

## DID JESUS REPENT?

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“In those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. . . . I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance. . . . Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan, to John, to be baptized by him. But John sought to prevent him, saying, I have need to be baptized by thee, and dost thou come to me? And Jesus said, suffer it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him.”—Matt. 3:1, 2, 11, 13-16.

The New Testament teaches, and Christian people have always held it to be a fundamental article of faith, that Jesus Christ was without sin. Therefore the Church has always been confronted with the difficulty presented by Jesus' baptism at the hand of John. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be baptized at all? John's baptism was a baptism of repentance unto remission of sins. Why should Jesus repent? Why should the sinless One symbolize the washing away of sins? The Church has always said, and said it with emphasis, that Jesus did not repent. He had nothing for which He needed to repent. But the difficulty has always remained. Why did He undergo the baptism of repentance? The natural inference would be that He repented, but that answer has been ruled out. Jerome has preserved for us this fragment of the Gospel According to the Hebrews: “Lo, the mother of the Lord and his brethren said to him, John the Baptist baptizes for remission of sins: let us go and be baptized by him. But he said to them, wherein have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him? except perhaps this very thing which I have said is ignorance.” Tertullian, in his treatise on Baptism, says, “The Lord himself, though no ‘repentance’ was due from him, was baptized.” (Anti-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3, page 675.) No repentance was

due from Him. This has been the thought and the claim of the Church. He is the sinless One. A modern theologian says: "This claim of sinlessness for Christ is to be urged, not so much because of any special statements by Christ as because of that remarkable fact to which Dr. Bushnell has called attention,—his impenitence. Jesus alone among all good men is a man of 'impenitent piety'; and by this He is marked off absolutely from every other good man. What happens in the life of any other good man is this: that, as he goes forward, the sense of sin grows upon him, the ideal rises before him and he feels increasingly that his own life is inferior to it. Of Jesus this is not true. He shows no sign of consciousness of failure. There is no evidence that He feels that He has fallen short in any degree. He is absolutely without that universal characteristic of all other good men, absolutely without penitence." (King, "Theology and the Social Consciousness," page 193.)

Now there is no one who would assert the sinlessness of Jesus with more strength than I. He is the perfect One, morally and spiritually. All that Dr. King asserts is true. But it is true because Jesus repented. I put forth this seeming paradox: Jesus is the sinless One because He repented.

But why did He repent? The great question demands an answer. Why did the sinless One, the perfect Man, the Image of the invisible God, repent? Why did He submit to the baptism of repentance? There have been many answers to this last question. It is sometimes held that Jesus found it necessary to set a good example to His disciples in this matter of baptism. As a leader He must do that which He asks His followers to do. This is as old as the beginning of the third century. Hippolytus represents Jesus as replying to John with these words: "Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Suffer it to be so now, John; thou art not wiser than I. Thou seest as man; I foreknow as God. It becomes me to do this first, and thus to teach. . . . Bap-

tize me, John, in order that no one may despise baptism. I am baptized by thee, the servant, that no one among kings or dignitaries may scorn to be baptized by the hand of a poor priest." (Anti-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 5, page 236.) This is the idea of Dr. Briggs. "The reason for the baptism, as given by Matthew, was that the Messiah might 'fulfill all righteousness'; that is, the highest of the divine requirements in preparation for the kingdom. The King would lead His people through the preparatory waters of baptism. Standing thus at the highest point of the righteousness of preparation, Jesus receives the recognition of the heavenly Father, and the baptism of the Divine Spirit, which endow him, as the Messiah, with the authority to baptize His disciples with the Holy Spirit." (Briggs, "The Messiah of the Gospels," page 78.)

Dr. Plummer, following Tertullian, thinks that the remission of sins had reference to a future remission, and doubts whether Jesus would have submitted to it if it had really conferred remission of sins. He claims that its main aspect was "preparation for the kingdom of God, and in this aspect... fitted well into the opening of Christ's ministry. To every one else this preparatory act was a baptism of repentance. The Messiah, who needed no repentance, could yet accept the preparation. By means of this rite the people were consecrated to receive salvation, and He was consecrated to bestow it." (Hast. Bible Dict., Vol. 1, page 240.) It seems to me this distinction is purely arbitrary. It is but another attempt to explain the mystery of why the sinless One was baptized with the baptism of repentance. Dr. Plummer also says that John's baptism had the divine sanction, and the Messiah must therefore submit to it. He must leave nothing undone which had been revealed as the righteous will of God. (Inter. Crit. Com. Matthew, page 28.) This is in harmony with the view of Edersheim, that John's baptism was "from heaven," that Jesus must be about His Father's business and do always the things that were pleasing to the Father. But Edersheim also says that it

is a mistake to consider the baptism of John as one of repentance. "The Baptism of John," he tells us further, "was in itself only a consecration to, and preparatory initiation for, the new Covenant of the Kingdom. As applied to sinful men it was necessarily a 'baptism of repentance:' but not as applied to the sinless Jesus. Had it primarily and always been a 'baptism of repentance,' He could not have submitted to it." (The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Vol. 1, pages 279-280.) The mistake, if there be one, lies in the New Testament itself. John came and "preached the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins." (Mark 1:4.)

