

**FRESH  
APPROACHES  
TO  
UNDERSTANDING  
BAPTISM  
THE OLD TESTAMENT  
THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD  
THE GREEK BACKGROUND  
JOHN THE BAPTIST  
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BAPTISM  
IN WATER AND HOLY SPIRIT**

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## **CONTENTS**

INTRODUCTION	5
SETTING THE SCENE	7
THE CONCEPT OF BAPTISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT	9
THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD	14
THE GREEK BACKGROUND	19
JOHN THE BAPTIST	24
THE GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING OF THE BAPTISM OF JESUS	31
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BAPTISM IN WATER AND HOLY SPIRIT	35
CONCLUSION	39

## INTRODUCTION

At the end of the nineteenth century, Bishop Westcott said that he thought the next major issue on the agenda would be baptism. He was right in identifying its importance as a subject requiring re-assessment as a matter of some urgency, but he was wrong in his expectation that the Church would give it the priority it needed and deserved.

One of the major problems that faces the Church, is its inability to break out of a few limited areas of discussion which have continually failed to produce any agreement.

Over the last forty years, the matter appears to have settled down. This may be largely due to adopting the cultural attitude to truth, where toleration of all positions is required on any matter where expressing disagreement might cause offence. The 1982 World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper No.111 on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry called specifically for mutual recognition of all baptismal practices, and many of the older denominations are seeking to follow this call to a greater or lesser extent.

A far as the newer churches go, especially the charismatic and pentecostal ones, each appears to have established their own particular take on baptism which seems to differ from church to church. Even within some mainstream denominations such as the Church of England, there appear to be a few ministers carrying out some form of re-baptism under the intriguing flag of 'reaffirmation of baptismal vows by full immersion'.

The net result of this, is that in many churches you could ask a dozen random people for their understanding of baptism and you would get a dozen random answers. The sad thing is that few seem especially bothered. Some time back, when I was working through some of my own thinking about baptism, I mentioned to a colleague that I thought that I might have some new insights that could be relevant. He gave a world-weary sigh and said, 'what possible new thing can you say about baptism?' A fair question and one to which he obviously thought the answer would be nothing – it has all been said before.

I had some sympathy for my friend. I have read at least a couple of hundred books and articles on the matter, and apart from a handful, they do all seem go round and round a few points on well-worn tram lines. You will possibly feel the same. What is the point of opening up the subject? It is just not possible to get any clear consensus on the matter.

What is strange however, is that there are a number of fresh things to consider about baptism that many may never have really thought about.

The aim of this booklet is not to challenge particular positions, nor to persuade the acceptance of others, but to dust away some of the cobwebs of stale thinking and to initiate some fresh discussion. There is no attempt here to cover the matter in depth. I have written two, and I am writing a number of other booklets exploring particular aspects of baptism. Here we are simply lifting a corner of the cover on a number of aspects in order to whet the appetite. We want to help you discover that there is more to baptism than you may have realised.

## SETTING THE SCENE

Can you imagine what was happening? Hundreds of people standing on the banks of the river Jordan listening to an odd looking man dressed in camel hair clothing, and shouting out that the kingdom of God was just round the corner. He calls for changed lives and a clear response to his message. Many want to respond: they have heard of the coming Messiah from their national scriptures and their family feast days, and their hearts have been longing for the time when God would free His people again. Then he pauses, and a cry goes out for all those who truly turn from their old ways to go down to him at the water's edge and be baptised.

What is interesting, is that there is no record of anyone asking him to explain what he means. No one asks 'why baptism?' No one asks him to explain the ritual. Neither were those who were interested instructed to sign up for a series of classes to learn the meaning of baptism. They obviously all knew what it meant and hundreds of them simply responded and were baptised.

Some asked, 'Why are you baptising, if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the prophet?' But it was John's authority they were questioning, not the meaning of baptism. Indeed the inference was that when the Messiah, Elijah or the prophet came, they would be expected to baptise. The issue was not that the people did not understand baptism, but that some were uncertain of the legitimacy of this man, John, carrying out baptisms.

Now if the people did understand baptism, and that certainly seems to have been the case, the question we need to ask is, 'what was that understanding and have we built **our** understanding upon it, or have we ignored it?'

Apart from the Quakers and the Salvation Army, all Christian churches perform baptisms. Why do they do it? The obvious (and correct) answer is that Jesus told them to. However, there is no consensus regarding what Jesus Himself understood or meant when He gave the command. Where churches give any teaching on the subject, the content of their teaching seems largely to be based on the New Testament record of how and when the early church baptised and the understanding that can be gleaned from the letters to the churches. Jesus, however, would have had an understanding that incorporated and built on what the crowds on the banks of the Jordan would have been familiar with. His thinking would be based on the Old Testament scriptures; it would have taken into account the Jewish practices of His day and it would have reflected the usage of the word in the language and culture in which He ministered. Not least, it would have built on the understanding that John had, for he had been specifically designated as the one to prepare the pathway for Jesus to follow.

Baptism (and its derivatives) is a common Greek word used in everyday conversations. Religious baptisms were practised on a daily basis by many Jews. Everyone standing on the banks of the Jordan river would have been familiar with the word, its meanings and the concepts that undergirded those meanings. When Jesus told His disciples to baptise the people who wished to follow Him, He did not empty the word of all its long, rich and deep meanings from the previous centuries or its current use at the time. Unfortunately, it seems that is exactly what many churches have done. Virtually all baptisms performed in churches today have been divorced from the meanings and concepts understood at the time of Jesus.

So what were those meanings and concepts? We will take a very brief look at the different background aspects of baptism which would have shaped the thinking of those in the crowd who heard John preaching.

## THE CONCEPT OF BAPTISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament is dripping with references to baptism.

In most English translations, the word does not appear, but that is not because it is not there, it is simply that other words have been used instead. By the time early English translations were being done, the word baptism had taken on an exclusive New Testament religious meaning. Baptism is not an English word but has been borrowed from the Greek. Generally speaking, when a word is borrowed from another language it is because the receiving language wants to express something in a precise and limited way. The precise way in which the translators wanted to use baptism, was exclusively for the act of initiation into the Christian Church.

