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The Evangelical Quarterly

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THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

"Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptised of him" (Matt. iii. 13).

WE are to consider the Baptism of Jesus—the first great milestone in His redeeming career.

Now, this is not an easy subject. The problem that it sets for faith must be immediately apparent to anyone who takes the trouble to think about the matter. "We can hardly imagine a period," says the late Principal Denney in *Jesus and the Gospel*, "at which there would not be difficulty in the idea that a person who was himself the object of religious faith should submit to be baptised with a baptism of repentance which looked to remission of sins." The baptism that John offered was, to put it in the plainest terms, a baptism for people who were afflicted by a sense of guilt, and craved to be delivered from it. Jesus cannot have had any sense of guilt: He was sinless. There had been—there was—absolutely nothing in His life, the thought of which made Him quail before God or feel unhappy in His Father's presence. He had no miserable memories from the sting and burden of which He wanted deliverance. Why, then, did He insist on being baptised by John? What was the point of it? That it either was done for show, or was an exhibition of false humility, is, of course, unthinkable. What was it that drove Jesus down from Galilee to Jordan to be baptised of John? That is the question to which we have to try to find the answer.

Well, my idea is this. Jesus had come to a fork in the road of His life. He saw two possibilities stretching in front of Him.

One was to do His very utmost to maintain His personal righteousness before God—to make blamelessness His ideal, and to sacrifice everything for the sake of being able to stand before His Father with an untroubled conscience. To do that He would have, in effect, to isolate Himself from human society. He would have to repudiate the current political and economic

and religious systems under which men lived, and refuse absolutely to be mixed up with anything that was in the slightest degree tainted with sin. It would mean complete severance of all social relationships, and retirement into a life of self-sufficient solitude—such, for instance, as John the Baptist had lived up to the time of his emergence as a preacher of repentance. That was one of the two alternatives that, I think, Jesus saw opening before Him.

The other was——? The other was just that He should go down among sinful mankind, and share its life for love's sake, and do what He could to redeem it. That meant inevitably, of course, that He would be involved, to some extent, in its common sin. He could not, for instance, sit at the table of a wealthy publican without eating bread that had been ground out of the poor by oppression. He could not take the hospitality of a Pharisee without eating the salt of one who despised his fellow-men. He could not live under Roman law, and discourage revolt against the Mistress of the world, without, in some degree, condoning Roman tyranny. No; if He lived a man among men, He could not altogether avoid the touch of sin.

But deepest of all, I think, must have been His keen perception of the grievous solidarity of mankind in sin and guilty responsibility for the misery of the world. To be a man among men was to be a sharer in that guilt and responsibility; and there was no escape from it. You and I are inclined to think of sin and guilt as purely personal things. The Jew was always keenly aware of the deeper truth—the truth that we are beginning to realise again in these days—that sin is not an exclusively personal thing, but a social thing—a thing inevitably affecting the life of every member of society. You remember Isaiah's despairing cry when he was vouchsafed his tremendous vision of God as the Most Holy. "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." It was not a sense of personal guilt merely that smote his heart in that dread moment; it was a sense of racial guilt also. He dwelt in the midst of a people of unclean lips; and in that uncleanness he was, willy-nilly, a sharer. Well, Jesus knew that, if He was going to cast in his lot with fallen mankind, He would have that feeling too. There would be moments when the very thought of His humanity

would make Him ashamed before God, in spite of all His personal blamelessness and unbroken personal communion with His Father. It has been pointed out that, when one member of a family goes wrong and brings disgrace upon himself, it is not upon himself alone that he brings it, but upon all the other members of the household. They feel his guilt and participate in his shame, no matter how blameless they may be as individuals. They cannot help accusing themselves, in some measure, for his downfall. Jesus knew that, if He went down into the world of men, He would have his portion of that uneasiness. In fact, I imagine that, in all probability, He had it already. His life, stainless though it was, was inextricably knitted with the sinful life of mankind. And, unless He withdrew himself absolutely from intercourse with men, it would be knitted more and more closely as time went on. So He had His choice: either to forswear all connection with His kind, and remain solitary and aloof, in perfect integrity of conscience before God; or to plunge, at the urge of the redeeming love in His heart, into the whirlpool of human life, and, in Paul's phrase, be "made sin for us, who Himself knew no sin". That was His choice. He had, I think, already made it, when He went to John, and asked to be baptised with the baptism of repentance.

That, then, is what the baptism of Jesus means to me. It was the outcome of His decision to identify Himself unreservedly with the wretched, sin-ridden, guilt-stained race of men for love's sake. He had weighed the alternatives. Should He put His own soul first? Should He seek, above all things, to guard it from any taint of social sin? Should He strive to preserve, absolutely untouched, His personal purity? It would mean standing aside, an inactive spectator, while the world reeled on, helpless and unredeemed, into deeper and ever deeper depths of darkness and misery. Or should He, on the other hand, answer the call of pity and of love, throw away the priceless jewel of His inward peace, expose the flawless, silver, God-reflecting mirror of His soul to the dints and scratches that a coarse, cruel, sin-enslaved world would inevitably inflict upon it, and go, regardless of all consequence, to the help of His fallen brethren? It would involve, for His sensitive conscience, being baptised with the baptism of repentance; for you could not become one with mankind and keep your own mouth free

of the taste of the dust and ashes of mankind's common and universal sin. But, having weighed the alternatives, He made His choice: He put self second and man's need first; He became sin, who Himself knew no sin, that He might be the Saviour of the world.

There are just two things to be said in conclusion.

The first is this. Let us try to realise something of what it must have cost Jesus to make His decision. The incomparable illustration is the case of Father Damien, who became a missionary to lepers at the cost of becoming a leper himself. Only by exposing himself to the contagion of the dread disease could he give the help that he wanted to give to those who suffered from it. That was the kind of sacrifice that Jesus made, when, to save sinners, He put Himself within such dreadfully close touch of the defiling hand of sin, that He felt that nothing less than baptism would meet the needs of His case. That was what He did for you and me. What a Friend we have in Jesus!

The other thing that falls to be said is that God gave instant and unqualified approval to His Son's decision. The Lord was no sooner come out of the water than "lo, the heavens were opened unto Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him: and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". What matters to God is that love should be free to save, cost what it may. And unto such love is given power to save—the power of the Spirit of the almighty and everlasting Creator and Sustainer of all the worlds that are.

DONALD ROSS.

Edinburgh.