



Conducted by
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"In reply to John the Baptists' question, "I have need to be baptised of thee and comest thou to me?" (Matt. 3:14) Jesus said, "Suffer it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness". What did Jesus mean?"

AS we see around us today the many religious bodies which take a casual approach to the question of the necessity of baptism, it is well to remember that Jesus travelled over thirty miles specifically to be baptised by John, Jesus took baptism seriously and regarded it as a necessity. John 1:28 tells us that John at this time was baptising at a place called Bethabara. Mark 1:9 says that Jesus left home in Nazareth of Galilee to seek out John and to request baptism.

This is the first mention Matthew makes of Jesus since he was taken to Nazareth in childhood. He had remained there in obscurity, and now at the age of thirty He emerges to begin His public work as God's Messiah. He begins by being baptised by John, and God marks the occasion by sending upon Him the Holy Spirit and making a public proclamation of God's approval of His Son. (It is interesting to note that Jesus was apparently the last person to be baptised authoritatively by John—see Luke 3:21, Acts 13:23-25).

John Recognises the Messiah

When Jesus presented Himself to John and requested to be baptised, John tried at first to dissuade Him and suggested that Jesus ought to baptise John. John may have had in mind the baptism in the Holy Spirit, for had he not just been proclaiming that the One to come after Him would baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire? The fact that John objected at first to baptising Jesus implies that he had recognised that Jesus was indeed the Holy One who was to come and whose coming John had been predicting. John's gospel chapter 1:33 informs us that John did not know of a *certainty* that he was speaking to the Messiah, for the sign had not yet been given. "And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptise with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on him, the same is he which baptiseth with the Holy Spirit." The sign was not, then, given until after the baptism, but from John's objection we assume that he was convinced that he was facing the Son of God. We can understand his humble reluctance to baptise Jesus. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Jesus had need of neither. To John the baptising of Jesus seemed strange and unsuitable. and it was more appropriate that Jesus should baptise John. John was a holy man and a prophet but still a sinner. Christ was faultless, supremely pure and good. Men are but men at best. Jesus was as far above the best of men as the stars are above the highest mountains; when one thinks of the stars the distinction between mountains

and the plain pales into insignificance. In power John was a strong and gifted man, yet how little he could do for the reformation of Israel let alone the redemption of mankind. He was but the labourer digging the foundations; Christ was the Master Builder who raised the great temple. John was but the prophet—Christ was the king. John was but a man, through the greatest prophet of all — but Jesus was the Son of God. Christ was designed for the highest honours yet in His first step He abases Himself and requests the baptism of repentance. John's modesty and humility regards this as an honour far too great for him to receive. His refusal is something akin to Peter's attitude (John 13:6-8) when he said, "Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Thou shalt never wash my feet".

Jesus insists on being baptised

Jesus accepted John's humility but not his refusal. "Suffer it to be so *now*"; said Jesus, acknowledging some force in John's objection, but intimating by the use of the word "*now*" that the appearance of His inferiority to John would be but temporary — "for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Some render it "...to fulfil every ordinance" or "...to fulfil every institution" and this seems to be the obvious sense of the phrase. It is true that the baptism administered by John was for penitent sinners who came confessing their sins. Jesus had no sin (not even years later when He died) and thus could not confess His sins or have them remitted. However, sinlessness does not parade itself as sinless nor hold itself aloof from the world's sin. Jesus became flesh and as a man sojourned amongst men, assumed their responsibilities and the burden of human duties. Jesus observed the Jewish law. God had sent John into the world to baptise with water (John 1:33) the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus was a Jew and it was incumbent upon Him to obey this appointment of God. Had remission of sins been the only result accomplished by John's baptism, then Jesus need not have come to John at all. Thus it was necessary for Jesus to explain to John the reason for His insistence that His being baptised was "*to fulfil all righteousness*". Baptism (John's and Christ's) has two aspects:— (1) It was an act in connection with which remission of sins took place and (2) It was an act of obedience to a positive command or ordinance of God.

It was for the latter reason that Jesus firmly insisted on being immersed by John — "for thus it becometh us" said Jesus. It *becometh me* (Jesus) to be baptised (in response to God's command to John), and it *becometh you* (John) to baptise *me* (in response to God's command to John). Kings and princes might get the idea that being regal personages they are exempt from the commandments of God. Jesus, however, destroys in these words any such idea. He sets a glorious standard and a wonderful example to all men in all time — that the precepts and ordinances of God must receive our due regard and full obedience. We must fulfil all righteousness — execute to the full the will of God, yield complete compliance with the will and wishes of God. This is what Jesus meant by "fulfilling all righteousness". As it was becoming for both Jesus and John to fulfil all righteousness it is equally becoming for every one of us to do the same. Jesus attached great importance to anything commanded or stipulated by God. Thus He attached great importance to John's baptism and to *obedience to it*.

The Pharisees' Rejection of Baptism

Take, for instance, the conversation Jesus had with the chief priests and elders in the temple (Matt. 21:23-27). They came to Him as He was teaching and asked Him by what authority He taught such things and who gave Him such authority. "And Jesus answered ... I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, likewise I will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it, from heaven or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say ... Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say,

Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus and said, We cannot tell. And he said ... Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things."

From this it is clear that Jesus was greatly displeased with those who did not avail themselves of John's baptism. It was from heaven and yet these chief priests and elders had disbelieved John and had shunned his baptism. Clearly *they* had not fulfilled all righteousness. One could not reject John's baptism and at the same time claim to be fulfilling all righteousness. If this was true of *John's baptism* it must be moreso true of *Christ's baptism*. How then can men today claim to be fulfilling the will of God and yet quibble about Christ's baptism, as to whether it is necessary or not, or whether "it is essential" to salvation? How indeed? Jesus was deadly serious about John's baptism — are we to suppose He is careless or nonchalant about His own?

Purposes of John's Baptism

Take another example, recorded for us in Luke 7:24-30. Here Jesus is speaking to the crowds concerning John the Baptist and his work and says, "This is he, of whom it is written. Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptised with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptised of Him".

From this incident we learn that John's baptism involved more than the question of remission of sins. Those who obeyed it and were baptised *justified God* (or as the word means, "declared Him to be right"). Therefore when one was baptised of John's baptism he or she not only received remission of sins, but their act of obedience was a justification and confirmation of belief in God's command. Those who were not baptised of John's baptism had, in effect, rejected the counsel of God (and that against themselves).

If Jesus had not been baptised it could have been said by some that He disbelieved that John had been sent by God and/or that He had rejected the counsel of God against Himself. Criticism could thus have been directed towards Him. If He had neglected John's baptism He would have fallen thus far short of perfect righteousness, and this defect would have clung to Him to the end of His life. But Jesus knew better than that, and was the perfect example we know Him to be. He insisted to a reluctant John, and set the standard God requires of all those who would be well pleasing to Him — that of trying as best we can "to fulfil all righteousness".

"A Greater than John"

The lesson is that what is true of John's baptism is moreso true of Christ's. The baptism of Christ, whence was It? from Heaven? or from men? Do we, like the sinners, justify God by being baptised into Christ? or do we, like the Pharisees and lawyers, reject the counsel of God against ourselves, *being not baptised of Him*. These are important questions for us if we think that we can adopt a casual approach to the baptism commanded by Christ and His apostles, in the New Testament.

After *Christ's obedience* to the ordinance of God came the opening of heaven and the public proclamation by God of His approbation of the Son, and His solemn appointment to the office of the messiah: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased".

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