As we shall see, the Old Testament, Judaism and Greek culture all used the word and the concepts arising from it in a much broader way than those we are familiar with. Virtually all English translations have followed the usage established in the middle ages in this country. In doing this we have moved away from the breadth of meanings it expressed when originally used.

The Levitical law required that a healed leper undergo ritual washing in order to be clean (*Leviticus Ch 14*). When Elisha instructed Naaman the Syrian (*2 Kings Ch 5*) to go and wash in the Jordan, his response was to go and do it seven times. When the Jewish translators produced the Greek Septuagint translation, they used wash on one occasion and baptised on the other. This is entirely in keeping with Jewish usage, which used several terms interchangeably in ways that continue to the present day.

Most of us would accept that it would be pedantic to argue for any real difference in meaning, between the accounts of a group of people coming in from a thunderstorm, who variously describe themselves as:

*Absolutely soaked*  
*Drenched*  
*Dripping wet*  
*Like a drowned rat*

A study of words relating to liquids will show that it is very common for many of them to be used interchangeably with others. This is normal, but we have made baptism an exception contrary to its original use.

In the Jewish Encyclopaedia (*12 Volumes, Funk and Wagnall, New York and London 1902*) the articles on ablutions, baptism, bathing and washing display an easy interchange between terms. A religious Jew today would still follow the usage of the Jews of Jesus' day, and often use the terms interchangeably with each other. Many Jewish commentators would have no hesitancy in describing the Levitical washings as baptisms and some present day Jewish synagogues have baptismal baths in order to carry these out

Baptism permeates the Old Testament, but often without distinction to similar actions called by different terms. We have included some examples at the end of this chapter.\*

The New Testament writers show no reluctance to use baptismal language quite broadly in respect of various events in the Old Testament. Peter compares baptism to Noah and the Ark (*1 Peter Ch 3 v 20ff*), and Paul explicitly states that the Israelites were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea (*1 Corinthians Ch 10*). It seems likely that Philip also used the image of Noah and the ark when speaking to the Ethiopian eunuch (*Acts Ch 8 v 26ff*).

The eunuch was reading a prophecy about the Messiah in the book of Isaiah, and starting from there, Philip goes on and leads him towards baptism. It is significant that in the following chapter of Isaiah there is a reference to the waters of Noah and two chapters further on he specifically states that eunuchs are included in God's grace (*Isaiah Chs 53,54,56*). Where else would the eunuch's request for baptism come from other than a faithful exposition of the Old Testament segment of Isaiah? Philip had no New Testament, for it had not yet been written.

Many Christians, have long acknowledged that the first few verses of the bible contain baptismal imagery, and some have seen parallels in the baptism of Jesus, where the Spirit descends as a dove upon Jesus, the firstborn of God's new creation.

These New Testament writers and later Christian teachers are simply developing Jewish thinking which viewed many things in the scriptures in baptismal terms. All of the bathing rituals for the priests would have been spoken of equally as washings or baptisms. The laver of washing, which formed the second stage of the passage into the tabernacle/temple after the altar of burnt offering and sacrifice, was an essential place of cleansing for the priests before they could go on and undertake their other duties. The laver in Solomon's temple was huge, probably large enough to take a football team in one go.

In spite of appearing several times in the Greek Septuagint as the most appropriate translation of Hebrew texts, the word baptise is rarely used in any English translations of the Old Testament. This tends to reinforce the English reader's experience of baptism as an exclusively New Testament word, which has no connection with the Old Testament. However, Jewish commentators on Old Testament passages such as the Exodus event and the journey in the wilderness, clearly see several aspects of them as baptisms.

The concept of baptism would also have undergirded many of the Old Testament references to prophesied outpourings of the Holy Spirit and some example of these are shown at the end of this chapter.+ This is not something fanciful, but clearly evident from New Testament treatment of Old Testament passages. When Peter explained what had happened when Jesus baptised the 120 in Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, referring to Joel's prophecy, he said 'this is that'. Although Joel uses the term *pour out*, Peter understands that it was what Jesus meant when He referred to the promise that He would *baptise* in Holy Spirit.

Jesus had told the disciples that they would be baptised in Holy Spirit a few days after his ascension. No one disputes that this first happened on the day of Pentecost, but we often fail to admit that the bible refers to that event and subsequent similar ones in several different ways:

*Acts Ch 2 v 4 says 'filled'*

*Acts Ch 2 v 17 and v 33 says 'pour out' and 'poured out'*

*Acts Ch 10 v 47 says 'received'*

*Acts Ch 11 v 17 says 'gave'*

Those last two references record Peter reflecting back on the Pentecost event and comparing it to the coming of the Spirit to the Gentiles in Cornelius's house. In that instance, in addition to received and gave, the following terms are also used:

*Acts Ch 10 v 44 'fell'*

*Acts Ch 10 v 45 'poured out'*

And just in case there is any doubt that these terms are all referring to the same thing, Peter goes on to say that what had happened made him remember that Jesus had said – 'you shall be baptised in Holy Spirit'.

Once we start applying a similar principle of fulfilment of Old Testament passages on the outpouring of the Spirit, to the act of baptism, which is part of the work of the risen and ascended Jesus, it takes its rightful place as a central theme of scripture.

Just as Jesus died at the feast of Passover and is understood to have fulfilled the heart of the meaning of the feast, so the Spirit was outpoured at the feast of Pentecost and fulfilled the heart of the meaning of that feast also. The Greek can, and perhaps should, be translated as ‘and when the day of Pentecost was being fulfilled’ (*Acts Ch 2 v 1*). Apart from the aspect of harvest that was part of the natural celebration of Pentecost, the feast also celebrated the giving of the law, when God came down in cloud and fire on Mount Sinai. In the fulfilment of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fulfilled other Old Testament scriptures by writing the law on the hearts of the newly formed church of God (*Jeremiah Ch 31 v 31 and Ezekiel Ch 36 v 25ff*).

