

The Covenantal Divide: The Baptism of Jesus, Part 1

Luke 3:21-22

These are monumentally important verses. These two verses here really represent a high point in redemptive history. This is a zenith that marks the division between the two covenants of the Bible, very, very important text. This is what you might call a watershed text. I'm calling these two verses, Luke 3:21 to 22, the covenantal Divide. The covenantal divide. We're going to consider the role of Jesus' baptism in that divide, and next we're going to look at his anointing. But the two events happened at the same moment, the same point in time at this covenantal divide.

Something far more glorious. We're looking at a covenantal divide. These verses, Luke 3:21-22, they mark the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant. We're probably more used to, because we have bibles in front of us, we're probably more used to the term testament, right? Old Testament, New Testament. This text marks the divide between the Testaments. On the one side is the testimony of the prophets of

Old represented by John the Baptist, the last prophet of the Old Covenant. And then on the other side is the testimony of the New Testament, represented first and foremost by Jesus, known popularly, according to Luke 24:19, as "Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people."

Jesus Christ is not just a single peak towering over the text; rather, the truths of his life and his ministry, his person and his work, those truths are like an entire range of staggeringly high mountain peaks forming a covenantal divide. And even though he stands between the two covenants, he also at the same time, he stands not to divide them, but actually to join them, to connect the two covenants. Just as our Rocky Mountains and the Continental Divide, that they have joins east to west, so also Jesus Christ joins the Old to the New. He is the continuity between the redemptive covenants of the Bible.

So with just that little bit of insight into the significance of this section, this Goliath of a text here that we have before us, let's take a look at those two verses together. Just read them; follow along as I read. "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit

descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'"

Now, let me make just a few observations so that you can kind of see for yourself the structure of the text. Basically, verse 21 gives us the setting and the occasion of the scene. And then verse 22 tells us what actually happened. Pretty simple, but I want to look a bit closer here. The way Luke writes this for us in the Greek, it comes across this way. In verse 21 it starts out this way, "Now it happened." Now it happened. You can't see that in your English text if you have an ESV Bible, ESV translation. Our ESV translation leaves the Greek opening, "Now it happened," untranslated, and it's just to keep it smooth. But the NAS, the New American Standard, and the King James version Bibles, they're careful to convey the verb, It came about (NAS), It came to pass, (King James Version). In verses 21-22, there is only one finite verb driving the action of the sentence and it's that verb, something happened. This thing happened, and the rest of the verb-sounding words, they're all there to support that opening verb, it happened.

As you can see, the setting and the occasion there described in just one verse, verse 21, that verse just sets up

the scene. People were being baptized. Jesus was baptized, and while he was praying, bang! It happened. It's verse 22, that fills in the details, tells us exactly what happened. What happened? Heavens opened. The Spirit descended. A voice came. That is what happened. And that is where Luke is putting the stress grammatically. That is where he is putting the stress structurally. The emphasis is on that supernatural phenomenon.

Earthly circumstances, an occasion here, is all important. We're going to take the time to understand why they are important today. But the passage actually calls our attention to the opening of the heavens, the descending Holy Spirit, and the affirming proclamation of God the Father. That is what Luke wants us to focus on. In fact, you'll notice, even though Jesus is here to be baptized, John isn't there interacting with him in the text. Luke closed the scene with John's ministry in the previous section. He doesn't want us to look at John anymore. He wants us to look at Christ.

But remember what has just happened in the text according to Luke's narrative here, verses 18 to 20. Look what he says there. "So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people." Remember, that's that term *euangelizo*. He preached the Gospel to the people, "But Herod the tetrarch, who had been

reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done," he added this to them all, he locked up John in prison.

Herod here represents the political establishment. He represents leadership. He represents, in fact, the category of all of those who prefer their sin, their lifestyles, their way of life, and they're willing to turn and reject the teaching of the biblical prophets like John the Baptist, like Jesus Christ, and ride on the heels of the rejection of Herod Antipas, the hostility of those who refuse to repent at the preaching of the truth. God steps in. He intervenes with what one commentator called "his own unimpeachable testimony." That's good. It's an unimpeachable testimony. What higher court are you going to go to and appeal to above God? None.

John came to prepare the way of the Lord by preaching the message of repentance. John came to identify the Christ, baptizing those who obeyed the prophetic word and then John came to point people to the Christ. But the political, the religious establishment, committed to their own sin, committed to their own self-righteousness, they wholesale rejected John's ministry. So God opened the heavens to send a message. "You are my beloved Son." It doesn't matter what they say. "You are my beloved Son

with you I am well pleased.” No higher testimony can be found than that divine voice booming out of heaven. God intervened, cut into human time and space to testify, to affirm and to validate Christ, which looked back to confirm not only John’s word, but also the word that was spoken by Gabriel, by Zechariah and Elizabeth, by Mary, by the angelic host, by Simeon, by Anna. God stands with all of those who embrace this Gospel, which is about his beloved son with whom he is well pleased. Where to do you want to stand?

