

### Baptism: Human or Divine

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 29, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

John the Baptist was dead. Deader than a door nail. Horrible death. Got his head chopped off by King Herod because John didn't just preach, he meddled in Herod's personal life. John was dead.

But before he got his head chopped off, John preached and baptised. That's how he got his name, John the Baptist - not because he was a member of the baptist denomination, but because he baptized people. People came into the wilderness from all over to hear him preach and get baptized - from as far away as Quarryville, Lancaster, Wilmington and Baltimore - they traveled on foot and by donkey.

John told them God didn't care if they were Jews or gentiles - they all had to repent. "Live changed lives" he said - lives that demonstrate God's power and presence. Live in such a way that everybody will know and recognize that God is the most important power in their lives. "Turn or burn", John preached. God's terrible judgement will fall on you whether you're a Jew or gentile. "Repent!" He called upon the whole nation of Israel to repent and get baptized.

But John the Baptist, unfortunately, was not a member of the Presbytery of Judah. He wasn't even ordained. And he never got the approval of session to baptize people. Worse than that, John the Baptist, never had the opportunity to go Princeton

Theological Seminary - or any seminary for that matter. Never even went to college. Didn't wear a gown. No clerical collar with preaching tabs. John the Baptist was the kind of guy who wears his John Deere hat when he's sitting in a restaurant. He's the kind of guy who wears his John Deere hat when he's preaching. That's the kind of guy John the Baptist was. Now you know why he was called John the Baptist, and not John the Presbyterian.

So, did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? I mean, how could it be from heaven if John wasn't ordained, wasn't seminary trained, wasn't a member of a presbytery, wasn't educated, and neither asked for or got permission from the session to baptize?

I don't know about you, but I believe that John's baptism was from heaven. Despite John's lack of ecclesiastical and academic credentials - men and women John baptized lived changed lives. The power of God fell upon them. John baptized with water, but God poured out his Holy Spirit upon them. Proud Pharisees and Scribes, learned men, humbled themselves at the preaching of John the Baptist and let this unlearned, uncouthed man baptize them. Men and women convicted by John's preaching, got baptized in the Jordan and came up from the water changed - they emptied out their closets stuffed with clothes and gave them to poor people. Soldiers repented and got baptized and went away changed - refusing to use their power to extort money by threats and false accusations. John the Baptist had no ecclesiastical authority to baptize, but so what! - changed lives were the evidence that John's baptism came from heaven.

Now, I'm no John the Baptist. I <sup>am</sup> ~~are~~ an educated person. I went to college. I went to seminary. Studied Greek and Hebrew. Have read most of Karl Barth's 12 volume Church Dogmatics. And I don't wear my hat inside like John the Baptist did. I'm a member of Presbytery and have been authorized by the Presbytery of Donegal and the session of the Oxford Presbyterian Church to baptize Samantha Lynn, and Samantha Lynn, and Tyler Jordan to baptize. But is my baptism from heaven, or is it merely a human ritual?

Let me answer that by referring to something I've heard Saint Joe Paterno say on a number of occasions. People ask him, "name the greatest Penn State football team you've ever coached. Was it the 1986 team that one the national championship? Or was it the 1968 team that went undefeated and should have been number one if President Nixon declared Texas number one?"

And Joe Paterno has said over and over - "I'll tell you in 30 years what team was the greatest. The greatest team is not the one that wins the national championship or goes undefeated - but the team which produces men of character who will contribute most to the welfare of their communities in years to come." The best team will be judged by the character of players in their adult lives.

And we will know if the baptisms I perform this morning are from God depending on the changed lives - the Spirit filled lives these children will lead throughout their lives. Will they grow up to know, love and serve Jesus Christ throughout their lives?

I baptize them with the confidence that what we do here on earth will be confirmed in heaven. God really does adopt Samantha and Samantha and Tyler as his very own children. I baptize with water. Jesus Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit. The water I use washes their bodies, the water of the Spirit washes away sin. Today, they officially become children of God. They're ushered into to God's kingdom. ~~They join that great company of sinner saints God delivered from slavery and gave water to them in the desert on their way to the Promised Land.~~ The journey to the promised land will be long and arduous for Samantha, and Samantha, and Tyler as it was for our ancestors in the desert. But we trust God's promises to bring us and them safely home.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you sent your servant John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son our Savior by preaching repentance and baptizing. Make us so to follow his teaching and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and, following his example, constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.