

Ready for revolution: Matthew 3:13-17

by [Brad R. Braxton](#) in the [January 2, 2002](#) issue

I have a friend who creatively blends his ethnic and religious heritage. He is a black man with an Afrocentric consciousness and also a committed Christian. His Afrocentric commitment does not nullify his belief in Jesus, while his Christian commitment does not abolish his ethnic awareness and pride.

I am always intrigued by the greeting on his answering machine. He ends his greeting with the affirmation, "Ready for the revolution!" Given his commitment to African people worldwide, this revolution may refer to the overthrow of tyrannical ideologies and practices that oppress black people.

And, given his commitment to Christ, this revolution also carries profound religious implications. His declaration of revolutionary readiness may be a subtle reminder that all the powers in this world, political and otherwise, must eventually answer to a divine ruler whose sovereignty is absolute. My friend's understanding of revolution is a complex mixture of the political and the religious. Similarly, the phrase "ready for the revolution" is an apt summary of the profound political and religious significance of Jesus' baptism by John. Through baptism, Jesus declares his readiness for the (political and religious) revolution represented by the kingdom of heaven.

In the synoptic Gospels, only Matthew presents this curious dialogue between Jesus and John prior to the baptism. Jesus is eager to submit to John's baptism, but John resists. Recognizing Jesus' superiority, John urges a role reversal, protesting that Jesus should baptize him. After some coaxing, John eventually relents and baptizes Jesus.

Many New Testament scholars contend that Matthew uses this dialogue to address a "messianic embarrassment" troubling some followers of Jesus. Certain persons may have asked, "Why would Jesus, a sinless messiah, submit to John's baptism, which was for the repentance of sins?"

Jesus submits not because of any need to repent of sin but rather to "fulfill all righteousness." The word "righteousness" carries numerous connotations. For many Christians, the word evokes thoughts of personal piety and the state of one's "soul"

or “conscience” before God. Yet the Christian tradition has emphasized the personal aspect of righteousness to the exclusion of another important feature.

Righteousness also signifies *God’s saving action in the world*. One might even translate the Greek word for righteousness (*dikaiosun*) as “justice.” According to Thomas Long, righteousness encapsulates God’s passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong.

Thus Jesus’ submission to John’s baptism is no simple act of personal piety. On the contrary, Jesus discerns that John’s baptism and fiery preaching constitute a revolutionary declaration about a new world order where God will set right all that the establishment (in Jerusalem and Rome) has put awry. Jesus says, “Through this baptism, I ‘take up arms’ with you, John, and join this revolution whereby God’s justice will be manifest in the world.” By submitting to John’s baptism, Jesus declares, “I am ready for the revolution!”

Other textual clues indicate the political and religious radicalism of John and Jesus. John’s baptismal activity occurs in the wilderness. In the first century c.e., the word “wilderness” held a subversive significance. In social protest movements around Judea, agitators led their followers into the wilderness. Thus, John’s choice of the wilderness and Jesus’ willingness to join him there carried a subversive symbolism, especially given the popularity of John’s movement. People joined through repentance and baptism, and declared that God’s true power would emerge on the margins of the society.

Still another indicator of the revolutionary commitment of John and Jesus is the centrality of repentance in their proclamation. Excessive, sentimental use has blunted the sharp edge of the word “repentance,” which involves more than an admission of wrong. The Greek word *metanoia* connotes a change of mind-set. To repent is to adopt a new mind-set that causes one to turn around. It is an apocalyptic act, creating a new way of envisioning and thinking about the world. Only those with new mind-sets will be fit for the new kingdom.

Furthermore, the means by which John and Jesus meet their deaths should convince even the most hardened skeptics of the revolutionary nature of their ministries. Neither dies of “old age” or “natural causes.” Bart Ehrman addresses this point:

If, for example, Jesus had simply been a great moral teacher, a gentle rabbi who did nothing more than urge his devoted followers to love God . . . he would scarcely

have been seen as a threat to the social order. . . . John the Baptist was imprisoned and executed because of his preaching. . . . Jesus was to fare no better.

The church would look different if we lived out the revolutionary implications of baptism. The next time I baptize someone, I will ask that person, “Are you really ready for this revolution? It may just cost you your life!”