

## The Voice Crying in the Wilderness (2)

his father in the temple before he was born or even conceived (1:13-17). Mormonism falsely claims that John was ordained by the angel when he was eight days old (*Doctrine and Covenants* 84:28), but this was the day of his circumcision and public naming (Luke 2:59-63). John was equipped and qualified through being filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (1:15), the godly instruction of Zacharias and Elisabeth in his parents' home, and prayer and meditation in the wilderness. Then John received a direct and irresistible prophetic call that he should begin his public ministry.

You see how God calls to special office in his church and kingdom? Those whom He granted the extraordinary (and temporary) offices, such as apostle, prophet or forerunner of the Messiah, received an extraordinary call. Those whom God grants the ordinary (and permanent) offices, such as pastor, elder or deacon, receive an ordinary call through the church and by the vote of the members.

John was about thirty years old when he began his public ministry (Luke 1:24-26; cf. 3:23). Before this, he lived in solitude in the deserts with the wild beasts (cf. Mark 1:13). Then he was shown or manifested to Israel (Luke 1:80).

Vast crowds came to hear that voice cry. Luke 3:7 tells us that it was a "multitude." According to Mark 1:5, "there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem." Matthew 3:5 adds that "all the region about Jordan" came to hear John preach. Among John the Baptist's Galilean disciples were Andrew, Simon, Philip and Nathanael (John 1:35-51). All sorts of people were in the crowds: tax collectors and soldiers (Luke 3:12, 14), fishermen, like Peter and Andrew, and even Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 3:7), and priests and Levites (John 1:19).

Let us picture the scene when John "came into all the country about Jordan" (Luke 3:3). This was to the north of the Dead Sea, near the River Jordan. He went from place to place, to locations he had probably seen and noted during his years of solitude in the wilderness before his public preaching (1:80). The people from Jerusalem and the nearby regions of Judaea, Perea and Galilee and from all walks of life such as soldiers and Sadducees, fishermen and Pharisees came to hear him preach. Over many days and weeks and months, vast crowds of hundreds and thousands, even a "multitude" (3:7), flocked to hear him.

How did the attendance at John the Baptist's ministry compare to the Old Testament preaching prophets from Samuel onwards? From the biblical records, it would appear that John the Baptist received a consistently larger crowd than Isaiah or Jeremiah, or Elijah or Elisha, or Hosea or Joel.

Next time, we shall consider why, in God's providence, such unprecedented large crowds came to hear John the Baptist.

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"Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness" (Luke 3:1-2). Not only do these names date the beginning of John the Baptist's public ministry, as we saw last time, but they also indicate the wickedness of the days when his voice cried in the wilderness.

Tiberius Caesar was an ungodly Roman emperor (although he was not the worst). The Roman dominion over the Jews was a judgment upon them for their sins. Pontius Pilate was the wicked Roman governor of Judaea, which included the holy city of Jerusalem. He was the one who sentenced Jesus Christ to crucifixion, for He "suffered under Pontius Pilate," according to that famous line in the *Apostles' Creed*.

Herod (Antipas) and Philip were two sons of Herod the Great, who sought to kill the baby Jesus (Matt. 2:1-20). Herod Antipas was the one who imprisoned and executed John the Baptist (Luke 3:19-20; Mark 6:14-29) and to whom Christ referred as "that fox" (Luke 13:32). Herod questioned and mocked the Lord at His trial (23:8-11). Through their rejection of Christ, "the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves" (12).

Annas and Caiaphas are called "high priests" (3:2). According to God's law, there should be only one high priest at a time, since each high priest was to be succeeded at his death. This reference to both men as high priests points to the Roman practice of selling this office and Jewish intrigues and conspiracies concerning the high priesthood. Annas occupied this office for nine years, after which he advised Caiaphas his successor and son-in-law. Calculating Caiaphas was the one who stated regarding the Lord that "it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not" (John 11:50; cf. 18:14). Annas and Caiaphas were leaders in the Jewish trial of Jesus Christ (18:13, 19-24, 28) and the trial of Peter and John (Acts 4:6).

Clearly, the days of John's preaching, the days of Christ's ministry and the days of the apostolic church were evil, judging from the leaders in church and state!

