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Mark Love  
mlove@rc.edu

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# Jesus' Baptism and Ours

MARK LOVE

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I was baptized in the frigid waters of the Yamhill River at Inspiration Point, Camp Yamhill, Oregon. Though this wasn't a formal doctrinal stance on my part, I was certain that being baptized in a cold river was superior, spiritually speaking, to being baptized inside a church building in still waters. I remember as a younger boy being impressed with the baptisteries that had a picture of a river painted on the back wall, which anyone with any church sense knew was the Jordan River. We knew this because this was the only biblical river we could name and we sang songs about "treading the verge of Jordan" and, oh yeah, Jesus was baptized there by John the Baptist. Still, when the time came for me to be baptized, I chose the wilder currents of the Yamhill River to the prosaic scenes of the Jordan painted on a baptistery wall.

Perhaps somewhere in my reasoning was the fact that I didn't really think of my baptism in relation to Jesus'. Though not as part of a systematic catechism, I memorized Romans 6 a few months before I was baptized. "What shall we say then, shall we persist in sin, so that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (vv 1-3). I knew that baptism had to do with participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

I also knew that my father, who baptized me, would speak certain words over me: "Upon your confession of faith, I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for the forgiveness of sins so that you might receive the Holy Spirit." And I recognized these words as words from Acts 2.38, words any good Church of Christ-er knew. Romans 6 and Acts 2, then, were the texts that stood watch over my baptism. And these are pretty good texts as far as baptismal texts go.

As a result, I didn't equate my baptism with Jesus'. I was, after all, being baptized for the forgiveness of my sins, and Jesus had no such need. In fact, his baptism was a puzzle to me. Some said that Jesus was baptized only as an example for us to follow. In fact, when I was in high school, my Southern Baptist friends, wishing to avoid the relation of baptism to forgiveness of sins (and therefore making it necessary for salvation), told me they were baptized only because Jesus was. If it was good enough for Jesus, it was good enough for them. I was not impressed with this line of argumentation.

Today, some forty-five years after my baptism, my understandings have deepened. Now, I see my baptism very much in line with Jesus'. What he was doing in receiving baptism from John, I was doing when I received baptism. Not only that, but I now see the Jordan River running smack dab through the middle of texts like the 6th chapter of Romans. Though the baptism offered by John and the baptism of Jesus are different in some ways, they are very much in continuity with one another; in fact, they share more in common than they have differences.

To align Jesus' baptism with mine, I changed my view of both. To view both differently required that I reframe some of the larger issues related to my understanding of scripture. Since Martin Luther named "justification by faith" the central theme of the Pauline writings, and since Descartes and other modern thinkers convinced us that what's most important takes place in the interiors of the individual, the pressing question most of us bring to scripture is "How can an individual sinner be forgiven?" While this is an important

question, it is not the driving question of scripture. That question I might frame this way: “How will God’s shalom, or good ordering, be restored to all of creation?” As I hope to show, the baptism of Jesus and Paul’s discussion of baptism in Romans 6 are both animated by this latter question.

### **The Baptism of Jesus**

All four gospels place the ministry of Jesus in relation to the career of John the Baptist. Jesus is presented as both greater than and in continuity with John. To understand John, then, is to gain crucial insight into what Jesus stands for.

John cuts a prophetic figure: preaching in the wilderness, baptizing in the Jordan, proclaiming both imminent judgment and renewal for a repentant and forgiven Israel. His actions bear symbolic weight, calling to mind the Exodus, Moses, and the figure of Elijah. These in turn carry with them eschatological significance: the future day when Israel’s God establishes his reign is coming near. For John, God’s reign would come as apocalyptic judgment for many in Israel—but a forgiven and repentant Israel would survive the calamity of the apocalypse and receive the final and ultimate blessings of God’s good reign.