*\*EXAMPLES OF BAPTISM IN OT WHICH ARE RECOGNISED BY MANY JEWISH WRITERS, THE ORTHODOX CHURCH, EARLY CHRISTIAN FATHERS AND CHRISTIANS TODAY. Creation Genesis 1:1-2, Flood Gen 6ff, Exodus parting of Red Sea Ex 14ff, Provision of water of life from rock in wilderness Ex 17:1-7, Laver for the priests and rituals for the cleansing of the people such as, Washing necessary for the priesthood Exodus 29:4, The place of the laver in the tabernacle/temple Ex 30:17:21, 2 Chronicles 4:2-6, Drenching in blood of altar and people at Mount Sinai Ex. 24:6-8, Entry into the land of Canaan through parted waters of Jordan Joshua 3ff, Elijah and the prophets of Baal 1 Kings 18:30ff, Elijah and Elisha parting Jordan 2 Kings 2:8ff, Elisha healing Naaman the Syrian 2 Kings 5:1ff.*

*+SOME PROPHECIES AND PROPHETIC TYPES OF THE MESSIANIC AGE AS THE ERA OF OUTPOURING OR BAPTISM IN GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT AND OF THE NEW COVENANT. Drink offerings in the feasts of Tabernacles and Pentecost Lev.23:15-22 & 33-44, cf John 7:37-39, Acts 2:1. Prophecies eg: Isaiah 35, Isaiah 32:15, Isaiah 44:3, Isaiah 53-55 also cf Acts 8:26-39, Isaiah 61:1-2, Jeremiah 31:31ff, Ezekiel 36:25-27, Joel 2:21-32, Zechariah 12:10& 13:1*

## THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

During this period Israel became much more cosmopolitan. Occupied first by the Greeks and then the Romans, cities in particular began to be home for some large groups of people from other nationalities. These non-Jews were excluded from Jewish worship and religious ceremonies. However, some of them were attracted to Judaism and when the temple that existed in Jesus' lifetime was built, it included a vast outer court, known as the court of the Gentiles, into which they could enter.

The common name given to many of those who believed in the God of the Jews, and who desired to worship him, was ‘God fearers’. Their faith might have been very real, but they stopped short of the final step that would have allowed them to enter the next court of the temple. Anyone who was prepared take this step was designated a proselyte, or convert, and in effect they were required to become a Jew. A proselyte was a Gentile who converted to Judaism. In order to do this, they had to submit to four specific things, one of which was baptism. Although the Jews were set apart as God's chosen people that choice was never intended to be exclusive. Dating back to His dealings with Abraham, God made it clear that His intention was to bless all nations, and that the ones chosen for the task, the Jews, were chosen as instruments to that end, and not as an end in itself.

Apart from baptism, the conversion process included three other elements. For a man, it necessitated the universal Jewish requirement of male circumcision. Then for both men and women it required a commitment to keep the law, and they also had to present a sacrifice as an offering at the temple.

There was some debate amongst the two main Rabbinic schools of Shammai and Hillel as to which was the most important aspect of conversion. The Hillelites favoured baptism because it portrayed spiritual cleansing and also the beginning of a new life as the Gentile became a Jew. Such was the reality of this conversion that it was said that after becoming a Jew a man could (in theory at least) marry his mother, because he was re-born and no longer her son.

One of the ways in which this conversion came to be known by the Hillelites was 'baptism is as a child new born'. This of course lends real significance to Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. As a teacher in Israel, he would have been equipped to talk to Gentiles who wished to explore conversion, and he would know the significance of their need to be born again. When Jesus told him that everyone - Jews as well as Gentiles - needed this new birth, Nicodemus balked at the idea. When he asked Jesus what he meant and how it was possible for a man to be re-born, it wasn't because he did not know, but because he was trying to avoid the implications of what Jesus had said for himself

If we set Jesus' conversation about the need to be born again in the context of what that meant as part of the conversion process for a Gentile becoming a member of God's people, we can see how that adds a significant depth to the meaning of the part that baptism plays in conversion to Christianity.

This was also a period when many Jews were anticipating the Messiah. This expectation had caused some groups to separate off into various places in the wilderness of Judea to prepare themselves for His coming, and to dedicate themselves to a holy life before God. Some of these were peaceful, along the lines of later orders of monks who withdrew themselves for study and religious observances. Others were more radical, and in some cases would have been ready to fight the Romans in order to try and re-establish the sovereignty of Israel.

One of the things that several of these groups incorporated into their lifestyle was baptisms or ritual washings. One of the groups that has become well-known following the discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran was the Essenes. There has been some speculation regarding their influence on John the Baptist, but although he was contemporary with them, there is no direct evidence that he was involved. However, for our purposes, we simply need to note that there is clear historical evidence for the wide practice of baptisms around the time of Jesus, and that the emphasis on them was for cleansing and purity.

Apart from the heightened expectation of the Messiah and an increase of groups forming to be ready for Him, some Gentiles were converting to Judaism. However, there was also another factor. The king was only half-Jewish and the Roman army, which controlled the country, was virtually all non-Jewish. The only Jews in power were the High priest and his family, and they were collaborators with the king and the army. This caused some faithful Jews to withdraw and dedicate themselves to seek God for the promised Messiah.

We know from Luke's record of events that when Jesus' parents took him to the temple to offer sacrifice after his birth, the man they met, Simeon, was waiting eagerly for the coming of the Messiah. He had received a revelation that he would not die before He came and when he saw Jesus, he knew that He was the one who should come (*Luke Ch 2 v 25-34*).

The New Testament mentions false Messiahs who had come in the years before Jesus and who had created unrest and an intensified expectation. There is also evidence outside of the bible in the apocryphal books, that the time when Jesus came was a period of heightened interest and excitement. This is confirmed by how readily Herod's advisors were able to tell him where the expected Messiah was to be born when the Wise Men came to enquire about Him.



The understanding of the messianic expectation is something that has been neglected in many churches today, but it is central to the understanding of the purpose and work of Jesus, including that of baptism. The title of Messiah (or Christ as it is in Greek) means the anointed one. One of the ways the word came to be used was when a ruler conquered another country and appointed a regent to rule in his stead. A king would not normally move away from his own country to oversee a new territory, the regent he appointed would do that on his behalf. He would have full authority to act in the king's name in every situation. At his inauguration, the regent would be anointed with oil. The concept of anointing is first and foremost a transference of authority (not physical or spiritual power). Because God was viewed as king in Israel, all the earthly kings and priests - those appointed to act on His behalf - were anointed with oil when they took office.

