

Chapter 1: Baptism of Fire

Testing is Intrinsic to the Faith

The main reason why it is so hard for believers to endure testing, I think, is that we don't realize how much it is a part of being Christian. We tend to think of hardship as some sort of an intrusion upon our lives, and an unwelcome one at that.

What if being Christian is in actuality positively constructed around such "accidents?" After all, the apostle wrote, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing..." (1 Peter 5:14, NASB). Is Peter saying that God allows us to get hurt to make us ingrates appreciate Jesus's work better? Or is he saying something much deeper; that suffering is an inseparable part of the design of the faith of Christ, so the more we are tested, the more we can be assured we really share in that faith?

No need to guess; the Bible shows how testing is embedded in our Faith at its very foundation, both in the sense of the beginning of our personal response to Christ's work and in the sense of the beginnings of our religion. Jesus's ordeals didn't happen to start in Jerusalem on his way to the cross, but practically and quite deliberately at the beginning of his ministry. For him and every believer before and since, a program of testing is meant to start immediately upon baptism. To see this, we need to revisit the story of baptism.

The Story of Baptism

The Bible records that there was once a fellow named John, called “the Baptist” after his penchant of giving ritual baths to people. He had been born a priest and could have lived a comfortable life “in the Lord’s service,” but God had other ideas. The Lord gave him a new name (“John” instead of “Zechariah, Jr.”), filled him with His spirit, and drove him out into the Judean desert. The compensation package for the difficult new job was nothing but the desert itself. For a covering, John wove together the cast-off hair of camels and for food ate insects and their products.

Society then as now generally paid little attention to poor people like John, but the one thing he *did* have—the spirit and miraculous power of the prophet Elijah—made him a force that couldn’t be ignored. Not only did he establish baptism as an initiation ritual but he was the very first to verbalize the belief system that later came to be known as Christianity. He was what most other religions would call a founder or guru.

In John’s case, little of what he said or did has survived—just a few references in the Gospels. According to them, the main thing he said was that the One that God had promised would come (the Christ) was in fact coming soon. For the many in John’s audience who were distressed by their unreadiness for Christ’s coming, John offered baptism.

Despite his moniker, John the Baptist didn’t actually invent the practice of ritual bathing. Several hundred years before, when Solomon built the first temple to God in Jerusalem, he included a large bath in which priests could wash their hands and feet before serving in the temple¹. He also built ten large basins for people to wash sacrifices that were to be burned. Solomon, in turn, was going by Moses’ instructions for the tabernacle from

¹ 2 Chronicles 4:2–6

several hundred years before *that*², but ritual whole-body washing like baptism was required only in certain cases of convalescence or blood-guilt-by-association. For otherwise healthy and innocent³ people, to be baptized was abnormal. So Experts were sent.

“If you are not Elijah or other Prophet or God incarnate,” they shouted loud enough for everyone to hear, “why do you baptize people?” What they actually were saying was, “An ordinary man like John here can’t do this! Wise up, people, and don’t be duped by this religious charlatan!”

John hardly looked up as he prepared the next penitent, much less bother to disagree. “It’s not me you have to worry about,” he replied calmly. “It’s the One coming after me. Compared to him, I’m lower than the lowliest slave you have in your houses—the one that has to take people’s stinky feet out of their sandals and wash them⁴. But you who are supposedly such experts on these things, you wouldn’t even recognize him, much less worship him as you should! Who knows? You’ve probably already pushed by him in the crowded streets⁵. That’s how close he is!

“Do you have a problem with me baptizing these folks in preparation to receive him? I baptize with water, but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He will burn up this flimsy excuse for what you call religion with unquenchable fire⁶! So if I were you,” and at

² Exodus 29:17, 30:18–21

³ Innocent only by strict interpretation of blood-guilt-by-association! But loosely or communally speaking, who can possibly be innocent?

⁴ The very One whose sandals John the Baptist was not worthy to remove later insisted on performing that very task (John 13:3ff.).

⁵ John 1:26

⁶ Matthew 3:11–12

this point I like to imagine that John paused to look up into their eyes, “I’d go for the water now, while water’s still good...”

