

“The Spirit Testifies!”

Richard Boyce discusses the drama between John and Jesus when our Savior came to John to be baptized, writing, “John recognizes that for Jesus, in contrast to us, this baptism is an unnecessary detour. As John makes clear at the beginning of this chapter, his is a baptism for the repentance of sins. Whatever else Jesus has been doing since he was in the manger, we can be sure that sin was not on his list.” Boyce concludes, “John recognizes the sinlessness of Jesus, and thus not only defers, but would actually *‘prevent’* Jesus lest Jesus’ identity and role in God’s saving drama be misunderstood.” (goodpreacher.com, “Preaching Matthew 3:13-17” by Richard Boyce)

Only Matthew’s gospel reports John was hesitant about baptizing Jesus. I find that a bit curious, since John and Jesus were cousins and their mothers had spent considerable time with each other during their pregnancies. Matthew may not have been aware of the family connection, since he never mentioned it. Luke, on the other hand, shared significant information about the miraculous nature of both births and he did not give any indication John was troubled about baptizing Jesus.

Keeping that in mind, let’s examine more closely what Matthew reported, *“Jesus arrived from Galilee and came to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. But John tried to make him change his mind. ‘I ought to be baptized by you,’ John said, ‘and yet you have come to me!’”* Now, it seems from Matthew’s account that John the Baptist realized Jesus was not like everyone else – indeed, John thought he was in need of Jesus’ baptism!

My suspicion is that Matthew was concerned with the claims of the followers of John the Baptist, who argued John was greater or more important than Jesus. David Ewart deals with this mystery writing, “just as the execution of Jesus on a cross confounds all Messianic expectations at the end of his life; so too, his public ministry begins with a confounding of social norms.”

Ewart explains, “Fulfilling / completing of righteousness requires letting go of our personal sense of what is right and proper, of our own will, in order to let it be God’s will that is fulfilled.”

Ewart concludes, **“For Jesus, as at the end, so too at the beginning: a deep and profound abiding in / aligning of his heart and will with the will and Spirit of God.”** (David Ewart, www.holytextures.com)

Even if Matthew’s account was fashioned to counteract the scandal of Jesus being baptized by John, it is a bit strange how Jesus went to him to be baptized. Matthew’s explanation was, *“But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires.’”*

Brett Blair suggests a reason why Jesus decided to go to John to be baptized. He explains, “Roy Lloyd, a Lutheran minister, once interviewed Mother Teresa. He asked her, ‘What’s the biggest problem in the world today?’ And she answered, without hesitation, **‘The biggest problem in the world today is that we draw the circle of our family too small. We need to draw it larger every day.’”**

Agreeing with Mother Teresa’s insight, Blair continues, “With all that is evil and wrong in this world today it would be easy to answer that question with a hundred different events. That’s what makes Mother Teresa’s response so jilting. She is saying that the problem is not so much with the world as it is with us.” Blair concedes, **“We need to see more people as our neighbor than we are currently doing.”**

Blair concludes, “I see Jesus doing this in his baptism. In his baptism he included us in his righteousness. He identified with humanity, with our need to be cleansed, and our need to be made pure.” Blair suggests, **“If you have been baptized you have been drawn, by Jesus’ baptism, into the circle of God’s family.”** (Brett Blair, www.Sermons.com.)

Moving on to Jesus’ actual baptism by John, today’s Reading states, *“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. Then heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and lighting on him.”* God’s Spirit or *“the Spirit of God”* is reported by the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke to have come down upon Jesus! The reader – you and me, are to understand that meant the **Spirit Testified to Jesus’ Importance – to his Identity**. The Gospel of John provides additional insight into the meaning of what the Holy Spirit did for that gospel, discussing John the Baptist, explains, *“And John gave this testimony: ‘I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and stay on him. I still did not know that he was the one, but God, Who sent me to baptize with water, had said to me, ‘You will see the Spirit come down and stay on a man; he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ‘I have seen it,’ said John, ‘and I tell you that he is the Son of God.’”*

The witness of the Baptizer, as recorded by the Gospel of John, indicated the Divine Parent, in advance, had told him of the appearance of the Spirit on a man being baptized, who would be the promised **“one who baptizes with the Holy**

Spirit.” So, the Spirit coming to Jesus at his baptism was a clear **Testimony of the Spirit** of Jesus being, as the Baptizer said, **“the Son of God”!**

John the Baptist in the Gospel of John does not report the voice from the sky or heaven speaking at the Baptism of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, it was the voice of the Almighty, which spoke to the Baptizer in advance and told him the **identity of the Messiah – the Son of God by use of the metaphor – “the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit”**. Since God gave this message in advance, it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized by John to fulfill that Promise. That being the case, could it be the sources for the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke misunderstood the timing of when God spoke?