In the specific wicked days indicated in Luke 3:1-2, John began his crucially important ministry. He did not receive an ordinary call. He was not anointed as a priest, though his father, Zacharias, was a priest. Nor was he a Christian minister who was chosen by a congregation and ordained by the laying on of hands.

John received an extraordinary call. The angel Gabriel proclaimed John's call to

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## The Necessity of Baptism

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A reader asks, "If someone who was not circumcised was rejected from the covenant, is that still true today? Would it be right to say, 'Yes,' based on Hebrews 2:2-3? Another way of putting the question would be: Does Genesis 17:14 have any parallel in this dispensation?"

These are the texts: "For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him?" (Heb. 2:2-3). "And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant" (Gen. 17:14).

Although the questioner does not explicitly say this, I am assuming that he understands that baptism has taken the place of circumcision in the new dispensation (Col. 2:11-12). I am also assuming that he is aware that circumcision has no spiritual significance today. His questions, therefore, refer to baptism.

The answer to this question is indeed, "Yes." The two texts quoted are relevant and make clear that the failure of parents to baptize their children is in the new dispensation as great a sin as failure to circumcise was in Israel during the old dispensation. It is even correct to say that those who fail to have their children baptized have broken God's covenant.

There are several things that must be said about this.

In the first place, the question immediately comes up: What about Baptists? Baptists believe only in "believer's baptism." That is, only those who are old enough to make a credible profession of their faith in Christ are to be baptized.

There is no question about it that they are very wrong in their theology. This is not the forum, however, in which to debate the whole question of infant baptism. But the situation of Baptists is somewhat different from the situation presupposed by the questioner. The texts quoted have to do with Israel, and Israel was the church of the Old Testament. These people were, therefore, God's covenant people. The context is exactly that God establishes His covenant with Abraham and his seed, and gives circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant. The refusal of an Israelite to have his child circumcised was a flat-out rejection of the sign of the covenant and, therefore, of the covenant itself.

God's commands had to do, therefore, with His covenant people. The Baptists do not even have a biblical covenant doctrine. The punishment for one of God's covenant people who refused to circumcise his children was to be cut off from the covenant, from the Old Testament church and from the people of God. In fact, by refusing to circumcise their children, they were cutting themselves off from the covenant people of God.

The New Testament equivalent of this punishment for those who refuse to baptize their children is Christian discipline, ending in excommunication from the church and

thus from God's covenant people.

That such refusal was a serious matter in Israel is evident from the fact that God was ready to kill Moses for not having circumcised his two sons. The narrative is given in Scripture in Exodus 4:24-26. It seems as if Moses' wife, Zipporah, was the one who refused to have the boys circumcised. Even though she had been born and raised in a home where God was worshipped and served, she was not of the seed of Abraham and did not have directly the promises of the covenant, nor the sign of it. Nevertheless, they were both on their way to join Israel, and God insisted that they become a part of His covenant people by giving their sons the sign of His covenant. They would not be a part of God's covenant people without it.

It seems as if during the forty-years wandering in the wilderness, the people also failed to circumcise their sons. I wonder sometimes if this was not due to the fact that every person older than twenty was killed in the wilderness, except Joshua and Caleb. However that may be, the nation could not enter the promised land without all the uncircumcised males being circumcised (Josh. 5:2-9).

It must be understood that circumcision and baptism are signs and seals of the covenant that are added to the Word of God as visible proof of the truth of the gospel that God establishes His people in the line of generations. Infants who are born dead and or who die shortly after birth need not be baptized: their salvation does not depend on it, contrary to Rome's teaching. There is no magical power or even spiritual power in the water of baptism; it derives its power from being a sign and seal that accompanies the Word. The power is that of the Holy Spirit who works grace in the believer through faith in Christ.

*Prof. Hanko*

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### ***Belgic Confession 34: Holy Baptism***

... Therefore we believe that every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be but once baptized with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same, since we cannot be born twice. Neither doth this baptism avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.

Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers, who we believe ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children. And indeed Christ shed His blood no less for the washing of the children of the faithful than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of that which Christ hath done for them; as the Lord commanded in the law that they should be made partakers of the sacrament of Christ's suffering and death shortly after they were born, by offering for them a lamb, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ. Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, that baptism is to our children. And for this reason Paul calls baptism the circumcision of Christ.