

Christians who are perplexed over why Jesus was baptized, since he had no original sin to be rid of, might be relieved to know they're in good company. That's because even the people of Jesus' own time wondered about it and were embarrassed over the whole episode. They would have gotten rid of the whole incident, except that it was so strong in the tradition that they couldn't. It really happened: Jesus was baptized.

But their embarrassment went deeper, namely, Jesus the greater was baptized by John the lesser and it should have been the other way around. Matthew has John protest, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus answers that it's the way to "fulfill righteousness." John omits the actual baptism while Luke sidesteps the issue by having John the Baptist in prison before Jesus' baptism and simply states in the passive voice that Jesus was baptized, and lets it go at that.

But, beyond the controversies, John's baptism, although not what we know as the sacrament of Baptism, had a deeper meaning. **It meant conversion.** Not necessarily a conversion from sin, but rather a conversion, a "turning toward" a particular way of life. Baptism was also considered to be a **mandate**, an inauguration to a mission. It was a public event for all to see that put one on the spot, something like getting married, declaring one's love and commitment publicly to this very special person so that all the world knows the two are one.

It was something like declaring one's candidacy, not for political public office, but for the public office of Christian, a follower of Jesus. For Jesus, his baptism was not a cleansing from sin, but in its deeper sense, a public declaration of his mission. From that point on he would be defined as God's Son, God's envoy, God's prophet, God's lover. "I come to do the will of the one who sent me" was his declared motto at his baptism.

Being defined is something we know about in our modern world. We call it image-making. Corporations are defined by their logos. Michael Jordan is defined by his celebrity status as a great basketball player. Taylor Swift is defined by her videos and the dollars heaped on her just in one year.

Others get their definition from history, which looks back to acknowledge their contributions. Alexander, for example, earned the addition “the Great” because he was such an extraordinary military leader. Then we have Ivan the Terrible, Catherine the Great, William the Conqueror, Lorenzo the Magnificent, Richard the Lion-Hearted, John the Baptizer, and yes, even Hagar the Horrible. And we have Jesus who is called the Christ, a title that means “anointed one,” a title he received at the public ceremony of his image - making, his office-taking, his baptism. “This is my beloved Son,” said the voice from heaven. The ceremony and the mission were ratified.

Seeing Jesus’ baptism that way throws a lot of light on our own sacramental baptism. Our baptism defines us publicly in relationship to God and consequently to one another, who pray openly, Our Father. It defines us a child of God, as being related to God and God’s work. The baptism we have undergone enrolls us in the public office of Christian. It is good to remember that what we do unconsciously when we enter church, dipping our hand in the holy water font – a miniature baptismal font – is meant to renew our sense of baptism, a reminder that - we belong to God, not privately as in some clandestine relationship, but publicly, committedly, openly. We have a mission to make this world holy by our holy lives. We are God’s beloved sons and beloved daughters, in a most profound sense. That becomes our foundational definition and identity.

The trouble is that because of the culture and mass media atmosphere in which we live, who we are and what we are as God's children becomes easily challenged and even obscured. We are bombarded with a million other images that challenge us. "Why don't you be like this?" or "You should be like that. This is the current 'look', the current 'in' images, the current persona." "You have an inadequate if not poor image" is the motto of all advertising. "We will make you over." For a price, of course.

We are consistently told to be other than what we are, because what we are is inadequate. Our main mission is not to be holy and make the world holy; our main mission to be beautiful and to feel good about ourselves. We are nothing if we are merely ourselves, the "merely" subverting altogether any sense of being made in God's image, refashioned into the shape of Jesus, touched by the Spirit, affirmed in our identity and dignity at baptism, and loved madly by God.

“Whatever they say of me, I know I am a child of God.” That’s what baptism is all about, Jesus’ and our own. Positively, baptism is a basic, irreversible identity and dignity as God’s child with all the commitment to mission that that implies; negatively, it resists being defined otherwise by the culture, no matter how nasty or seductive that culture. And – no doubt about it – at times, like Jesus, the baptismal identity and the culture’s identity will clash and we will have a crisis, a cross. Will we hold fast to what we are under God, or jettison that for the more appealing identity of power? “Fall down and adore me and all these things will be yours” is a constant temptation.

Baptism says we are no longer defined by others. Paul puts it rightly and directly: “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God. For as many of you as were baptized, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus the Christ.”

We end where we began. Why do we make a fuss over the baptism of Jesus? Why was he baptized anyway? He was baptized as a sign of public commitment and public definition of what he was. “You are my beloved son.”

Your baptism and mine are the same. We have been defined forever as God’s sons and daughters, and no one can take that identity from us, or deface it, or make us ashamed of it. We have been given a mission at baptism: to do the works of Christ Jesus, to continue his mission. We can be no more than that; we are never any less.

Baptism makes us “beloved children” forever.