

Why John's Baptism Required Baptism into Christ

by Ted Gatza

The question came up in our recent Bible class concerning John's baptism. *"If John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, why did those in Acts 19:1-7 need to be baptized again?"*

What we know about John and his work

Isaiah prophesied about one who would precede the Messiah and prepare the way for the people to receive him (Isa. 40:3). His message was one of preparation and repentance: *"Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* When John the Baptist called for repentance, he was urging moral readiness rather than the ritualism to which the people were accustomed. The fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy is reflected in Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2, and Luke 7:27.

Malachi 4:6 declares that he will *"turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers."* This indicates that the faith and devotion of the patriarchs would be restored in their descendants, and that those descendants would return to the faithful ways of their ancestors. Luke 1:16–17 shows this promise being fulfilled in John's ministry. In preparing hearts and restoring the ancestral faith, John was, in effect, making a straight highway for the Lord.

John's baptism an ordinance of God

John's baptism was an ordinance given by God. John himself testified, *"He that sent me to baptize with water..."* (John 1:33). When the people obeyed John and were baptized, they justified God through their obedience. Luke 7:29 records this, *"And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John"*. Not only did this obedience justify God, but it also demanded ethical reform. John called the people to lives marked by honesty, justice, and self-control (Luke 3:10–14).

Finally, we see that John's work resulted in the baptism of the people for the forgiveness of sins. *"John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins"* (Mark 1:4). This leads us to an important question: *If John's baptism provided the forgiveness of sins, why was it necessary to be baptized again after the new covenant was established?*

The Law of Moses provided forgiveness of sins

God provided a means for the people under the Law of Moses to receive the forgiveness of sins. The Israelites were taught that life is in the blood, that it was given to them upon the altar, and that it made atonement for their souls (Lev. 17:11). Accordingly, various laws were established to address sin and provide forgiveness.

For example, when the whole congregation sinned, a bull was to be offered, and its blood was used sacrificially for their forgiveness (Lev. 4:13–21). When a ruler sinned, the required offering was a male goat without blemish, and the blood of the animal was

instrumental in securing forgiveness (Lev. 4:22–27). Likewise, when common people sinned, they also offered a sacrifice involving the shedding of blood. In each case, forgiveness of sins was granted through obedience to God's prescribed law.

However, forgiveness under the Law was not extended to all without exception. Those who despised the word of the LORD and willfully violated His commandments were to be cut off from among the people, bearing their own iniquity (Num. 15:31). The high-minded or presumptuous sinner had no provision for forgiveness under the Law.

While the Law of Moses did provide forgiveness of sins, that forgiveness was not perpetual. It required continual and repeated blood sacrifices. This was provided through the annual Day of Atonement, during which atonement was made *"for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year"* (Lev. 16:34). If forgiveness under the Law had been permanent, such yearly repetition would not have been necessary.

How John's baptism differed from the baptism into Christ

John stood at the end of the Law and the Prophets (Luke 16:16). Forgiveness was still being offered, but the final atonement for sins had not yet occurred. John's baptism was therefore preparatory and temporary. When the people obeyed God and submitted to John's baptism, they did so with obedient hearts, and God forgave them of their sins.

Those who submitted to John's baptism understood that they were confessing their sins and repenting with a genuine change of heart. They recognized that this act was obedience to God's command in order to receive His forgiveness. By doing this, they were preparing themselves for the coming of the Messiah.

What they did not yet understand was the necessity of the Messiah's death upon the cross, His resurrection from the grave to overcome death, and His victory over Satan. They did not yet comprehend that baptism into the blood of Christ would provide forgiveness once for all.

What they understood was that God was offering forgiveness at that time, on His terms, and that to refuse John's baptism was to reject God Himself (Luke 7:29–30).

John's baptism belongs to the transitional period between the Law of Moses and the fully established gospel age. It was administered before the cross and before the New Covenant came into force. This is an essential point to remember. Jesus had not yet died (Heb. 9:16–17). The gospel had not yet been preached (1 Cor. 15:1–4). The Great Commission had not yet been given (Matt. 28:18–20).

John's baptism was temporary and conditional, designed to point forward to the perfect and perpetual forgiveness found only in Christ. As the Hebrew writer declared, *"By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."* John preached with this future reality in view, calling the people to look ahead in faith: *"John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus"* (Acts 19:4).

John's baptism was a “type and shadow”

In Scripture, a type is a God-ordained, historical reality that points forward to a greater fulfillment, called the antitype. A shadow likewise anticipates a coming reality. Paul explains that shadows lack the substance they represent: “*Which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is Christ*” (Col. 2:17). The Law of Moses is described in this way. Hebrews states, “*For the law, having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things...*” (Heb. 10:1).

John’s baptism functioned as a shadow of the baptism that would come under the new covenant. While it was from God and effective for its time, it could not accomplish what new-covenant baptism would later accomplish, because it could not bring a person into the shed blood of Christ. When we contrast John’s baptism with baptism under the new covenant, we see the relationship between shadow and substance.

John’s baptism came from God (John 1:6), required repentance, was for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4), involved immersion in water, and was temporary in nature. By contrast, baptism under the new covenant came by the authority of Christ (Matt. 28:18–20), is for the forgiveness of sins, places one into Christ, and is a permanent ordinance (Eph. 4:4–6).

Thus, John’s baptism was a true type that was real and effective in its appointed time yet it was incomplete. It served as a shadow pointing forward to the baptism under the new covenant, which brings one into full and complete standing in Christ.

In Conclusion

God has always been mindful of man’s need for the forgiveness of sins. John’s baptism was ordained by God and gave that forgiveness. Yet it was never meant to be final. It was preparatory in nature by calling men to repentance, and pointing their hearts forward to something far greater.

When Christ accomplished His saving work, John’s baptism reached its God-appointed end, and gave way to the baptism established under the new covenant. In this baptism, God’s full and final provision for the forgiveness of sins is revealed. Here, repentant believers are baptized into the death of Christ, raised to walk in newness of life and cleansed by the precious blood that He shed for them.