

I don't want bring you down, so I'm not going to tell you how I broke my New Year's resolution. Let's just say *Peanut M&Ms* may or may not have been involved and leave it at that. One resolution that I make every year and plan on keeping and hope you will too...is to laugh a little more. A teenage boy had just passed his driving test and inquired of his father as to when they could discuss his use of the car. His father said he'd make a deal with his son, “You bring your grades up from a C to a B average, study your Bible a little and get your hair cut, and then we'll talk about the car.” The boy thought about that for a moment, decided he'd accept the offer and they agreed on it.

After about six weeks his father said, “Son, you've brought your grades up and I've observed that you have been studying your Bible, but I'm disappointed you haven't had your hair cut.” The boy said, “You know, Dad, I've been thinking about that and I've noticed in studying the Bible that John the Baptist had long hair, Samson had long hair and there's even strong evidence that Jesus had long hair.” (Parents will appreciate his reply.) His dad said, “Did you also notice they all walked everywhere they went?”

Admittedly, it was no laughing matter when Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. John the Baptist and Jesus had a disagreement to begin with about who should be baptizing whom! The question that some of you may have is why Jesus needed to be baptized at all. The answer may partially be found in the background of John. John may not have been the solo act most interpreters have originally thought. He may have been out in wilderness not living alone, but rather in a community that made its home in the wilderness—intentionally away from the distracting and corrupting influences of the crowded urban areas. We don't know for sure, but it's possible John the Baptist was part of this religious party, one of the established parties in first-century Judaism, called “The Essenes.” We've always heard much more about the two major religious parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but there were others; and the Essenes were one of the others.

There were probably several branches of Essenes that existed rather independently of others. The simple fact that they lived in communal isolation from other groups virtually necessitated this lack of contact with others. Here are a few other quick facts about the Essenes.

They lived celibate lives. (That might come as a shock to the teenage driver from my earlier story!) When individuals joined the community, they gave all their property to the community and became voices in how their collective property would be used. They promised not to take oaths, and they didn't eat meat; they further rejected the ritual of animal sacrifice practiced by mainstream Judaism. Slaves or servants were not allowed within the community because they all agreed to be servants to each other. They committed to be channels of peace in the world, and they were essentially pacifists who agreed to carry weapons only to protect themselves from wild animals and robbers.

Along with the Pharisees, but unlike the Sadducees, the Essenes believed in life after death. Initiates were confirmed as members of the community through a water ritual, which we could call baptism. If all of this sounds rather Jesus-ish, there's a very good reason for the connection. In the last half century or so the world heard about the Essenes who lived at the community of Qumran where, in 1945, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. By almost all scholarly accounts, those scrolls, some dating all the way back to

300 BC, were core documents in the library of the Essenes who lived at Qumran.

Some of the fears of being in the wilderness were dramatically minimized by living in community out there. In any case, that was John's place of ministry, and people from the safe cities were risking their lives to get out to the wilderness to hear John's sermons, which would have called hearers to a way of life based on the Essenes' understanding of Judaism. John would have called his sermon listeners to lives of *righteousness*, and to seal this commitment to *righteousness* he asked them to be baptized, as the Essenes were baptized. I think that some of the people who went out to hear John in the wilderness sought membership in the Essene community and may have stayed.

John the Baptist and Jesus were cousins. John was a little older than Jesus, and John had committed himself to a prophetic calling long before Jesus did. The relationship between the two was likely very strong, even though they didn't live very close to one another.

Even though we can't know for sure if John was part of the Essene community many of the practices of the Essene community can be seen in Jesus' core teachings. Something else we can now bring into the picture is that Jesus' spiritually exhausting 40 days in the wilderness (the next thing on his agenda) where his own vision for ministry became painfully clear, could have taken place out in the wilderness in the vicinity of the Essene community.

The principle earthly figure to whom the Essenes looked for guidance and hope was someone they called the "Teacher of Righteousness." The French scholar, the late Andre Dupont-Sommer, believed that Jesus self-identified as this teacher of righteousness, a very logical outgrowth, he believed, of the suffering servant figure who appears late in the book of Isaiah (53-55): "*Surely, he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.*" This alone would have kept Jesus from having anything to do with any militaristic messianic expectations.

It's a fascinating theory. In our passage from Matthew today, what does Jesus say when John the Baptist hesitates to baptize him? Jesus says he should be baptized by John, "*to fulfill all righteousness.*" On that basis, John consents to administer or preside over the baptism of Jesus. God, then, in the first Gospel is entirely pleased with Jesus and his reason for having been baptized. God's voice of *acceptance and approval* of Jesus is addressed to all who are at the Jordan on the day Jesus comes to be baptized: "*This is my Son, whom I love.*" Mark and Luke make it personal to Jesus: "*You are my Son, whom I love.*" Linguistically, it's not entirely accurate to refer to Jesus as God's *only* son. The word from John 3:16 (*monogene*) translated "only begotten," in view of the language of the rest of the fourth Gospel, means Jesus is God's unique, one-of-a-kind son, or only-son-given, not God's *only* son. We are *all* children of God. But like Jesus, we must all be accepted and approved by God.

Jesus' baptism didn't make him a sinner or a saint. It didn't prove he needed to repent, and it didn't guarantee that in the flesh he was beyond the lure of sin and self-interest. It did indicate that Jesus came into the world to take upon himself the common sin of humanity. Baptism is an affirmation, a celebration and a potentially risky calling, based on what has happened or will happen on the inside of us—something we call faith. As St. Augustine said, baptism is "*a visible sign of an invisible grace.*" In our tradition the sacrament of baptism is always a public act because it is something God shares with the community of

faith, just like the crowd who witnessed Jesus' baptism on the banks of the Jordan that day. Parents present their children by faith; believers present themselves by their own faith. And this public act identifies a child or an adult with a specific Spirit and presumably with Christianity's founder. When we are baptized God says, "*This is my child, whom I love; with him/her I am well pleased.*"

If I had the opportunity to ask Professor Dupont-Sommer a question about his theory that Jesus is the Teacher of Righteousness to whom the Essenes looked for guidance, it would be this: If Jesus did so closely identify with the Essenes, why did he not buy into their separatist way of life? Why didn't Jesus stay out in the wilderness to conduct his ministry? For John the Baptist, *righteousness* meant separation from the evils of mainstream society, but for Jesus *righteousness* meant returning to the nitty-gritty of life. Even when his life was at risk, Jesus kept going back into the thick of things because for him *righteousness* had more to do with engaging those who were against the Kingdom of heaven and less to do with avoidance. John stayed in the wilderness, for the most part, and those who wanted to hear him had to go out to where he was. Jesus, clearly breaking that pattern, went directly to those in the greatest need, who were victims of injustice, as well as to those who were hungering and thirsting after (you guessed it) *righteousness*.

Baptized by John, Jesus received the Spirit and was declared by God to be his Son. Even though John is reluctant to baptize, Jesus insists that "*it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness*" and identify with all who need repentance.

If Jesus was sinless why would he want John's baptism of repentance?

Simple: For us. Not to become party to our sin, but to absorb our sin into his own personal love. He sought out John to receive the baptism of repentance to repent WITH a sinful humanity, and to redeem a sinful humanity BY God's grace.

This narrative from Matthew 3 shows us that Jesus was both *accepted and approved* by the Father who sent him, so that mercifully God's *acceptance and approval* can be given to all who are baptized—today. Amen.