

A few questions about baptism (Matthew 3:13-17)

Do we assume the authority of the heavens?

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When we baptize someone, what do we expect?

If past experience can predict the future, it is unlikely that the heavens will be rent or a voice from the heavens heard. But the more interesting question is whether we think that, as the congregation acclaims the baptized person's status as a beloved child of God, we in fact speak with the full authority of the heavens. Do we assume that authority? Not in the mode of arrogance, but in awe-full obedience to the command to name God's claim on all who are immersed in these waters?

Jesus insists that John baptize him, in order to fulfill all righteousness--a clear effort by Matthew to locate Jesus' ministry within the broad sweep of God's faithfulness to Israel. Are we equally careful to make sure that everything we say about Jesus does right by the deeply Jewish character of the Gospels, and honors the fact that God's mission in and through the church is the grafting of all people onto the foundational promise between God and Israel (Romans 9-11)?

Jesus' baptism is the inauguration of his public ministry, speaking the gospel and spreading God's healing presence in highly visible ways. Do we, too, regard baptism as an ordination of sorts, creating a call to the vocation not just of lay service but of proclamation and healing? Is every baptism in our churches also an ordination?

Jesus' baptism is followed by his temptation in the wilderness. As David Bentley Hart has pointed out, the exorcisms characteristic of the baptismal rite in the early

church (and still present in many baptismal rites today) were quite serious-- Christians understood demonic forces to be real, and understood baptism as a signal to those forces that the Christian was ready to do battle against their influence in the Christian's life and in the world. Where do we locate the demonic today? What battles do we think we are preparing baptismal candidates for when we include the renunciation of the demonic?

I commend these questions to you in the hope that they are as fruitfully disturbing to you and your church as they are to me.