All priests and kings in Israel were in that sense messianic; they ruled on behalf of God in His authority. Throughout the Old Testament, by type and by prophecy, the people were given the expectation that one day God would appoint a Messiah who would bring in the full and final kingdom of God, which would be established forever. There were certain things that would mark this future messianic age, one of which was that it would be an era of the outpouring of God's Spirit. In other words, God would not be an absent king ruling through His appointed regent, but He would actually be present in and through the Messiah He had appointed.

The imparting of authority through the anointing with oil would be replaced by imparting authority through the anointing of Holy Spirit. Whilst the anointing would come first and foremost on the Messiah, as all God's people would become kings and priests, they too would receive the anointing of the Spirit in order to become co-workers in the kingdom. As co-workers, their priority would be to establish the kingdom with the Messiah.

This messianic expectation of the age of the Spirit was understood in baptismal terms. As we saw earlier, Old Testament prophecies foretold of times when there would be outpourings of the Spirit. Anyone who was thirsty could come and drink and water could be drawn from wells of salvation.

Most importantly, the age would be the time when God would initiate a New Covenant with His people. The Old Covenant was instituted in the context of baptism. The waters of the Red Sea parted, then God came down in fire and smoke upon the mountain to give His law and, when the people finally entered the land God had promised, they did so through the parted waters of the Jordan. We saw earlier that Paul had specifically interpreted the Exodus event in terms of baptism (*1 Corinthians Ch 10 v 1-2*). One of the main prophecies of the New Covenant (*Ezekiel Ch 35 v 25-27*) describes it in terms that any Jew would recognise as messianic baptismal language. *'I will sprinkle clean water upon you.....I will cleanse you.....I will put my Spirit within you.'*

Why has the Church sometimes failed to grasp this baptismal imagery? As we go on to look at the Greek background of the word, we will discover how far removed our thinking about baptism is from that of the people of Jesus' time.

## THE GREEK BACKGROUND

In English, a word such as drink is used in many different ways. We can drink. Sometimes we drink a drink. If we do it standing in the sea, we drink a drink in the drink. A man may have a drink of tea with no slur on his character, but if he drinks then it is a different matter, and having drunk he becomes a drunk. Robbie Burns wrote to his love that she should ‘drink to me only with your eyes’, and if you are cultured enough to remember that, it may indicate that with your thirst for knowledge you have drunk deeply of the poets. We could go on, but once we start looking, it is easy to see that in English some words relating to liquids have a broad range of meanings, which can be both literal and metaphorical. We might paint the fence white and the town red, or stain the tablecloth but not our character.

Anyone translating the above passage from English to another language would have to be careful that they found appropriate equivalents in that language for every use of the word drink. This might mean choosing a wide variety of words to cover the different ways in which it has been used. Probably the worst thing they could do would be to transfer the word drink over to the other language with no attempt at translation.

Words relating to liquids are especially prone to being borrowed for other uses. Imagine Sally at home studying Shakespeare for her degree while her husband leaves for a night out with his friends. ‘You can go and drink all the beer you want, I am going to stay here and drink in Shakespeare.’ Unless we understand that, in order to make a point, the word drink is deliberately being used in two quite different ways, Sally’s words become nonsense.

In both classical Greek (the language of poets, playwrights and philosophers) and common Greek (the language of the man or woman in the street and the language of the New Testament) baptism or one of its derivatives has dozens of possible meanings. It has been used in all of the following instances:

A ship sinking or a man drowning  
To be drunk or high on drugs  
To be in serious debt  
A sun drenched or wave washed beach  
To pickle onions or preserve fruit  
Overwhelmed with worry  
To wash  
To dunk a piece of bread in soup  
Rivers merging  
To conquer and colonise a country  
Dyeing cloth

When Classical Greek passages containing baptism have been translated into English, the interchangeable nature of words and phrases relating to liquids and their broad use, has necessitated numerous English words being used to give the correct meaning. Today, we might translate someone who was ‘baptised in debt’ as being ‘up to their ears in debt’, and we would simply say ‘he had a bath’ to describe someone who had been ‘baptised with soap and water’ in order to get clean.

We hope to develop some of these things in a later booklet, but for the moment we trust that two things have become clear about words that relate to liquids, both in English and specifically about baptism in Greek. The first, as we have seen, is that they can be used with a wide spectrum of meanings and that the specific meaning will relate to the specific circumstance – we know that soaking in the sunshine whilst lying on a sun-drenched beach, will have a completely different result from being thoroughly soaked in water because we have been drenched in a thunderstorm.

It is neither possible nor desirable to tie down these words to a single, precise, limited meaning in every circumstance.

The second thing, is that when words relating to liquids develop in meaning, there is a common pattern they seem to follow. They usually begin as a simple literal action and (over decades or centuries) they move toward the *result* of that action, then sometimes on to a metaphorical result. We will look at a couple of examples, one from English and one from Greek, so we can see what this means in practice.

To drink is a literal action, used to describe taking liquid into the mouth and swallowing it. That is the original simple meaning. Someone who drinks alcohol becomes affected by the action, and they are referred to as someone who drinks, but this no longer just means they carry out the action, but that they carry out the action with a result, and it is the result that now becomes the emphasis of the word. The next stage is that they become a drunk, and the word is now used to describe their ongoing condition. But then the word moves on even further to be used in a picture form (that is metaphorically) so that someone can be described as drunk with success. It is important to recognise that this movement of meaning will affect how we do a word study. It would be incorrect to say that every use of drink or drunk must relate to its original straightforward use of taking liquid into the mouth.

There may be a number of intermediate stages in the process of development, but where there is movement, that is the general direction that such words take.

One of the most common uses of baptism in both classical and common Greek relates to dyeing cloth. In this instance the progression went as follows: baptism in its early basic form simply meant to dip, that is something was partially or wholly put into a liquid. In the dyeing industry this was how they used baptism when cloth was put into the dye. Over time, the sense of

purpose was included – the cloth was dipped in order to be dyed – that is, to have its colour changed. From there it moved to the next stage. Whenever something was baptised (dyed) and its colour changed – whatever physical method was used to achieve the desired result – it was still described as being baptised. So a piece of cloth could be baptised white from strong sunlight, or baptised red by being drenched with blood (when a butcher slaughters animals or a warrior slays his enemies) or of course it could still be dipped, but that could not be assumed to be the case. Although its original root meaning was to dip, that became the exceptional rather than the common use of the word.

