usher in a new period of Israelite history (see 2 Chr. 7:14). If so, then John's "baptism" served two purposes: First, to mark a course-correction for the people of Israel in their relationship to God, like all other course-corrections of times past; but second, to announce, on the basis of Israel's repentance, a new time period in which God would establish once more Israel's political freedom, whether in history or as the eschatological turning point of history. But history did not comply. John was beheaded and Jesus appeared on the scene as both Christ and Lord. That is to say, with Jesus' resurrection came the recognition that the end or fulfillment of history had dawned—under the aegis of the Holy Spirit—breaking down the old ideas of divine kingship and divine judgment. Blending together these historical and theological data points, Mark could say not only that John was "preparing the way of the Lord" (v. 3; see Isa. 40:3) by means of Israel's "repentance," but that, in view of Jesus' baptism "with the Holy Spirit," he was God's agent for the kingdom itself (1:1, "Messiah, the Son of God"; compare with 14:61, but here Mark is playing with a Greek cognate). As it turned out, John marked the "beginning" (v. 1) of God's final purposes for Israel. John may have expected a coming kingdom, whether "of God" or "of David," but Jesus arrived instead (vv. 7-11; note the eschatological motifs of divine judgment: baptism, heaven being torn apart, and the

Spirit of God descending upon Jesus), announcing the arrival of God's reign apart from any political forces: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and trust in the Good News" (1:15). For Jesus, "the kingdom of God" (or reign or kingship or realm or domain; see Robert Funk's "Honest To Jesus") was far more than a cyclical "return" in expectation of a reconstituted "kingdom of Israel." Rather, it was people putting their daily lives in the hands of God, trusting that he will provide for their greatest needs. John's "baptism of repentance towards (this is a better translation than "for") the forgiveness of sins" was limited to the outward "sins" of Israel, or to their individual sins taken together as a whole, in prospect of the "forgiveness" or forbearance of those sins. But in view of Jesus' "baptism with the Holy Spirit," John's baptism could at most only bring about a temporary waiver of Israel's ever-recurring sins; judgment light, if you will. And even that was due to God's forbearance (see 10:5; also Rom. 2:4-5) rather than to any real change in the people. With Jesus, there is no more returning to the wilderness to find God! In the kingdom of God, Israel's tenuous waiver system of "forgiveness" and the old pattern of judgments and political renewals that followed (see Matt. 11:12), was over.

[Note: If John had anticipated a time in which the waiver system of Israel's sins would end (vv. 7-11), would he not have followed Jesus and become one of his disciples? On the one hand, John's preaching was not that unusual in anticipating a renewal of Israel, though he garnered a lot of attention by his baptizing. On the other hand, if he had anticipated a baptizer of the Holy Spirit, would that not have made any renewal moot—or at least implied that the coming renewal of Israel that he expected was doomed from the start? In my opinion, John's reference to Jesus' "baptism" in v. 8 is Mark's own retrospective editing, a deliberate and sharp contrast to John's

baptism. Thus, to characterize this analysis as “A Tale of Two Baptisms” is in keeping with Mark’s own theological agenda, even though he added to John’s preaching to make the point.]

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Returning the Heart to God?*

John’s baptism did not and could not “return” the heart to God, even if it claimed to do so. As wonderful as a renewal of Israel might have been at the time, it could not address the deep-in-the-heart origin of sin from which all other sins spring. Israel’s sins were too deeply entrenched to be solved by the cycle of “repentance” and “forgiveness” that John was preaching. Because John only dealt with external sins (and even that he limited to the people of Israel), he remained blinded to the far deeper need of mending the human heart vis-à-vis God as a precondition for Israel’s blessing to the world in fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise (Gen 12). In truth, John’s baptism of repentance was merely a show-case for Israel’s supposed worthiness to be forgiven, whether based on an outward show of water-baptism or as a veiled presumption of her election.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Water versus Spirit*

