

## Jesus' Conversion<sup>1</sup>

*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'*

*21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

Today marks the traditional time to ponder the Baptism of Jesus. Let me recommend at the outset that we set aside all ideas about baptism, which are derived from our practice of Christian baptism. We need to think of John the Baptizer's practice of baptism as its own special thing.

John the Baptist's ministry must have been at the center of a pretty dramatic time of revival and reform in Israel. We have, for the sake of comparison, the Tea Party gatherings. Clearly there is energy out there on the part of many American citizens to raise an alarm about the political direction of our society. I believe John the Baptist stirred up even more religious excitement among his own people.

---

<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on January 10, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

Now, here's what John's message was. God is about to make a big move. He is coming. He's going to set things right. And, despite the fact that we're God's chosen people, our lives and society have drifted off the path. God intends to pass judgment on our waywardness. So what's needed is a change of heart, an about face, and a good ritual dunking in the Jordan River as a sign of our sincerity. John's baptism was for people ready to put aside their pride and admit they're sinners and feel sorry enough to let John baptize them.

John's baptism was a little like going forward for the altar call at a Billy Graham crusade. Or maybe it was like going to Alcoholics Anonymous and standing up and saying for the first time. "Hello, I'm Doug, and I'm an alcoholic."

Actually, baptism was even more a token of humiliation. Back in those days if a Gentile, a non-Jew, wanted to convert to Judaism he or she would go through the instruction rigmarole and circumcision for men. And the convert was given a ritual initiatory bath to wash away Gentile sins. For a Jew to take the Gentile-sinner's dip in the water was like starting all over again as a Jew.

Compare that to this. You accidentally run a red light while driving your car. You say to yourself, "That

was so stupid, and I have been so inept, that I'm going to suspend my own driving privileges and retake the driver's tests and pass them before I will consider myself fit to drive again.

What I'm trying to make vivid is the environment into which Jesus appears and accepts baptism. Jesus lines up on the bank with a tax collector in front of him and a guy who is in tears behind him and he takes John's sinner's bath. Jesus is baptized.

Now, I'll tell you a secret. Christians ever since have been perplexed by Jesus submitting to baptism. How can Jesus be feeling sorry about his sins and wanting to set them aside, if he never actually sinned?

Here's how I answer that question. It's true that Jesus never quite committed a sin. But he was fully a human being. And to be a human being is to be tempted to sin. It's to be confused. It is to hang around people who are sinning against you and one another. These people pull you down and make you want to be less of a person than you really are.

So, if Jesus didn't commit a sin, he lived in a world of sin. Add to this the fact that as a human being Jesus grew up and matured. He developed along the way.

Moreover, Jesus was confused along the way. To be a human

is to lose the path for awhile and then to struggle to get back on it. To be a human is to be part of a society that collectively commits sins.

So when Jesus received John's baptism of repentance he was saying that he too was tempted, he too needed a change of course, he too had joined sinning, covenant-breaking humanity, and he longed to be free of all of that. And then, curiously enough, Jesus also never actually committed a sin.

So what have we said so far? It's really a remarkable thing that Jesus was baptized. We know that Jesus didn't actually commit a sin. But he must have felt lots of other weaknesses, temptations, confusions, and changes of mind that go along with being a human being. And Jesus joined many in his generation in being drawn to John the Baptist's invitation to clean house morally and spiritually so to speak, in order to be prepared for what God was preparing to do.

Let me share on a personal level. I was able in my doctoral work to spend a full five years studying religious conversion—the important spiritual turning point that is part of many people's personal journey. Back then, a question formed in my mind that I've never fully answered, but have developed some strong hunches about. Was Jesus

ever converted? You see, conversion is a turning point; it's a sense of coming to a new mind about what God wants you to do. Thought of that way, I would venture to say that Jesus was converted. And that conversion was right here at his baptism. What we see going on with Jesus is that he is thinking about his life in a fresh new way, putting the past behind, seeing something new to give himself to.

So, what's all of this have to do with your life and mine? If Jesus was converted, if he was repentant and needed a change of heart, if he was shaken by John's dire message and felt that he too needed a new start, if Jesus could awaken to a fresh new call, don't we all need from time to time these turning points in our own lives? If the only one who ever lived who might not need conversion and repentance actually experience them, can't we certainly expect conversion and repentance in our own Christian path?

Somewhere we've gotten the idea that to be a Christian is to exist unchanging in a state of perfection. I prefer the word, "disciple" to "Christian." To be a disciple is to be on a journey. And along the road is ever-changing scenery. We get off the path and must backtrack. We bog down and then run forward. We get new directions and change tacks.

If we're right so far about Jesus, then it follows that genuine Christian living is full of bumps and crises. Every so often disciples are shaken up and learning something revolutionary. Every once in a while we're at a cross roads and chose a fresh direction.

One of the things that draws me to Christians like Dallas Willard or Barbara Brown Taylor, or Brian McClaren, or the lives of the saints is the sense that they're changing their minds and hearts throughout their lives. I'm not suggesting that abandoning Jesus Christ altogether is an option for disciples. What I'm lifting up is that the most exciting Christians are forever seeing their journey freshly. They're forever being shaken to their core with a new truth emerging from their study. They're always having experiences that send them in new directions.

I ran across a little phrase that has stuck with me for the last couple of weeks. Someone was describing the life of a monk or nun. "It's a life," so they said, "of falling down and getting up, falling down and getting up." I like that. Sometimes we get up in a way that affects the next 15 years of our lives. Maybe some of us have two conversions. Maybe some of us have ten.

And it's part of a normal healthy Christian walk of discipleship. If Jesus received the baptism of repentance,

Jesus' Conversion

Page 7 of 7

can't you and I be expecting to need repentance (which means "afterthought") can't you and I be expecting to repent our way through life itself?

There are turning points along this path. Welcome them! Seek them. Let them bring you at last into God's everlasting kingdom. How does Jesus put it? "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."