If you turn to the Gospel of John you will find that the baptism of Jesus was the means by which John the Baptist was to discover and proclaim the Messiah. "And I knew him not," John is reported as saying, "but that he might be made known to Israel for this I came baptizing in water. And John testified, saying, I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and it abode on Him. And I knew him not; but he who sent me to baptize in water, he said to me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and abiding on Him, this is he who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." John 1:31-34.

But that was not the whole reason for the baptism of Jesus. John continued to baptize afterwards, and the Church has never accepted this as a full explanation of Jesus' baptism.

Of the many other attempts to explain the mystery, we mention but one. It is said that Jesus is the representative of a guilty race, or the bearer of the sins of others, or acts in solidarity with His people. As the representative of man, He must repent of our sins; as the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world, He must symbolize the remission of the world's sin. I have always felt that there is some truth here, in spite of objections. But I believe that the whole truth is obscured.

The idea of substitution has held too prominent a place. I hold that Jesus did repent. As the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world, He found it necessary to repent. He is the sinless One, the perfect One, but He is the sinless and the perfect One because He repented. He said, "Thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." He fulfilled all righteousness by repenting. But in order that we may bring out the truth, it will be necessary for us to consider the message of John, especially that contained in "the kingdom of heaven" and in "repentance."

The Kingdom of Heaven was the great social hope of the Jewish people. It was the Golden Age, the Paradise of God, which had been promised long before by the prophets of Jehovah. The glorious kingdom of David was to be re-established. Jerusalem was to blossom forth as the center of the world's activity, in all the revived magnificence of Solomon. The land would bring forth in abundance, the land of milk and honey overflowing with its own natural produce and the tributes levied to the ends of the earth. Every Jew would sit under his own vine and fig tree, peace and happiness rule in every home. Righteousness was to go forth as a river, and justice cover the earth. For God would dwell with His people and protect them. His reign would extend throughout the earth, the nations would feel His wrath. Such were some of the characteristics of the coming day. Some of the popular ideas concerning that glad day—it was "glad tidings" to the people of that day to hear that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand—were conceptions founded upon error, or misunderstandings of the prophetic message, and Jesus in His ministry was compelled to antagonize the ideas then current as to the Kingdom of God. This He did at the expense of losing a large percentage of the people. The prevalent conception of the Kingdom of God was political and materialistic, with a few added spiritual ideas. Jesus' conception was primarily spiritual. Other things were secondary, and should be added

later. To Jesus the Kingdom consisted in a society of renewed men, who lived in harmony with the will of God. It was "a kingdom impossible to the natural man, so to enter it he must be born again from above. And this is impossible to the proud, self-righteous, the self-satisfied, so that only those who are meek and teachable in spirit can ever learn the secret of Jesus and obtain entrance to His kingdom. Men cannot compel the coming of such a kingdom of the spirit, though they can do much to hasten it; God alone can set it up; the kingdom and the power and the glory are His." (Vedder, "Socialism and the Ethics of Jesus," page 345.) Thus the message with which John the Baptist and Jesus came before the people was one that aroused immediate interest, because it revived and stimulated the hope for the future.

But if those who entered the Kingdom were the ones who were born again from above, whose new life was imparted by God, there were at least two conditions to be fulfilled. The one who entered the Kingdom must repent and believe. Believe—that is, trust in God who imparts the life and establishes the Kingdom, in Jesus as the revelation of God or the messenger of God, and also in the Kingdom itself. Repent—here we come to the other word—"repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Repentance is a change of mind. We commonly speak of repentance as implying sorrow for past sinfulness and a determination to live better in the future. In the experience of most of us that is no doubt true,—we have felt deep sorrow for past or present sin, and have determined with Christ's help to live a righteous life in the future. But whether John or Jesus meant all that we mean by repentance is an open question. When John stood up before the multitudes in Judea and told them to repent, he was saying in effect, "Change your mind, your ideas of life are wrong, you need a new viewpoint, a change of front, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, and if you enter the Kingdom you must live different lives than you do now." Of course all those Jewish people wanted to

enter the Kingdom. And John reminded them of Elijah who was to come. So they flocked to him and were baptized, confessing their sins, (Matt. 3:6). Sorry for them? Yes, if their sins kept them out of the coming kingdom. For that boon they were willing to change their minds and about face. But what were the sins? If we turn to the third chapter of Luke we will see some of them revealed.