There is no justification whatsoever for rejecting Jesus Christ. He is the unimpeachable testimony about the truth of Christianity. I realize people can look at our lives and say, Hypocrite. You’re inconsistent with what you claim to believe. Granted. Guilty. Look at Jesus Christ. Tell me if you can find a flaw. Not one. God knows all things. He affirmed Christ from the very start, and the more you study the person and the work of Jesus Christ, the more you’ll come to see Jesus as God sees Jesus. But those who reject him, those who refuse to look closely, those who refuse to love him, they will suffer for treating with indifference or with hatred the one whom God the Father sent and approved. Serious issue here, folks. God makes that clear from the very start by anointing Jesus at his baptism.

So we're going to focus on Jesus' baptism and then his anointing, that is an approval from God, anointing and here's the little outline we're going to follow. There are three points that we're going to cover. The transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant involves a handoff from John's ministry as the forerunner, to Jesus' ministry as the Messiah. As Jesus said, all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. In fact, all the prophets and the law culminated in the ministry of John the Baptist because they all pointed to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

So first we're going to take time to understand the setting, the setting of this monumental event here, what happened here. This is the ministry of John the Baptist. That's going to take some time to consider as we look at the other Gospel accounts and try to understand the significance of all this. And then, second, we're going to look at the occasion, which is the obedience of Jesus. And then finally, the response from heaven, which is the affirmation of God that we just read about.

Okay, so let's get right into that first point, the setting, the ministry of John. The ministry of John, we're going to spend the bulk of our time on this point. We need to

understand the significance of John's baptism. We need to understand what happened that day, why John came to baptize. We need to understand why Jesus came to be baptized by John, what compelled him, why it was necessary, what it signified. Okay.

So let's understand first what actually happened. How did everything go down that day? There are a number of accounts in the Gospels that we read, and they seem to present it from different angles. So we want to see what happened. Look at verse 21 again. It says, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying." This divine phenomenon happened immediately after Jesus was baptized, while he was praying. It says there, "When all the people were baptized," and that might give you the impression that the scene was rather crowded, that Jesus was mixed in with a whole bunch of people getting into the Jordan River. It might give you a sense that it was thronged with people. It may be a bit chaotic. In that case, everyone, right? Everyone would have been there in the waters witnessing the heavens opening, the Spirit descending, and the voice coming out of the heaven, right? That's how it seemed.

There is actually, though, good evidence that this was more of a quiet scene, more of a tranquil scene, a little more



serene. Luke has painted here a very, very careful, precise picture, grammatically, to clarify that point. Here's how verse 21 reads in the Greek. It says, "Now it happened when all the people were baptized, after Jesus was baptized, while he was praying the heavens opened," and so on. Luke's very precise, the tense of the verb that he uses in that first phrase, "when all the people were baptized," if he had used the present infinitive, he's wanting us to picture Jesus getting into the water with the rest of the people. But Luke didn't use the present infinitive; he used the aorist infinitive, which strongly implies, as A.B. Bruce says, quote, "that the bulk of the people had already been baptized before Jesus appeared on the scene. That is, that John's ministry was drawing to its close." End Quote.

So Luke wants us to see here the general time frame of Jesus' coming forward for baptism. It was during the time frame of John's ministry, actually more toward the end of that time, not during the throngs of people, but a little more toward the end. Jesus' baptism happened during a time of popular interest in John's ministry, but he's not necessarily getting into the water with a bunch of other people. You need to understand that Jesus and John, here, were relatively alone at this point as they come

together into the waters of baptism. I don't know what kind of pictures you saw on the flannel graph in your Sunday School, but if it ruins your flannel graph memory, I'm so sorry, but I think that is what the text is teaching. During the waning months of John's public ministry that's when Jesus came forward for his own baptism.

It's interesting to note this that this has been the first time that John and Jesus had actually met. They were cousins, right? Luke 1:80, though, tells us that John was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance in Israel. God prepared John away from the public eye, tucked away in the Judean wilderness. Jesus, though, on the other hand, he had grown up in Nazareth living a relatively normal human life, submitting to his parents, supporting his mother, Mary, working in his father, Joseph's, carpenter shop. It's a relatively domesticated life.

It's interesting, though, that Luke doesn't put John here in these verses at all. He's making a distinction. Matthew and Mark put John and Jesus together. Luke doesn't include John here at all. Once he put the period on verse 20, Luke closed the chapter on John's ministry. John is locked away in prison. He's off the scene. Jesus takes center stage. The only interaction

between these two prophets that's recorded in Luke's Gospel, it doesn't come until Chapter 7 and they actually communicate there through intermediaries. John sends his messengers to Jesus to verify everything is going according to plan. Jesus answers him.