However, there are some aspects of what is said in the message given by the **“Voice ... from heaven”** as reported by Matthew. Those aspects are important for our understanding of the nature of the relationship between Jesus the Christ – the Messiah with the Divine Parent – the Creator – God. Matthew reported, **“Then a Voice said from heaven, ‘This is My Own Dear Son, with whom I am pleased.’”** Those words – **“Dear”** or **“Beloved Son”** and **“with whom I am pleased”** – indicate a **close parent – child relationship**.

Martin Copenhaver examines that special connection writing, “I don’t remember the first time I walked, but I imagine it went something like this: I stood at one end of the room with my mother and my father was a full three steps away. Before that day I could probably do the kind of creative dangling that almost looks like walking, when somebody held me by the hands and shifted me from side to side as my feet barely touched the floor. But this is the day when I will try a real honest walk on my own — all holds barred — with just two eager parents, miles apart, there to cheer me on. So I set out, wobbling at first, stumbling at second, but unmistakably making it on my own from one set of arms to the other. And then I imagine that my father lifted me high in the air with an exultant shout as if no one in human history had ever walked before. Then, after numerous kisses and exclamations, I probably felt like the most loved, most marvelous boy in all the world.”

Copenhaver elaborates, “After a time I could walk with more assurance but, for some reason, I didn’t receive so much praise. In fact, I can’t remember the last time that anyone praised me for walking across a room. So I had to do other things. Simply walking just wasn’t good enough anymore. I had to strive to make a splash in other ways, just to get back to that feeling, that feeling of being noticed, of being picked up with a shout of delight, of being valued.”

Copenhaver suggests, **“For the most part, we don’t have much experience with unconditional love, so we try to create conditions in which we will feel worthy of love. We do not entirely trust love without reasons, so we strive to create reasons for the love received.”**

Copenhaver reminds us, “And in all that striving, it’s easy to lose sight of the fact that my parents did not praise me because of my accomplishments. Rather, they praised my accomplishments because they loved me, and would have loved me if there were no accomplishments to praise.”

Copenhaver concludes, **“If parents sometimes have something like unconditional love, a love without reasons, for their children, how much more so does God love God’s children?”** Copenhaver points out, “All of our striving is to try to win something that is ours already. God values you, not because you have distinguished yourself in some way, but because you are God’s beloved.” (Martin Copenhaver, *Whispered in Your Ear*)

Given the value and importance of revealing the **parent – child unconditional loving relationship between Jesus and God**, it was good for the **“Voice ... from heaven”** to speak to John the Baptist prior to the Baptism of Jesus and after the Baptism of Jesus to speak in conjunction with the appearance of the Holy Spirit. What does the speaking of the **“Voice ... from heaven”** mean for you and me?

The answer to that question helps provide insight into your and my call as followers of God’s Son, Jesus the Christ. Copenhaver is correct when he reminds us, **“God values you, not because you have distinguished yourself in some way, but because you are God’s beloved.”** It is because of our Divine Parent’s **“Agape”** Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for us that God’s **“Dear” – “Beloved Son”** was sent into the world, was baptized, and became the embodiment of God’s **“Agape”** Love for all people!

Because of God’s Parental and **“Agape”** Love for all of us and the Good News of God’s Love being **“in the flesh” – “The Word became a human being”** in God’s **“Own Dear Son”**, who was so committed to fulfill God’s Love for us that he submitted to be baptized by John the Baptist and eventually suffered, died, and was raised for us, so, we have reason to rejoice and celebrate and to join in the Testimony of the Spirit by living out that unconditional, sacrificial and welcoming love toward one another and all people with whom we meet and interact in our lives! Join in the Spirit’s Testimony! Amen.