Now for the odd twist in the story (as if it weren’t full of them!). When the One John had been talking about all along finally revealed himself, John realized he himself hadn’t recognized him. It was his own cousin, Jesus! And then, to beat all, Jesus asked to receive the very water baptism of repentance that John had been offering.

“But Lord,” objected John, “You’re the one that’s going to baptize with Spirit and fire, remember? *You* ought to baptize *me*! What do you need a water baptism for?”

“Besides, we were repenting for you, the One who brings God’s holy judgment. If you’re that judge, you don’t need to repent!”

John had a good point. Jesus was the only person ever to be perfectly blameless, born that way and having lived that way, and so was the only one who legitimately could have said, “No thanks! I don’t need to repent or get wet.” But he chose to be baptized with water anyway, “for righteousness’ sake.” In other words, he showed his own needless preference for righteousness graciously granted by God over righteousness that he could claim on his own. He chose to be righteous through faith, in other words.

This was pure genius! By this one little request, Jesus quite considerably released everyone else from the shame of having no choice. For if the only one who had a choice chose what we have no choice but to receive, doesn’t it say that what we are constrained to ask for is in fact the better choice? Besides, it gives greater glory to God for anyone to ask him for something that he or she can get on his or her own (if a person in fact can get anything on his or her own—but that’s another story), and therefore such an act of recognition is more pleasing to Him. In Jesus’s case—the only one in all history who had a

choice about righteousness—God couldn't contain his pleasure and shouted it out. And then the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove and sent him out into the desert to be tested.

A Pattern in Baptism

OK, having told this story at some length, let me explicitly point out a pattern. John offered water baptism for repentance, but promised that Christ would baptize with Spirit and fire. When Christ was revealed, he demanded a water baptism, then received the Spirit and went out into the desert (a hot place!) to be tested. In other words, he himself was baptized with water, Spirit, and something like fire. Before that, John initiated the practice of water baptism, but had already received the Spirit during conception and lived under extreme duress in the very same desert. Again the collusion of Spirit, something like fire, then water in baptism. And the whole process of water baptism derived, as we saw above, from worship at the temple or tabernacle, the place where God's Spirit rested, before which items that were to be burnt in the fire as an offering were first washed with water!

It would seem that the process of rapprochement with God has three components, all of which, according to John (the one that started the practice), can be considered baptisms or parts of Baptism. In ad-hoc order, the first is an appeal through water baptism, initiated in recognition of God's activity in the world, for him to grant us his righteousness (Peter uses the term "a clean conscience"⁷). The second is God's Spirit, which He initiates as a gift of encouragement and direction. And the third is the purification, the fire, the testing⁸, that dry region in which no immediate way out can be found. Baptism by fire can be initiated by anyone that can impact our lives, even spirits or strangers, when we are ready to stand

⁷ 1 Peter 3:21

⁸ Ps. 66:10–12, Jer. 6:27–30, Zec. 13:9, 1 Peter 1:6,7

having some of our impurities brought to the surface and (we hope) burned away. In a sense, the closer the person through whom the test comes, the more challenging the test, because such a person knows best how to find and draw out our impurity.

I suppose one could be unhappy that he or she must face testing. In a sense, we bring it upon ourselves by our appeal of water baptism, however little we may realize at the time the role Fire must play to answer it. But God prepares us for and sustains us through that process and make us proof of the very poison that will seep from our cores. When we go through tests without failing, we are freed of our impurity, just as we requested of God. And for the many times we fail a test, we nevertheless retain the endless grace of a generous God, to grow to the point of enduring the same flame again, and again and again as necessary until we are at last freed of the need for it. Hence, that fire that appears so harmful produces in God's hands a refining effect quite impossible by other means.

Could John, the honey-swilling priest's kid, have possibly understood the far-reaching implications of what he was saying? The beauty of it is, he didn't have to, because he wasn't actually the one starting a religion, however much it was based on what he said. It was all God's idea, and one that wasn't new at all. After all, the story of how God brought the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land provides a much more extensive exposition of baptism of water, spirit, and fire, as we shall see next.