The general progression of words related to liquids is virtually always that the emphasis moves from the act to the result of the act. The speed or extent of this development is not consistent with all words. To bathe, has stayed as the simple action of having a gentle swim, but not with any specific result. Whereas having a bath, has progressed to the place of result (that is to be clean) whether that is lying down or standing up and scrubbing. The thing we need to discover is where the biblical use of baptism comes in this line of development. Is it used in the bible primarily as a simple action close to its original form, or has it moved towards emphasising the results of an action? By the time of the New Testament, baptism had come to be used primarily to indicate a result or condition rather than simply the action which might have brought about that result or condition.

A pickled (baptised) onion was not simply an onion that had been dipped in vinegar, but an onion that had been dipped in vinegar and had taken on the characteristics of the vinegar. A piece of cloth that had been dyed (baptised) red, had not just been dipped into a vat of red dye and taken out in the same state that it went in, but has come out red. It has taken on the colour of the dye in which it was baptised. A person baptised into Christ, takes on the effects and influence of His death and resurrection and the nature and holiness of His Spirit.

This is a very difficult move for many of us to make in our thinking, but it is an extremely important one to wrestle with. For at the heart of the concept of baptism is the idea that two things come into contact, one usually more influential or powerful than the other, and the one affects the other. While a particular method may be employed and may sometimes be important, the purpose or effect is usually the primary factor.

When dyeing (baptising) a piece of cloth, it is always more important that the cloth takes on the intended colour than the particular method used to achieve that.

One of the most interesting uses of the word was when the Greeks conquered Persia. Alexander instructed his officers to intermarry with Persian women, to introduce Greek customs, money and language and to make the country 'Greek'.

The word used to describe this process, which was intended to radically alter the culture, was baptise. This usage is very close to the concept of an anointed messiah taking charge of a country in order to bring it into conformity with the kingdom he came from.

Jesus, God's anointed Messiah brings in the kingdom of heaven on earth, by baptising His followers with the Spirit of holiness and heaven in order to transform them into citizens who manifest that same holiness with all aspects of the kingdom as their priority.

## JOHN THE BAPTIST

Sometimes it appears that John is considered to be no more than a sort of spiritual warm up act to get the people ready for Jesus. Although he is a genuine prophet, it is OK if you miss his performance, as he does not really contribute anything to the following act.

If John's ministry was to prepare people for Jesus in this way, then he would have been better off doing it in Galilee where Jesus ministered for much of the time, rather than in the wilderness by Jordan which Jesus only visited occasionally.

Most books about baptism do not even mention John, even though he was called 'the Baptist'. If our understanding of Christian baptism is gleaned primarily from the end of Matthew's gospel, the Acts and the Epistles, then that is perfectly understandable. John will remain an enigma to us that we can relegate to our 'might look at someday if I have time' pile.

The nagging problem is that Jesus seemed to have had a very high regard for John. That is sometimes attributed to John's exemplary character. He certainly displayed great courage, integrity and humility, but was that enough for Jesus to rate him as the greatest person ever born (*Matthew Ch 11 v 11*)?

The bible does not tell us a great deal about John, but what it does tell us is worth going over carefully.

John understood his role was to prepare the way for Jesus. There are hundreds of scriptures that speak of the coming of Jesus, however apart from the Psalm predicting the downfall of Judas, there are no other Old Testament scriptures foretelling anything

about another specific person, *except* the prophecies in Isaiah and Malachi (*Isaiah Ch 40, Mal Ch 3*) that predict the role of John the Baptist. Neither of these passages say a great deal about John, but what they do both say is that he was to prepare the way for the Lord, though they are not specific as to how this would happen.

The question that is rarely asked about the relationship of John with Jesus is, ‘what was the relevance of John’s baptism to Jesus’ ministry and, what connection did it have to the Christian baptisms that would happen after Jesus’ death and resurrection?’ This is perhaps one of the most important, but neglected areas of thinking about baptism. Just how did John’s preaching and baptising prepare the way for Jesus?

John was not in fact a spiritual warm-up artist getting the audience ready for the main act, nor was he merely a prophet, but, as Jesus said, he was more than a prophet – even the greatest person that had ever lived (*Matt Ch 11 v 7 – 11*). Even allowing that John may have influenced many thousands of people, if the core message was simply a turning back to God, he was neither more nor less than most of the Old Testament prophets who preceded him. How does that fit in with Jesus’ description of him? We will look at different aspects of John’s ministry in turn.

***John was the last priest of the Old Covenant, completing the purpose of the Levitical priesthood.***

Born into a priestly family with an impeccable family line, John would have been set to follow in the footsteps of his father Zacharias when he reached the age of thirty. (We know that this was in fact how old John was when he launched out in ministry, as he was a few months older than Jesus and began preaching a few months before Him.) However, in spite of his entitlement, from an early age John had chosen a prophet’s food of locusts and wild honey, and a prophet’s clothing of camel hair. He neither accepted his priestly portion of food from the sacrificial offerings

nor his priestly clothing from the temple wardrobe. But a priest was a priest – by birth-line not by vocational choice. As such, John followed the path of the few prophet-priests before him; Samuel (who had been the one who introduced and anointed David into his kingship) and Jeremiah and Ezekiel (who were the two prophets specifically foretelling the inauguration of a New Covenant that would be inward rather than outward).

The Jewish faith began with Abraham, and sacrifices began when God called Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (*Gen Ch 22*). But God did not allow Abraham to go through with the sacrifice and He provided a ram as a substitute. Abraham had understood that God would provide a sacrifice for Himself, as that alone would satisfy His holiness. Every priestly sacrifice throughout the following centuries was in anticipation of that final provision by God. All sacrifices were required to be perfect, and a key role of the priest was to examine the animal and pronounce it sound. John completed this task when he saw Jesus and announced ‘behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (*John Ch 1 v 29*). After John identified Jesus Christ as the final acceptable sacrifice, the priesthood became superfluous. No more types or substitutes would ever be needed, and never again would a priest be required to examine and offer them. The seal of this was when, at His trial, Jesus stood before the actual High Priest and he failed to recognise Him as the Lamb of God. The earthly priesthood was defunct.

