

Jesus, The Voice, And The Dove

"And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16-17; See also Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22, and John 1:32-34).

Many have used the above passage as a proof-text for the Trinity. Is this the point of the passage? In order to get a better understanding of the passage, all four gospel accounts need to be consulted and compared/contrasted. All three synoptic gospels agree that the heavens were opened. Matthew, Mark, and John agree that the Spirit of God was seen to descend upon Jesus in the form of a dove. The gospels of Matthew and Mark use "he" to refer to the person who saw the Spirit of God descending in the form of a dove, whereas John uses the personal pronoun "I" in reference to the person who saw this phenomenon. Matthew alone refers to the fact that the Spirit was lighting upon Him, and only John describes the dove as continuing to abide over Jesus as He was being baptized. John is also the only writer who gives the purpose for the appearance of the dove. All three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) speak of the voice from heaven and reiterate what was spoken that day.

Understanding the purpose for Jesus' baptism may also be helpful. There appears to be four purposes. In Jesus' own words He said the purpose was "to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus was giving us some sort of an example to follow.

Secondly, Jesus' baptism served as an official and public inauguration of His earthly ministry (John 1:26-27, 31). It was at this time that Jesus was revealed to Israel as their Messiah.

The third purpose of Jesus' baptism was that it was there where Jesus was anointed by the Father with the Holy Ghost and power for ministry. I believe this to be the most important reason of all.

The Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings were always anointed in some way to signify that they were chosen of God (Exodus 28:41; 29:7; I Kings 19:16). The oil with which they were anointed was symbolic of the Holy Ghost. Jesus, then, in like manner was to be anointed by the Holy Ghost since He came to fulfill the roles of prophet, priest, and king (Psalm 45:7-8; Isaiah 61:1). Instead of being anointed with oil that was symbolic of the Holy Ghost, Jesus was anointed by the Spirit of God Himself. The priests in particular were washed with water and anointed for the purpose of consecration to their office (Exodus 29:4, 7). This may have some bearing upon why Jesus was baptized in water. Surely He was not baptized because of sin, because He was sinless. He was baptized as a washing for His ordination as the High Priest for all mankind (See Hebrews 7).

This anointing Jesus received does not mean that He became God or the Christ at His baptism. This was merely the point at which God anointed Him for ministry. Jesus had to be anointed for His calling and ministry in the same way we are anointed for ours.¹ To demonstrate this, notice that it was not until after this anointing at Christ's baptism that He performed His first miracle (John 2:11; anointed by God in 1:32-33). Why didn't Jesus perform any miracles before this time? Why was it that God did not use Him to preach and heal until after He was over thirty years old (Luke 3:23)? It was because the time for His earthly ministry had not yet come, and therefore God's anointing and power was not with Him to do so. Unless it is the will of God to heal someone, they will not be healed. If He does not heal the sick, raise the dead, give a word of knowledge, a prophetic word, vision, or revelation, none of these things will happen. We cannot force God to do anything through us. They can only be done in accordance to divine will. God, for whatever purpose, chose not to do anything substantial (pertaining to ministry) through Jesus until He was over thirty years of age.

This does not mean that Jesus was not God before His baptism, but demonstrates that Jesus ministered as a man anointed by the Holy Ghost. It must be remembered that Jesus did not work miracles because He was God, He worked miracles as a man anointed by the Holy Ghost in the same sense as we do. It is not that God could not anoint Him to work miracles before His baptism, but that He chose not to. Jesus, just as we ourselves, could not do anything apart from God's will. Jesus plainly said that He could not do anything by Himself, but He only did that which He saw the Father

do (John 5:19-20, 30, 36). This is due to the fact that Jesus operated within the realm of any human being. (See my paper on Christology under the heading of "The Ministry of Christ as it Relates to the Kenosis).

In accordance with that thought, note that it was not until after Jesus' baptism that He stood in the synagogue at Nazareth and proclaim the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Himself saying, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the LORD" (Luke 4:18; anointed by God in 3:21-23). It was not until after Christ's anointing at His baptism that this Scripture was fulfilled. Before He was anointed at His baptism, it was still prophetic in nature, although the One who would fulfill it was alive and well in the world.