So John's not even here, and yet they are in the water together, first time they meet. It's all because Luke's emphasis is different from Matthew's and Mark's. He wants us to focus on what happened in verse 22. So what happened in verse 22? Why don't we want to get caught up in John's ministry, which I'm forcing you to do today, get caught up in John's ministry. What was going on? Why doesn't Luke want us to see that? Because he wants us to focus on and see the supernatural phenomenon; the heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit descended, a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Mark, here, paints an even more vivid picture of this scene. He says that when the heavens were opened, he doesn't say it that way. Mark is so strong in his language. He says when Jesus came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open, ripped open. Luke's got a different emphasis, more theological. But you need to know that this is as dramatic as it can be. This is not just a, Oh, what a nice cloud

formation. This is something being torn open. Torn open, you might even say it was not just sudden and immediate, but even violent.

Some people are tempted to think that this is simply a shared vision between John and Jesus, the two cousins standing there in the water, they're having some kind of subjective religious experience here. Luke's language, though, doesn't allow us to see it that way at all. Next phrase says, "The Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove." The word form there, it's the word *eidos*. We get the word idol from that word *eidos*. That is a physical representation of a deity. The form, the *eidos*, it refers to the shape, the structure of something as it appears to somebody else, the form the outward appearance. This is what other people perceive with their senses, but then it adds the adjective, bodily, *somatikos*. You hear the word, *soma*, body, in there. That refers to something being corporeal, as opposed to non-corporeal, that is to say there is a body here. There is something substantial, something objective; this corporeal bodily reality that descended from the open heavens was dove-like. Note the language there. Luke, again, is very precise. In fact, all of the Gospel writers say the same thing on this point, they don't say that the Holy Spirit, in the body of a dove, descended from heaven, they say it was dove-like.

First of all, the word dove, that's a word that is translated dove, but it can also be translated pigeon. For obvious reasons we like to picture the Spirit not as a pigeon, but as a dove. Hard for those Christian retailers to sell all their trinkets and holy hardware with pictures of pigeons on the cups and all of that kind of stuff, so a dove it is. A dove it should be. But the word *peristera* can be a dove or a pigeon because both birds have the very same kind of descent. If you've ever observed those birds, like a pigeon or a dove, descending from flight to a stop, landing on a branch or on the ground, or wherever they land, they descend from their flight and come to a stop in the same matter, with a kind of fluttering. It's energetic. It's graceful, it's gentle, but it's also full of life, full of energy.

All the way back in Genesis 1:2 when the Holy Spirit was involved in the creation of the heavens and the earth, it says, "The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." You remember that? Genesis 1:2. The Jewish commentators used to picture that verb translated as hovering like a brooding bird, hovering or fluttering over its young. So, for a Jewish man like John, this is the perfect way for God to represent the Holy Spirit to him, for the descent of this bodily form to be this physical bodily representation with his energetic fluttering as

it comes to a rest on Jesus, the representation of the Holy Spirit. The commentator James Edwards writes, "Such concrete imagery underscores the objectivity of the event. The descent of the Spirit on Jesus is not depicted as a metaphor of enlightenment or a mystical experience, but as an empirical reality."

So the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended bodily, like a dove, like a pigeon, and a voice spoke from heaven. Audible voice, once again, a physical phenomenon setting sound waves in motion, which reach the auditory nerves of these two men at the waters of the Jordan River that day. That's just to give you a picture of what happened on the scene, just to get a clear idea of how things went that day. Jesus and John in a private or semi-private setting, going into the water, being baptized, it's in the context and the scope and the sphere of his massively popular well-known ministry, but it's during a time when they're kind of alone. Jesus goes down at the hands of John who's baptizing him, he comes up, he's praying. The heavens open, literally open. The Spirit, in the form of a dove, as it comes down, it's looking like that fluttering, it's looking like energy itself, coming down and resting on Jesus, and then God the Father speaks.

Before we get into the profound meaning of this heavenly affirmation, this divine phenomenon, the heaven has opened, the Spirit has descended, a voice has spoken, we need to ask a very fundamental question before we go any further. And it's this question: Why did Jesus come to be baptized at all? What prompted this? Luke 3:3 tells us that John came proclaiming a baptism of repentance, for what? The forgiveness of sins. Jesus didn't have any sins. He did not need to repent of anything. His life was always and ever in full conformity to his father's will. What did he need to repent of? What sins did he have? What's he coming for? In fact, God the Father himself, as we just read, verse 22, God has put his imprimatur on Jesus, affirming from heaven, "With you I am well pleased." What is that if not an acknowledgment of sinless perfection?

As Jesus taught later, no one will enter heaven approved by God without perfect righteousness. And yet the heavens are open to him. He said in Matthew 5:20, "I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees" believe me, folks, they were fastidious about righteous performance, external acts. Unless your righteousness exceeds that in some way, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Later in the same chapter, verse 48, "You must therefore be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."