As far as God was concerned, the Levitical priesthood was no longer necessary once Jesus had died, risen from the dead and ascended to heaven. Once ascended and seated at the right hand of God, Jesus took up His unending role as God’s new High Priest after the order of Melchisedec (*Hebrews Ch 7 v 17*).

No priest before or after John ever carried the responsibility of identifying God’s full and final sacrifice. John was truly the greatest and the last earthly priest.

### ***John was the last prophet of the Old Covenant***

This was accomplished in two main ways: Firstly, by declaring the end of inclusion in a covenant based on the blood-line of Abraham. John preached that it was no longer possible for a Jew to claim access to God because they were Abraham's children. He declared that the axe was laid at the root of the trees and now every man or woman stood before God on their own.

Secondly, John announced that God's Messiah had come. This completed his own prophetic role, which had itself been prophetically foretold. He had prepared the way of the Lord, and the Lord had come. The Messiah and his messianic people would now fulfil any prophetic function that was required. Old Covenant prophets would no longer be necessary. All future prophecy would come through God's New Covenant people.

### ***John announced closure of the Old Covenant line of the kings of Israel by introducing the eternal king.***

Matthew introduces Jesus as Israel's king in the genealogy at the beginning of his gospel, and through the birth narrative where the Magi come seeking the one who has been born king of Israel.

John would have understood that part of his role as the one who was 'making the path straight and the rough places smooth', was to prepare the way for the king. In biblical times in the Middle East, when a monarch travelled, they would not be expected to rough it. An envoy (with a retinue of staff and slaves) would go before them. Their job was to physically make the paths straight and smooth, and also to ensure that people were ready to receive their king. No king of Israel would follow Jesus. He was the last. And no envoy would ever be needed again. John was the last.

In these three ways John inaugurated the closure of the Old Covenant. But he also inaugurated the beginning of the New.

John himself was not fully of the Old Covenant which he was closing down, but neither was he of the New which would only begin with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus said the least in the kingdom of God would be greater than John. In this was part of his greatness. He stood as a rock, alone between the two great periods of God's dealings with humanity. He was the one person entrusted with the task of announcing to Israel 'the Old is dead, long live the New'. He even re-directed those who followed him to Jesus, and several, such as Andrew and Peter, became His core disciples.

### ***John introduces Jesus to Israel in the context of baptism.***

We do not know whether John and Jesus, who were cousins, had met as children or young men. But this aspect of their relationship is obviously unimportant as, even if they did, it is not recorded for us. What is recorded (*John Ch 1 v 31*) is that part of the reason why John baptised, was in order that Jesus might be revealed to Israel. This was not co-incidence. John did not get up one day and think 'what shall I do today? I know I'll go down to the Jordan and do a bit of baptising'. God had told him that as he baptised in water, He would reveal to him the person who would baptise in Holy Spirit.

God's revelation of Jesus as the one who would baptise in Holy Spirit was in the context of water baptism. The gift of the Spirit is at the very heart of the messianic expectation and the New Covenant promised to Israel, and it was John who announced this.

John did not say a lot about Jesus. He acknowledged Him to be greater than himself and of more worth than himself. As we have seen, he identified Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but it is noteworthy that this description is only recorded in one gospel. What is emphasised by all four gospel writers is John's proclamation that Jesus would baptise with Holy Spirit. (*Matthew and Luke also include the comment 'and with fire'*).

John's gospel also includes John the Baptist's comment that it was God who told him, 'the one on whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining, is the one who baptises in Holy Spirit.' It is significant that this detail of John's description of His ministry is the only one which Jesus Himself repeats and emphasises to His disciples (*Acts Ch 1 v 5*). After his mission to Cornelius, Peter also refers to it, 'I remembered the word of the Lord how He said "John did indeed baptise with water, but you will be baptised with Holy Spirit"' (*Acts Ch 11 v 16*). As far as I am aware, no other statement is repeated as many times (6) in the New Testament.

Without question, the emphasis of John the Baptist, who was the one designated to introduce Jesus, is that Jesus is the one who will baptise in Holy Spirit.

In his preaching, John compared and contrasted baptism in water with baptism in Holy Spirit. He said 'I indeed baptised you with water, but He will baptise you with Holy Spirit'. In our thinking we sometimes wrestle with the meaning of this in respect of how it will work as a physical act – if John plunges people under water, does that mean Jesus will plunge people into Holy Spirit? It does not mean that at all. The construction of the Greek in this passage means 'on the one hand this and on the other hand that'. In other words, it is not merely a comparison but a comparison and a contrast, *with the emphasis on the contrast*.

In our earlier illustration we had Sally at home studying Shakespeare for her degree, while her husband left for a night out with his friends. Her comment, 'you can go and drink all the beer you want, but I am going to stay here and drink in Shakespeare' is a similar construction to that used by John.

***The same words – drink and baptise – are used to emphasise a difference in result not a similarity of action.***

Jesus baptising in Holy Spirit will have a different result than John baptising in water.

This ties in with what we said about the Greek usage of the word. The emphasis is not on the action but on the result, and it will not be the same for water and Spirit, just as it will not be for beer and Shakespeare.

When water baptism occurred in the Old Testament, or in usage with proselytes or Greeks, the emphasis tended to be on cleansing, and birth and death. The emphasis on the non-literal pictures of baptism which were applied to the Spirit in the New Testament, tended toward the anointing for authority, the rebirth of the spirit and mind and, most of all, the uniting with Christ whereby his life floods through ours. If we bring these two emphases together, they make for a powerful experience and a genuine new beginning.

All of Jesus' ministry, especially those aspects related to the cross, and resurrection, are often highlighted by preachers as fulfilments of identifiable prophecies throughout the scriptures. However, the one thing about Jesus, emphasised and repeated by the person appointed to introduce Him, that is - He will baptise in Holy Spirit - is treated by much of the church as if it has hardly any Old Testament roots whatever. Consequently, there is little agreement between Christians as to what we should expect Jesus to do when He baptises in Holy Spirit, and even less agreement as to what happens to us when He does so.

Unless we are intended to have a clear prior understanding of baptism, and in particular, what it would mean in the ministry of Jesus, it makes no sense for that to be John's major point of introduction.