Finally, the purpose of Jesus' baptism was to reveal the identity of the Messiah to John the Baptist. John's ministry was to prepare the hearts of Israel for the LORD to visit them without consuming them in His wrath for their sins (Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1-7; 4:5-6). That is why John came preaching repentance from sin, demanding to see visible evidence stemming from this repentance. He brought the people to understand their moral obligations and the importance of having one's heart right with God (Matthew 3:1-2, 5-12; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3-14). John preached in the wilderness telling the people that although he baptized them with water to repentance, there was One coming after Him who was greater than he, and He would baptize them with the Holy Ghost (Matthew 3:11-12; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16-17; John 1:23, 26, 30-31). John's ministry was to prepare the people for, and point the way toward the Messiah. John, however, did not know who this Messiah was (John 1:30-31). He did not know that His own cousin was God manifest in the flesh, the anointed Messiah for Israel and all the earth (Luke 1:34-41; John 1:30-31).

The lack of John's knowledge as to the identity of the Messiah is the purpose for the descent of the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove. Earlier I mentioned that Matthew and Mark use the third person singular pronoun "he" in reference to the individual who saw the Spirit of the Lord descending upon Jesus in a dove-like form, but they never indicate who this

"he" was. From the text it would appear that the "he" was Jesus. In the gospel of John, John the Baptist used the first person singular "I," referring to who saw the dove, indicating that it was he who saw the Spirit of the Lord descending and abiding upon Jesus. Apparently John the Baptist was the only one who saw this phenomenon. He explained this in John 1:31-34 when he said:

And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.

It was "He that sent" John to baptize which gave Him a personal sign wherewith he could identify the Messiah for whom he prepared the way. This sign was that the Spirit of the Lord would descend and abide upon Him. God did not tell John that it would appear in the form of a dove, but that was the way it ended up happening. God had to make His Spirit visible in some way because He is invisible. If He did not appear in some type of visible form John would have had no way of seeing Him descend upon the Messiah. The appearance of the dove was only for John's sake so that He could finally know the identity of the One he had been preparing the way for. Once the Messiah was manifest to Israel, John's ministry was close to completion (John 3:30). In defense that John alone saw the dove, it can be argued that if others would have seen the dove there would have been no reason for John to relate the story to them as he did (John 1:29-36). After John saw the dove, he was able to boldly proclaim of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36)

Jesus, the dove, and the voice from heaven do not represent the Trinity as some see this Scripture. The purpose of the dove was that it symbolized the Holy Ghost. It must have been symbolic because the Holy Ghost is not a bird! The appearance of the dove was for John's sake only.

The voice is never said to be the voice of God. It is thought to be the voice of God because of the voice's reference to Jesus as "my beloved Son." Since

it is God who is said to be Jesus' Father throughout the New Testament it is concluded that this had to be God speaking here. The Scripture says that Jesus was begotten by the Holy Ghost, thereby making Him Jesus' Father, so why could the voice not have been the Holy Ghost's (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:35)? Was the Holy Ghost Jesus' Father, or was it God? Although I believe it was God who spoke, I am making this point to show the foolishness of trying to find all three members of a trinity here. This is a problem one will run into when trying to use this passage to split up the Godhead into members; however, when one understands that God is one, and that the Holy Ghost and Jesus are manifestations of this one God to man, passages like this are easily understood.

Just as the form of the dove was for the benefit of John, it seems best to understand the voice from heaven to be for the benefit of the people present at Jesus' baptism. Although this is not said to be the purpose in any of the synoptic gospels which mention the voice, the passages do not rule out this idea. In fact, the writers never gave any reason or purpose for the voice. They simply affirmed the historicity of the event to be factual. I base my hypothesis for the purpose of the voice on John 12:28-30. In this passage there was a voice that came from heaven too. Jesus said that this voice was not for Him to hear, but for the people's sake. (See also Matthew 17:5 for a third occasion upon which there was a voice from heaven. This voice is also explained to be for the benefit of those present).

In conclusion, the baptism of Christ does not indicate a plurality in the Godhead. The dove was only a representation of God's Spirit for John to see. When the Holy Ghost descended upon Jesus, John saw a symbol of God's Spirit, not a person of the Godhead. The voice from heaven does not indicate that Jesus was a separate person from God either, but demonstrates the fact that God still existed as the omnipresent Spirit in heaven even after the incarnation. Jesus was God manifest in the flesh, and as such was willingly limited by the incarnation as it pertains to where His presence could be at any given time. To claim that the voice from heaven, or the appearance of the dove indicate a plurality in the Godhead is not warranted. This passage only demonstrates the omnipresence of God, and the relationship between the Father and the Son as it pertains to the incarnation.

Footnotes

1. See Matthew 12:18; Luke 4:18; Acts 2:22; 4:27; 10:38