

7.19

Mark 1:4—Purpose of John’s Baptism (Church Tradition)

The Gospels of Mark and Luke both say that John the Baptist proclaimed a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Notably, the author of Matthew’s Gospel rewords this, to indicate only that people confessed their sins when John baptized them.

Mark 1:4	Luke 3:2–3	Matthew 3:1, 5–6
“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”	“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”	“In those days John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ . . . Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

Perhaps the author of Matthew was uncomfortable with attributing to John’s baptism something that he believed only Christian baptism as authorized by Jesus could accomplish.

All three Synoptic Gospels also indicate that he baptizes people with water while the one who is coming after him will baptize people with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8) or, indeed, with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16).

One story in the book of Acts also attempts to distinguish between the effects of these different baptisms:

Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” (Acts 19:1–4)

Some writers in the first few centuries of church history also tried to sort this matter out. Here are the views of two prominent leaders in the Eastern Church, both of whom served (successively) as Archbishop of Constantinople.

Gregory Nazianzen (ca. 329–390):

Let us here treat briefly of the different kinds of baptism.

Moses baptized, but in water, in the cloud and in the sea; but this he did figuratively. [see 1 Cor. 10:1–2]

John also baptized, not indeed in the rite of the Jews, not solely in water, but also for the remission of sins; yet not in an entirely spiritual manner, for he had not added: “in the spirit.”

Jesus baptized, but in the Spirit; and this is perfection.

There is also a fourth baptism, which is wrought by martyrdom and blood, in which Christ himself was also baptized, which is far

more venerable than the others, in as much as it is not soiled by repeated contagion. [see Mark 10:38–39; Luke 12:50]

There is yet a fifth, but more laborious, by tears; with which David each night bedewed his bed, washing his couch with tears [see Ps. 6:6].

*Oration 39*¹

John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407):

Since the Victim [Jesus] had not been offered, nor had the Holy Spirit yet descended, of what kind was this remission of sins? . . . When he said that he came “preaching the baptism of repentance,” he adds, “for the remission of sins”; as if to say: he persuaded them to repent of their sins, so that later they might more easily receive pardon through believing in Christ. For unless brought to it by repentance, they would not seek for pardon. His baptism therefore served no other end than as a preparation for belief in Christ.

The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 10.2²

1. M. F. Toal, trans. and ed., *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: A Manual of Preaching, Spiritual Reading, and Meditation*, 4 vols. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958) 1:74–75.

2. Toal, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, 1:74–75.