N.T. Wright, following the lead of each of the gospels, explains John’s actions more precisely in relation to the vision of Deutero-Isaiah. Though some have returned to the land, and though the temple has been rebuilt, the long shadow of exile continues to stretch over Israel. The occupation of the land by a foreign empire and the corruption of temple practice by empire-sympathizers were but two signs that Isaiah’s vision for the consolation of Israel had not yet been realized. In turn, this meant that Israel had not yet been forgiven. The exile was not yet ended. Judgment on Israel was not yet complete.<sup>1</sup>

The implications of this exilic backdrop are significant. John offers an opportunity for a repentant remnant to experience in a different setting (the wilderness area around the Jordan) what was normally offered through the temple. From these new conditions, an eschatological people of God, a renewed Israel, could be constituted and would receive the long-awaited consolation of God. What John was signaling that Jesus would in fact provide was “the final eschatological blessing outside the official structures, to all the wrong people.”<sup>2</sup>

In particular, Wright claims, the offer of forgiveness of sins should not be thought of as personal, but as the necessary precondition for Israel to be restored under God’s rule. Wright puts it succinctly, “Forgiveness of sins is another way of saying ‘return from exile.’”<sup>3</sup> Those being baptized by John are responding on behalf of a still-exiled Israel. Sins here are primarily corporate, not individual. This corporate dimension of confessing sins is put well by John Meier in his comments concerning Jesus’ baptism:

Confession of sin in ancient Israel did not mean a lengthy unraveling of a laundry-list of personal peccadilloes. . . . Confession of sin often meant recalling God’s gracious deeds for an ungrateful Israel, a humble admission that one was a member of this sinful people, a recounting of the apostasies and infidelities of Israel early on and down to one’s own day, and a final resolve to change and be different than one’s ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

So, we should not understand Jesus’ baptism by John—even though it is for repentance and forgiveness of sins—as an expression of personal repentance or the need for forgiveness, nor only as an example for sinners yet to come, but rather as an act of solidarity with those who long for the coming of God’s reign.

1. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 150–68. Wright cites the following Old Testament passages that combine the end of exile with the forgiveness of sins (Lam 4.22; Jer 31.31, 33.4–11; Ezek 36.24–26, 37.21–23; Isa 43.25–44.3; Dan 9.16–19; Ezra 9.6–15; Neh 9.6–37).

2. *Ibid.*, 272.

3. *Ibid.*, 268.

4. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols., vol. I: The Roots of the Problem and the Person, The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 19), 113–14. As cited in Robert L. Webb, “Jesus’ Baptism: Its Historicity and Implications,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2000): 301.

Kilian McDonnell describes Jesus' baptism as a boundary event in his life and describes its meaning in just these terms.

That boundary event means at least that Jesus sees himself as a member of that chosen, beloved, but sinful Israel that John the Baptist threatens with divine judgment. By accepting baptism at the hands of the Baptist, Jesus recognizes that this is the divinely appointed means of passage from the sinful Israel to the Israel promised salvation on the day of judgment.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Webb states that “Jesus was acknowledging Israel’s sin and need to turn around, and he was committing himself to do whatever he could do to bring this about.”<sup>6</sup>

But what do we make of John’s reluctance to baptize Jesus? In Matthew’s account, John protests Jesus’ desire to be baptized by him. “I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?” (Matt 3.14). Isn’t this about Jesus’ lack of personal sin? Actually, no, John’s reluctance is not due to Jesus’ sinlessness, but due to Jesus’ greater status related to the kingdom of God. John should be Jesus’ disciple, not the other way around—the demonstration of which is clearly an interest of the gospel writers. After all, according to the Isaiah passage used by all gospels, John is making a straight road, not for exiles to return home, but for the very coming of the Lord. The descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove, the rending of the heavens, the voice of divine approval echoing Psalm 2, all of these confirm John’s eschatological insistence that, in Jesus, God’s reign has come near. Given these circumstances, the greater should not be baptized by the lesser—the Baptist being unworthy to even untie the Messiah’s sandals.

However, by submitting to John’s baptism, the greater to the lesser, Jesus is demonstrating the very nature of God’s reign. God’s reign is not imposed from above, a “lording over” as the Gentiles do. God’s reign moves from the bottom up and is demonstrated when the greatest are the least and the servant of all. His kingdom comes not from the halls of power, not from Rome or Jerusalem, but from the margins, from Galilee, in the Jordan, a river in which not even Naaman wanted to dip. In solidarity not with the religious elite or the powerful, but in solidarity with those who find themselves truly exiled. This sort of reign finds its ultimate expression in death on a Roman cross. This kind of reign begins with the greater submitting to baptism by the lesser.

### **Baptism in Romans 6**

As I mentioned earlier, my baptism was heavily informed by my memorization of Romans 6. Just as my view of Jesus’ baptism has changed through the years, so has the view of my own baptism as I have considered more deeply Paul’s language in Romans 6.