John’s baptism did not and could not solve Israel’s perpetual crisis of faith—a “crisis” (from the Greek word for “judgment”) that was concealed under religious presumptions but ultimately can have but one outcome. Along with Israel’s hoped-for renewal was therefore the foreboding sense that judgment was coming upon the world, or at least to Israel’s little corner of it (see Lk. 3:7-9 and Matt. 3:12). While the judgment of water was limited to outward sins, the judgment of the Holy Spirit digs deep into the spirit. It is of such magnitude that neither Israel nor any part of the world can escape it, because it calls for an end of every human undertaking to renew itself. Creation itself is implicated! Mark 13 hints at its cosmic impact; and Mark 15:33-39 hints at its religious impact. Against the power of God

to destroy sin and evil, no one can stand.

PROGNOSIS: Jesus' Baptism

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Sending the Holy Spirit*

The “Good News of Jesus Christ” (v. 1) is that God’s reign on earth has at long last begun. In Jesus, the Holy Spirit has been unleashed upon the earth, both to judge sin at its root and in its totality, and to fulfill, indeed to overflow, all the promises of God. Jesus signaled the reign of God by healing both body and spirit. He interpreted scripture with decisive “authority,” he cast out demons, and he raised the dead. These acts are all indicative of the presence and power of God. And because the reign of God was central to Jesus’ preaching, so that it interpreted his deeds, the kingly title “Messiah” (Christ, Anointed) naturally attached to him. Jesus himself demurred from such recognition, preferring the less politically volatile, Jewish apocalyptic title, “Son of Man” (see 8:27-9:1). Nonetheless, the political undercurrents of Jesus’ messiahship prevailed; and Jesus did not prevent his crucifixion as “the king of the Jews” (see 14:61; 15:2, 8, 12, 26, 32). Therefore, Jesus’ life and death and resurrection gave shape to the kingdom of God as the very essence of life well pleasing to God. On a basic level, then, the reign of God is what Jesus’ “baptism with the Holy Spirit” was about, and it overturned the corrupt notion of kingship, and leadership generally, that had occupied Israel from the time of Saul (see 1 Sam. 8:7), and even infected Jesus’ disciples (10:42-45). Jesus did not merely herald the kingdom of God or preach about it; rather, it is completely identified with him, and by his death and resurrection Jesus invites others to join with him in it.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Receiving the Holy Spirit*

“Trust in the Good News with all your heart!” Jesus says (1:15). Why? Because the reign of God begins and ends with trust in God. By “God” of course, we mean the One who “inspired” (in-spirited) Jesus and raised him from the dead. Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, we who receive the Holy Spirit trust in THIS God, and by such trust join with Jesus in the reign of God. By receiving the Holy Spirit, the reign of God happens “for us.” In cultic terms, but for that reason no less real, our sins are forgiven. That is the Good News.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Baptized With the Holy Spirit*

The reign of God judges all things, yet it is also a new creation. In our joy that the reign of God has come upon us, we who are subject to the Spirit cannot ignore the Spirit’s leadership. In what is probably an honest reflection of the tension between John’s preaching and Jesus’, the disciples of Jesus ask that they hold positions of power in the coming kingdom. “Not so!” is Jesus’ reply. Then he points out that his own “cup” or “baptism” consists here and now of servanthood in the kingdom (10:39-45). Such baptism is not an option for kingdom dwellers. The reign of God among us is not a static repose or a heaven far away, but a risky response to the political and religious presumptions of righteousness permeating every human thought and act. Kingdom dwellers refuse to “live by presumptions,” and instead trust the Good News—that is , they “live by faith.” As we “step on superman’s cape” we can expect to pay a price: our own hypocrisies are exposed and ridiculed; we suffer public embarrassment from family, friends and church; we are betrayed by well-wishers; we join the ranks of the poor either by design or necessity—finding Christ there too; we confront the power of the law without an advocate for ourselves; and finally we face death. Sound familiar? John and Jesus, and countless others, testify to “the cost of discipleship”

(Bonhoeffer). But just as these trials of faith are for the benefit of others, they also lead us ever deeper into faith, that is, into the Spirit of Christ.