

THE QUESTION OF THE WEEK

“John the Baptist proclaimed: ‘One, mightier than I, is coming after me...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’”

(Mark 1: 8)

A question: Before John the Baptist burst on the first century scene in hill country of Judea in the first century was there any kind of baptism among the Jews? The quick answer is that it was never the belief in Judaism that the normal or usual way one became a Jew was by means of baptism. A person was born Jewish. At that time the situation was that you were Jewish if your born of a Jewish man. Today you are Jewish if you are born of a Jewish mother.

BUT. If you were a Gentile, a non-Jew, and wanted to become a Jew how could you do that at the time of Jesus? Well, there was a period of instruction and preparation which was followed by a water bath into which you would step and allow the water to wash over you. This was called a mikvah. Undergoing this water bath (or baptism) was the way a non-Jew could become a Jew. It was not necessary for anyone born Jewish to be baptized in order to become a Jew.

And so, what John the Baptist was doing was different. He was specifically calling Jews to come forward to be baptized. Why? For the forgiveness of their sins. To have their sins washed away. To provide every person thus baptized a fresh start, a new beginning. Being baptized by John did not make a person a Jew, it made them a better Jew. When Jesus allows himself to be baptized by John it was to enter into solidarity with sinners. It was not to wash away Jesus' sins. Rather it was to bring something to the baptism of John that John's baptism needed. What you ask? The Holy Spirit. The empowering Spirit is what each of us received when we were baptized those many years ago. And that empowering Spirit has grafted us into the side of Christ, as adopted sons and daughters. We live empowered now by his own Holy Spirit.

Without the gift of Christ's Spirit we would not be able, ever, to live his way. Did you realize that? That is the question of the week.