A remarkable feature of this text is that, though it is one of the most complete statements about the meaning of baptism found in scripture, it nowhere mentions the forgiveness of sins. The word *forgiveness* does not appear anywhere in this text. This does not mean that forgiveness of sins isn’t one of the accomplishments of baptism. It doesn’t, however, appear in this lengthy discussion of baptism.

This is because Paul’s theology is not driven by the question “How can an individual be forgiven?” As many Pauline scholars have pointed out, the deep structure that informs his theology is an apocalyptic eschatology,<sup>7</sup> not too dissimilar from John the Baptist’s. That is, Paul believes that in Jesus Christ, God has acted decisively so that the realities of the new age are breaking into the present. One cannot belong to the coming new age and still serve the realities of the age that is passing away. In particular, the death and

5. Kilian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 6.

6. Webb, "Jesus' Baptism: Its Historicity and Implications," 301.

7. See J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998). Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); J. Paul Sampley, *Walking between the Times: Paul's Moral Reasoning* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

resurrection of Jesus show forth the realities of the new age. The cross demonstrates the power of God subverting the powers of the present age and forming the shape of our participation in the realities of the coming age whereas the resurrection reveals that the realities of the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age have broken into the present.

This is the backdrop of Romans 6. Baptism, as a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus, transfers believers from one dominion to another. They are no longer under the dominion of sin and death, but under the dominion of grace. Notice the language of dominion or kingdom (*basileia*) that Paul uses in Romans 5 and 6. Both the age that is passing away and the age that is coming are associated with powers, dominions, and reigns. Paul describes grace not simply as God's willingness to pardon individuals; grace, instead, is a dominion, a realm of power that creates a different form of life.

According to Paul, it is now possible not to belong to the old humanity associated with Adam under the reign of sin and death, but instead to belong to a new humanity under the reign of Christ—a reign that offers different human possibilities. Baptism, as participation in the paradigmatic act of the age to come, transfers us from one kingdom to another. Notice the language of dominion and reign that is present in this text:

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be **enslaved** to sin. . . . We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; **death no longer has dominion** over him. . . . Let not sin therefore **reign** in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For **sin will have no dominion** over you, since you **are not under law but under grace** (Rom 6.6–14; emphasis added).

Baptism, then, is not simply the place where we have our individual sins forgiven, but the place where sin's power over our lives is broken and we accept the conditions of life associated with the coming kingdom of God so that we might walk in "newness of life."

Like Jesus' baptism, our own baptism is a way of aligning our lives with the realities of the coming kingdom of God. Like Jesus' baptism, ours is a commitment to conform to the shape of God's coming age of salvation. Like Jesus' baptism, ours is a sign that God's reign doesn't express its rule through "lording it over" or through possessing our life, but rather through a surrendering, through trusting submission, through serving, through death.

### A Few Implications

Once our view of baptism becomes larger than the forgiveness of individual sins, then everything around it becomes enriched in meaning. I recently attended a Church of Christ service where there were several baptisms. All of them were done a little bit differently, according to the tastes of the one doing the baptizing. But there was one thing all of them had in common: baptism was about knowing certain things and then deciding to act in accordance with that information. What was on display in each case was the inner life of the individual, primarily their thoughts and beliefs. This is why our major test for children seeking baptism is knowledge—"Do they know enough?" And why sometimes people come back for a re-baptism confessing they didn't know enough the first time.

When Jesus' baptism is considered in light of the coming kingdom of God, however, then the emphasis is less on what we are doing, and more on joining in what God is doing for the sake of all creation. Changing our focus from what we are doing to what God is doing is always a good decision. Baptism, in this sense, is a call to action. Like Jesus, who received the conferral of the Spirit before his public ministry, so we receive the Spirit as ordination for service in the kingdom of God.

This shift might also shed more light on the location of Jesus' baptism. Jesus' baptism—his coronation as the King of God's coming reign—takes place not in the halls of power among those who are in charge, but in the wilderness among those who are hoping for a different kind of rule or reign. When we are baptized, we

belong immediately to a people—God’s eschatological people who are longing for a different ordering to our world. And the natural habitat for that movement is the muddy Jordan River among “sinners.”

While I cherish the memories of my own baptism in the Yamhill River at Camp Yamhill’s inspiration point, perhaps I dismissed too quickly the prosaic scenes of the Jordan River painted on the walls of those church baptisteries, the headwaters of the kingdom of God.

**MARK LOVE** SERVES AS THE DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY AT ROCHESTER COLLEGE IN ROCHESTER, MICHIGAN (MLOVE@RC.EDU).