John's introduction of Jesus is in the context of baptism. Jesus final recorded words in both Mark and Matthew refer to baptism in water, and His final conversation recorded in Acts refers to baptism in Spirit. If we do not understand the relevance of that emphasis, might we be missing something?

## THE GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING OF THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

When I was travelling up the M1 some years ago, my children yelled out that we were entering Robin Hood Country (indicated by a very large sign) and could we stop as soon as possible. Of course, Robin Hood had probably never trod the ground beneath the service area in Sherwood Forest where we got our drinks, but the association was strong for our children and the other visitors who stopped there.

There is a place on the banks of the Jordan river which was officially designated as the place of Jesus' baptism just a few years ago. Whether it actually is the place or not may be open to dispute, but it is in the area of the river where many bible maps have always placed it. So, whether or not it is the exact spot, it is certainly close by it, and it would have had all the similar feelings of association that our children got in Sherwood Forest.

If you look at a map of Israel at the time of Jesus, you will see that many of them locate John's baptismal activity at this place just below Gilgal, a few miles up-stream from where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea. The vicinity of Gilgal was also the area where the Israelites camped after crossing the Jordan under Joshua's leadership.

In some versions of the Bible, the area where John baptised is named in the margin as Bethabara, or the place of the crossing. This could indicate a ford (there was one or more in that area where the men of Jericho sought the spies), or it could indicate the actual place where Joshua and the people crossed. There were several hundred thousand people occupying a large area, so no exact place is likely to have been noted.

However, all the indications point to the fact that Jesus was baptised either at or in the vicinity of Joshua's crossing. Now just as my children knew 'Robin Hood's country', so the Jews would have known the area of Joshua's crossing. This would have been significant for several reasons.



*The place of crossing was probably a few miles up from the head of the Dead Sea near to Jericho*

It was also the place of Elijah's and Elisha's crossing. In the record of that, Elijah, having defeated the prophets of Baal in Carmel in the north-west of Israel, moves south right through the land, back to Sinai, the stopping place of Israel after their departure from Egypt, and after that coming back to Gilgal where he picks up Elisha before going over the Jordan river.

Paul describes the crossing of the parted Red Sea in terms of baptism (*1 Cor Ch 10*), and God compares the Jordan and Red Sea crossings (*Joshua Ch. 4 v 23*). It is not therefore unreasonable to consider the parallel events with Joshua in similar terms.



The proselyte baptism considered earlier may be thought of as identification with the nation's deliverance from Egypt and their entry into Canaan, the land which they had been promised. Gentiles transitioning to become Jews inherited and, in type, participated in Jewish history. In their baptism they identified with the birth of the nation of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan river.

But the history of Israel also incorporated the great period of the prophets and this too had been initiated through a baptismal act. When hundreds of years after the entry into the land, the people of God became unfaithful, and their leaders failed, God raised up the dual prophetic ministry of Elijah and Elisha. In a key symbolic act, Elijah had followed the footsteps of Moses to Sinai and then handed over to Elisha who followed in the footsteps of Joshua.

At the same place on the Jordan where Joshua had led the people over, Elisha struck the waters and they parted again. He crossed into the land to call back the people to faithfulness to God. Associations of events and memories linked with places are very powerful. It is inconceivable that the people standing on Jordan's banks listening to John the Baptist preach, would have made no connection with the dramatic actions of the past that had taken place where they stood.

What would have been equally as powerful, was the association of names. Joshua, had come as the one who led God's people into the land that God had promised them. He had done this through the parted waters. Elisha had come to the same place to recall the people back to God, again through parted waters. Joshua and Elisha both have the same meaning to their names – God saves. When John went down to the Jordan, expecting God to reveal the chosen Messiah, at the same place that both Joshua and Elisha had crossed over, he saw Jesus, whose name also means God saves. By revelation, John recognised Him as God's chosen one.

Joshua, Elisha and now Jesus. All named God saves, and all entering the waters of Jordan at the same point though separated by hundreds of years.

If the messianic expectation was that the Messiah would come in a way similar to that which those predecessors had done, then both the place and the similarity of names would have created an atmosphere pregnant with anticipation.

When the priests under Joshua's command entered the river, the waters parted. When Elisha took Elijah's cloak and smote the waters, they parted again. What would have been the expectation when Jesus entered the river? John identified Jesus as the one who would baptise in Holy Spirit (a clear function of the Messiah). Can we not imagine the buzz that might have gone round the crowd? If this was the Messiah, would the river part again?

Jesus entered the water and John baptised Him, but the waters did not part. There was no disappointment, for something far more significant and powerful happened instead. The heavens opened.

In a unique, cosmic act of messianic commission, God sent the Spirit to descend as a dove and settle on Jesus. Not an anointing with oil, neither an invisible anointing of Spirit, but a tangible, visible, impartation of the Spirit of God. There could be no doubt this was the Messiah. Jesus was publically anointed and appointed to rule the kingdom of heaven on earth. To reinforce and seal His authority, the voice of God declared, 'this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'.

The Messiah had come, not to re-take the land from the Romans who now possessed it, as Joshua or Elisha might have been expected to do. But Jesus would lead the people of God into the real land of rest – even the kingdom of heaven itself, where God already reigned and no usurper could ever occupy it.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BAPTISM IN WATER AND HOLY SPIRIT

Baptism in water and baptism in Holy Spirit are two parts of one work of God.

At first glance, this may seem a difficult concept to grasp, but it is actually quite straightforward. If we consider what happens when someone gets married, regardless of the culture or local traditions, it will include several stages:

The word marriage means a union or joining together. It describes what happens to a man and a woman who go through a series of actions or ceremonies in order to arrive at a state of being married. Whilst the exact form may vary, it usually follows something along the following lines:

1. A ceremony of separation, especially for the woman who leaves her father and mother and the family home. Traditionally she also forsakes her own surname.
2. A ceremony of union, where there is public/legal declaration of the formation of a double unit instead of two single ones.
3. An entering into an agreement (covenant) which involves promise and commitment.
4. Some form of physical action to seal the agreement, often an exchange of rings.
5. A physical and sexual consummation of the union.

These actions combine to bring the couple into union with one another. They then have one joint life together, recognised and described as marriage.

