

# Reflections on John the Baptizer: John's Baptism

By Patrick Swayne

Ignoring the quotes in between, the Bible reads, "As it is written [...] John came" (Mark 1:2, 4). The mission and work of John the Baptizer was as much in the mind of God from eternity as the mission and work of Christ was. It is easy for us to underestimate the importance of the ministry of John the Baptizer and the impact he had on the ancient world given that we do not have an inspired biography of his life. However, even the few mentions we have of him in Scripture are sometimes not fully appreciated. Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11; cf. Luke 7:28). Mark records, "All the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him" (Mark 1:5; cf. Matthew 3:5). John was known enough by the audience at Pisidian Antioch for Paul merely to reference him (Acts 13:23-25), and his disciples carried his message at least as far north as Ephesus and as far south as Egypt if Apollos learned about John's teaching in the place of his birth (Acts 18:24-25; 19:1-5).

One cannot think of John without thinking of baptism. He's called "the Baptist" in our English Bibles, not because it was his religious title, but because his God-given mission was to baptize people. In fact, to finish the thought above, "As it is written [...] John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for remission of sins" (Mark 1:2, 4). Note the double emphasis – John "came baptizing" and "preaching [...] baptism." The logical conclusion is that God's eternal plan, as prophesied in the Old Testament, involved baptism just as much as it involved John. Having a man 1) to bring Israel to repentance and 2) to teach Israel the importance of baptism was vital to Christ's later work.

There are differences between the baptism that John taught and the baptism which would later become a part of the Christian dispensation. Those who came to be baptized by John came "confessing their sins" (Mark 1:4). We never read of this happening once Christ's New Testament came into effect. The authority for the John's baptism came from John; those baptized having learned from John or one of his disciples thought that they were being baptized "into John's baptism" (Acts 19:3). Those who are taught the New Testament (without the addition or subtraction found in manmade teachings) are baptized instead "in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38); they "put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). Ultimately, John's baptism looked forward to the one "who should come after [John]," (Acts 19:3) rather than allowing one to be baptized by faith "into His death" and to rise from the water "through faith in the working of God" to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12).

Despite these differences, one can certainly see the hand of God at work in sending John, not only to prepare for the coming Messiah, but to prepare people for the Messiah's requirement for individuals to be baptized. As in Christian baptism, John's baptism demanded that repentance come before baptism; John rejected those who came to be baptized under false pretenses (Matthew 3:5-12; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3-9).

As in Christian baptism, John's baptism was via immersion; John baptized in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:5-6; Mark 1:5, 9; John 1:28), but specifically at "Aenon near Salim, because there

was much water there” (John 3:23). And, as in Christian baptism, the baptism that John performed resulted in “remission of sins” through the “tender mercy of our God” (Mark 1:4; Luke 1:76-79; 3:3), a foretaste of what would be granted to those baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38).

One of the most powerful truths surrounding the ministry of John the Baptizer was the fact “that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (Mark 1:9). Matthew records that John tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” (Matthew 3:14). Jesus responded by saying, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Jesus had no need to be forgiven of His sins – He had none (Hebrews 4:15); however, He could not be fully righteous if He did not obey the command that God sent to mankind through John to be baptized.

It seems so strange to me that so many people argue so fervently against baptism. Robertson, for example, looked at the phrase “for the remission of sins” in Mark 1:3 and said, “Certainly John did not mean that the baptism was the means of obtaining the forgiveness of their sins or necessary to the remission of sins” (Robertson’s Word Pictures). Even though baptism was the very reason why John preached and labored and the very reason Jesus why Jesus came to John, some people are so committed to their denominational understandings that they cannot see Scripture without them. Let us never be guilty of judging anything as being unimportant that God places such obvious importance upon. As one sister who was converted out of a denominational faith that denied the importance of baptism once told me, “If baptism was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me.”