First they must get rid of the mistaken idea that Jewish birth entitles one to membership in the Kingdom. "Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham for our Father; for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And even now the ax lieth at the root of the trees; every tree, therefore, that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire." And the people, alarmed, asked what they should do. John answered, "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath food, let him do likewise." In other words, Love your neighbor, share your blessings one with another, let the strong bear the burdens of the weak. That was a general exhortation. But there came also unto him publicans, tax gatherers, who also wanted to know what to do. And he said unto them, "Extort no more than that which is appointed to you." "Do not graft, give every man a square deal, have mercy on him and show your goodness of heart in taking only what the law allows. To do this you must about face, repent, or you cannot enter into the kingdom of Heaven." And likewise there came unto him soldiers with the usual question, "What must we do?" And John answered, "Take from no man by force, neither accuse anyone wrongfully; and be content with your wages. . . . Make the power placed in your hands a blessing, not a curse. Be content with what you earn, and seek not riches by plunder, theft, or any other evil means. Change your mind about the treasures and joys of life, for unless you do you cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." Matthew

tells us that the Pharisees and Sadducees came to John's baptism, and that John wanted to know who warned them to flee from the wrath to come, and called upon them to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. They too needed a changed mind, a new purpose in life. Aristocratic, proud, domineering, their Jewish citizenship was no lucky talisman to open the doors of the Kingdom to them. Self-righteous, exalted in their own minds, their position as the religious leaders of the nation would avail them nothing. Repent, become humble minded, as little children, and bring forth fruits worthy of your change of mind, and the Kingdom of God will open up, and you can enter in. This is the gospel of John (Luke 3:18), and the gospel of Jesus was like unto it.

But Jesus did not come to John with any misconceptions concerning the coming Kingdom; He was not proud and self-righteous; He was not given to extortion, nor any of the characteristic sins of that day. John was very much surprised that Jesus should come to him. He felt that he should rather be baptized by Jesus. Why then did He come? If the Kingdom of God were at hand, it meant that a radical change must take place in human life. If the teaching of John were true—and John's teaching harmonizes with that of Jesus Himself—then all classes must change their ways, and must think of life in a new manner. Also we are all members of a common life, and in any social order it is impossible for even the best to disentangle himself wholly from all sense of human solidarity and brotherhood. Jesus was without personal sin, but did that fact blot out all sense of human solidarity and brotherhood? On the contrary, for that was stronger in Jesus than in any of the sons of men. Jesus realized the evil in human life as no other man ever did, and the injustice, the selfishness, the lovelessness of men pressed home upon His heart. He knew how close knit are the bonds of human society. He knew what mankind has since come to know, that the purer the life, the greater is the feeling of guilt for human sin. He who was without



sin felt the guilt of sin as no one else ever did, before or since. Is it inconceivable that such a One should feel the need of repentance?

A member of the social order of His day, He was compelled by His very membership in the social order to share the mistakes and the blunders of men, compelled to share the guilt even of human sin. All His life He had lived without public protest against the evils of His day. If sorrow be a necessary part of repentance, shall He not declare His sorrow for human sin? If repentance be the determination to change the mind about life and live differently in the future, shall not He in whose mind the conviction had long been shaping itself that this life is based upon wrong principles, and that a radical change was necessary, shall not He declare His conviction, voice His protest against the present order, and give Himself henceforth to a new purpose in life? The trouble with most of us today is that in our thinking about Jesus we are always taking the personal, individual point of view. There is a personal, individual righteousness. Jesus did not need to repent to fulfill that righteousness. There is also a social righteousness. Whenever the social order is unrighteous there is need of "social repentance" to fulfill all righteousness. It would be a blessing if all the members of the Church today could get that social point of view. The ordinary repentance emphasized in evangelical preaching is personal repentance, sorrow for past sins, a change of front, and a new life purpose for the future. We need a social repentance to round out our Christian life, a sorrow for the sins of the world, a change of mind about them, and a new life purpose for our social life. And if you think you have done all this, then go farther, follow Jesus, fight, protest. No longer tolerate social wrong. No longer withhold moral support. Make your repentance complete, and fulfill all righteousness.

Dr. Sanday tells us that "perfect penitence requires not only contrition for sin, but complete identity of the self with the holiness which condemns sin. This combi-

nation is to be found only in Christ . . . . ” (“The Life of Christ in Recent Research, pages 235, 236.) Yes, that combination is found only in Christ, for He only completely identified Himself with the holiness which condemns sin. He identified Himself with that holiness at His baptism. And when we are “in Christ” we too must identify ourselves with the holiness which condemns sin, and condemn it all along the way. We need that kind of repentance.