Although the different parts of the process may take different forms in different cultures, there are usually two key elements. The first involves some form of ceremony and declaration and usually covers the things described in 1 - 4 above. This ceremony may be brief with just a couple of witnesses, or it may be elaborate with a large number of people attending. The change that takes place on this occasion is one of status. There is a change for both parties, from living individual lives to living a joint life.

The second element is the consummation of the union by sexual intercourse. The meaning of consummate is to complete or make perfect and, although the public ceremony contains all the legal elements, in most societies, they do not finally become effective and binding until intercourse completes them. The change that takes place through physical union is described in the bible as the two becoming one flesh.

Paul, quoting Jesus and Genesis wrote: *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”* (Ephesians Ch 5 v 31).

We can set this out as follows:

Marriage is an ongoing state of union between a man and a woman, entered into through two separate elements which do not usually take place at the same time or place, but which are both essential, and which once they have taken place are treated as two parts of one process. Simply put:

ceremony (event 1) + consummation (event 2)  
= union in flesh (ongoing state)

So too with Christian baptism. There are a series of actions or ceremonies which, when passed through, bring a person into a state of union with Christ which is ongoing.

1. An acknowledgement of separation from sin, the world, the flesh and all that is past. We also take on a new name. Christian simply means 'little christ' or little anointed one.
2. An acknowledgement of union with Christ. We agree that we no longer live for ourselves, but in relationship with Him. We declare our acceptance of all that God offers us in Christ.
3. An entering into an agreement, the New Covenant, as the basis for our future life.
4. Baptism in water as a physical act to seal the agreement.
5. A spiritual consummation of the union through baptism in Holy Spirit.

Just as in marriage, so too in baptism. The principle thing that changes in 1 - 4 above is our legal status, but this time it is God's law, not the law of the country. Our change of status is completed through a spiritual consummation when God unites us to Christ as we receive His Spirit. Just as in marriage, the consummation rarely takes place at the same time as the ceremony and may be separated by a period of time. Nonetheless, a similar simple equation describes what happens:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{ceremony (event 1) + consummation (event 2)} \\ &= \text{union in spirit (ongoing state)} \end{aligned}$$

As explained in the section on the Greek background of the word, the common use of baptism was to denote a change in the ongoing condition of the object baptised rather than conveying a preciseness about the act of baptism itself.

An onion is changed when it is pickled (Greek - baptised), and so does our perception of it. It is its ongoing state – pickled – that now defines it, not the how, why or when that it was actually put into the vinegar.

A couple who get married in jeans in a ten minute ceremony with two witnesses, and who do not consummate their marriage until a month later, are no less married than a couple who have a million dollar wedding with hundreds of guests, who consummate on their wedding night. A marriage is defined and completed by the components and facts of the ceremony and the subsequent consummation, not by the form, the splendour or the level of experience generated in the process. It would however, be incorrect to talk of someone as married, if they had not made any ceremonial vows or entered into a physical union. Whatever sort of relationship they might have with another person (and it might be a positive one) it is not marriage.

Similarly, it is never merely the outward form or level of experience involved in water and Spirit baptism that determine their validity. Provided the key elements are included, there may be considerable leeway in respect of the form of the events. However, it is essential to remember that the New Testament knows nothing of a Christian who has not been effectively baptised in water and Spirit so that they are joined to Jesus.

Particularly in the writings of Paul, the assumption is always that the readers have been baptised in both water and Holy Spirit. Paul tends to merge the two, asking, 'do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ, were baptised into His death?' (*Romans Ch 6 v 3.*) Baptism is treated as one entity – water and Spirit – and no attempt is made to separate the two.

Paul also compares the marriage relationship with the union between Christ and the Church (*Ephesians Ch 5 v 31-32*).

## CONCLUSION

When Paul wrote to the Roman Church he asked them whether they knew the implications of being baptised into Christ. His language was actually quite strong – ‘are you ignorant?’ He quite clearly believed that being baptised made a difference. This is one of the consistent things we find as we read the New Testament – being baptised is not the same as not being baptised. Much of what Paul and other writers say when they mention baptism, will not make sense if the reader has not been baptised.

One of the aims of this little booklet has been to help us discover how we might respond to Paul’s question to the Roman church, but we will struggle to do so if we have not been baptised in both water and Holy Spirit.

It is a strange thing, but in a number churches, including some Baptist and charismatic ones, it appears to make little or no real difference whether someone has been baptised or not, and many people seem uncertain whether they have received the Holy Spirit.

There is no doubt about the matter. The New Testament writers believed that something happened in baptism and, that the something was both essential and life changing. The heart of the issue is **what** happens rather than **the way** in which it happens.

Paul asks the Romans, ‘do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ were baptised into His death?’ He then unpacks the implications of that: if we are united in His death, then we are dead. We are also buried, and we will also share in

His resurrection. That means that as far as sin goes we are to understand ourselves as being dead to it, but alive to God. Paul’s letters to the Colossians and Galatians also emphasise the simple fact of union with Christ. Through both baptism in water and Spirit, what happened to Christ is what happens to us as well.

Unfortunately, in the church in the UK, many of us treat Paul as if he is saying to the churches ‘let’s pretend’. Baptism is a picture (a visual aid if you like) of what happened to Jesus, and when we are baptised it will help us (just as a visual aid does) to imagine (which is another word for pretend) that somehow we have also been crucified, which will then help us to resist sin – somehow. Of course if this is how we view it, it will not make any difference and it will confirm our view that nothing happens in baptism.

Water baptism incorporates a death certificate, a marriage certificate and a passport all in one. Water baptism gives us assurance of our status and standing before God. We *know* we have passed from death to life. Baptism in Holy Spirit makes that death, union and citizenship a reality which we can know in practice and experience. One without the other is incomplete. The benefits of our water baptism do not become effectual unless Jesus baptises us in Holy Spirit as well.

Unfortunately, the emphasis some Christians have put on power, gifts and experience as the purpose of receiving the Spirit, have clouded its real meaning as the point of entry into the New Covenant where God writes His law on our hearts and minds, and commits Himself to teaching us how to live by His word and His indwelling Spirit. If we are baptised in Holy Spirit we probably will find ourselves moving in some measure of power and gifts and we probably will have some experiences of the reality of God. However, the more important purposes of His coming are to unite us to Jesus, teach us, transform us, and enable us to worship Him and be a blessing to others.