

The Baptism of Our Lord

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The Baptism of Our Lord

Analysis by Steven Albertin

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with* the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 19 But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20 added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

DIAGNOSIS: Who Am I? Chaff.

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Who Am I? I Don't Know.*

[Whether He Might Be the Messiah (3:15).]

Regardless of our age or stage in life, we encounter causes, philosophies, products, pitchmen, messiahs, etc., all trying to tell us who we are, offering us an identity, promising us life, if we only follow their agenda. The crowds in today's Gospel daily encountered a myriad of messiahs who offered to provide them with the identity they needed. These crowds wondered if John might finally be The One. The problem is they, like we, can never be sure whether this one is The One. So we are continually "church shopping" or flitting from one self-help philosophy or therapy to another, collecting as many "household gods" as possible, covering all our bases, being the ultimate pluralist and embracing diversity but never able "choose this day whom we will serve."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Who Am I? But I've Got to Decide.*

[Filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts (3:15).]

But finally we have to decide. Even not to decide is to decide. To decide to be an eternal pluralist and committed to diversity forever is a decision. We have no choice but to answer the expectation and questioning in our hearts. We have to have a god—a Messiah, someone who will finally answer that gnawing question for us: "Who am I?" The crowds thought that John just might be the answer they were looking for. Perhaps his willingness to stand up to the establishment or the charismatic power of his personality and his daring declaration of a cataclysmic end to this hopelessly corrupt world is what they found attractive. We too are attracted to those who seem strong, self-confident and powerful. We want some of the same stuff. "I want to be like Mike!" (Remember the Michael Jordan Gatorade commercials back when he was the latest messianic pretender of American pop culture?). The faces on our pop culture icons are

perpetually changing. But what remains the same is that there is always a pop culture icon. If we don't have one, we create one, because we need to have a god who will help us answer the perennial question: Who am I?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *“Who am I? Chaff.*

[But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (3:17).]

John points the crowds away from himself to another Coming One. If they think John is a strong and charismatic leader, they haven't seen anything yet. The One who is coming is not only more powerful than John but is someone so important that John is not even worthy of untying his sandals. But if they think they can measure up to his expectations, if they think that he will finally make them winners, they are in for a big surprise. He will expose them for the frauds and fools that they are. Who are they? They are chaff that will be burned with unquenchable fire because they have not measured up. Every one of our gods will be exposed for the fakes that they are. The Creator expects that his creatures remain creatures. But when we want to make creatures creators, our idolatry will not go unrewarded. We are exposed for what we really are. We assumed that we were wheat to be gathered in His granary. But in reality we are chaff to be burned with unquenchable fire.

PROGNOSIS: Who Am I? Beloved.

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Who Am I? Jesus Is the Answer.*

[A voice came from heaven, “You are my Son” (3:22).]

John points the crowd and us to the only One who can help us to answer the eternal question: “Who am I?” and save us from the unquenchable fire. Ultimately only God can do that. That is precisely what God does in the Coming One, Jesus. However, John most likely misunderstood how Jesus was going to do that. He expected Jesus to “read everyone the riot act.” Instead Jesus

chooses to be baptized, to join us in this broken and sinful world. This baptism by water, this dying and rising in the water of the Jordan, eventually leads to his dying and rising at Good Friday and Easter. But because Jesus was sure of who he was, because he knew “who I am,” because he was able to believe the good word concerning his identity at his baptism, he was able to walk faithfully to the cross and to the empty tomb beyond. Even though John believed that the coming Baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire was a baptism of judgment, Jesus’ faithful baptism at the cross and empty tomb transformed this coming baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. Instead of judgement it would be mercy. Instead of disappointment and failure, it would be the offer of new life and a new identity in Christ.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Who am I? A Beloved Child of God.*

[The Beloved; with you I am well pleased (3:22).]

The daring claim of Jesus’ ministry and the ministry of His Church is that God in Jesus is offering the crowds, the disciples and you and I the same identity that belonged to Jesus. Our baptism into Jesus’ fate, destiny and identity means that what belonged to him and what he earned is now given to us. It is a gift and always a gift. When we believe that offer, we have that identity. We receive that status. We now know who we are. The restless questioning in our hearts now comes to an end “in Christ.” We now have the peace that the world cannot give. We now belong to a parent and a family that will never desert us. Who am I? A beloved Child of God! God is my daddy. Jesus is my brother. And my family is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Who Am I? One with a “Spirited Life!”*

[With the Holy Spirit and fire (3:16).]

From our identity flows our behavior. We live our lives the way

we do because of what we believe ourselves to be. The quality of the person determines the quality of the work. The same Spirit that descended upon Jesus descended upon us at our Baptism. The Holy Spirit and fire (which John thought would mean the judgment of the world but in Jesus became mercy and forgiveness) because of Jesus is now the firepower of our lives. Luke's post-Pentecost perspective shapes Luke's report of Jesus' baptism. The Spirit and fire promised by John were poured out at Pentecost and brought about a new life for those who now could answer the "Who am I" question with their baptismal confession of faith. The Christian life is shaped by baptism and by the identity we received in our baptism. Luther knew this well when he asked in the fourth and last question on Baptism in his Small Catechism: "What does Baptism mean for daily living? Baptism means that day after day we must die to sin and rise to newness of life." In this new life we get to live as Jesus did. Confident of who we are, we can joyfully respond to our various responsibilities with a sense of calling and vocation, giving our lives away in service to others, just like the Jesus who now lives in us, who determines who we are and what we do.