

“The Baptism that Changed the World”

Matthew 3:13-17

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

January 12, 2020

A 3-year-old girl was in church with her parents, for her first time seeing a baptism performed. Innocently, she asked: “Why did Pastor Bob push that guy in the water?” Her mom tried to explain, but the child wasn’t satisfied, and later asked more questions. Her parents talked about sin, and how, when people decide to live for Jesus and “do good”, they want everyone to know. The parents said that water symbolizes Jesus washing away the sin, and when the baptized person comes out of the water “clean”, they will try to be good. The parents realized they had failed, again, when the little girl asked: “Why didn’t Pastor Bob just spank him?”

If God had just spanked Jesus, we would not on the First Sunday of Epiphany be talking about a “Baptism that Changed the World”. According to scripture, when Jesus came out of the waters of the Jordan River, “the heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and lighting on him. Then a voice said from heaven, ‘This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased’.”

In 1950, Edgar Goodspeed, encouraged by his peers, published a readable, straightforward, succinct book entitled “A Life of Jesus”. It became a seminal volume in college and divinity studies of the New Testament. Goodspeed claimed that religious life had awakened early for Jesus, and that as a Jewish boy he had come to think of himself as a son of the Living God. He knew of the work of his cousin John, and was drawn by John’s personality and message to the river bank. Satisfied that John was preaching the Will of God, Jesus offered himself for baptism. After the event, Jesus understood clearly for the first time the role that God intended him to play in the drama of redemption. As Goodspeed says, this was “the decisive hour, not only in Jesus’s life but in the human experience. One man had at

last been caught up as no one before into the vision of God, to be his spokesman, his Chosen, his Beloved, his Son.” This was the baptism that would change the world! The awesome weight of the responsibility caused Jesus to remove himself from all human contact, into a state of brooding depression, which has come to be described as his temptations in the wilderness.

All along, the question has persisted among scholars of religion: Why was Jesus baptized at all?!

Baptism by water was a part of the Jewish culture, but it is not even certain that it was practiced before Jesus’s time. And it was typically only applied to Jewish proselytes anyway. If Jesus was perfect, what sins did he have need of being washed away? There are typically three explanations:

First, that by his baptism, Jesus renounced, not guilt over wrongdoings, but rather the safe shelter of home and the familiar. With this event on the Jordan shore, Jesus began carrying the cross, so to speak, on which he would end of dying in Jerusalem. There was no turning back.

Second, that by his baptism, Jesus took upon himself the common sin shared by all mankind, not to become party to the sin, but to share the shame and pain. Jesus absorbed the sin into his own love, thereby redeeming all sinners—in God.

Third, that by his baptism, Jesus acknowledged a growing, deepening sense of destiny. He knew that God was laying upon him a certain commission or purpose as like no other had ever been given to another. It befell Jesus to serve as God’s channel to the world.

For me to claim that Jesus’s baptism is the baptism that changed the world. Is not to discount the influence of other religions, cultural phenomena, social movements or pivotal events in the course of human history. It is rather to acknowledge that virtually all such religions, phenomena, movements and events somehow reflect, or are measured by, or have occurred in the context of 2000 years marked by the entrance of God in character on the stage of the human drama.

Allow me the audacity to cherry-pick a few scenes from the stage play—scenes that illustrate by their nature, for good or for ill, how it befell Jesus to serve as God’s channel to the world.

In 313, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which granted freedom of worship throughout the Roman Empire, and less than 100 years later, Christianity was the official religion of the Empire. The baptism of Jesus, who died because of Roman indifference, changed the world.

In 1291, two centuries of conflict between Christians and Muslims ended, with the parties co-existing in a shared Holy Land and a stronger Europe. The baptism of Jesus, who preached compassion and decried violence, changed the world.

In 1517, Martin Luther posted 95 theses regarding the reformation of church practices. The baptism of Jesus, who stood for oneness of the human family in God’s sight, changed the world.

In 1945, preacher and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed for plotting with others the assassination of Adolph Hitler, 21 days before Hitler’s suicide. The baptism of Jesus, who by example helps his followers discern right and wrong, changed the world.

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Having fled a devastating earthquake in Iran, a Muslim man known as “M” ended up in Greece with extended family. He became interested in Christianity, though it was forbidden reading the Bible by flashlight at night. After two years, he planned to be baptized. But M’s cousin discovered his intent, and before M woke on the morning of the baptism, the cousin poured boiling water on M, scalding his

thighs and arms. I was baptized that day anyway, declaring: "No matter what they do to me, I will love Jesus."

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