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True Baptism

1. In Matthew 3:13–15, it is said: “Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad Him, saying, I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered Him.”
2. Question: Given His innate perfection, what need did Christ have of baptism and what was the wisdom thereof?
3. Answer: The essence of baptism is purification by repentance. John admonished and exhorted the people, caused them to repent, and then baptized them. It is evident then that this purification is a symbol of repentance from all sin, as though one were saying: “O God! Just as my body has been cleansed and purified from material defilements, so cleanse and purify my spirit from the defilements of the world of nature, which are unworthy of Thy divine threshold.” Repentance is the return from rebelliousness to obedience. It is after experiencing remoteness and deprivation from God that man repents and purifies himself. Thus, this purification is a symbol saying: “O God! Render my heart goodly and pure, and cleanse and sanctify it from all save Thy love.”
4. As Christ desired that this custom instituted by John be practised by all at that time, He Himself submitted to it, that souls might be awakened and that the law which had issued from the former religion might be fulfilled. For even though this custom was instituted by John, it represented in reality the purification of repentance which has been practised in all the divine religions.

5. It is not that Christ was in need of baptism, but He submitted to it because at that time this action was praiseworthy and acceptable before God and presaged the glad-tidings of the Kingdom. However, He later said that true baptism was not with material water but with spirit and with water, and, elsewhere, with spirit and with fire. What is meant here by “water” is not material water, for elsewhere it is explicitly stated that baptism must be with spirit and with fire, and the latter makes it clear that the intention is not material fire and water, since baptism with fire is impossible.
6. Therefore, by “spirit” is meant divine grace; by “water”, knowledge and life; and by “fire”, the love of God. For material water cleanses not the heart of man but his body. Rather, the heavenly water and spirit, which are knowledge and life, cleanse and purify the heart of man. In other words, the heart that partakes of the outpouring grace of the Holy Spirit and becomes sanctified is made goodly and pure. The purpose is that the reality of man be purified and sanctified from the defilements of the world of nature, which are vile attributes such as anger, lust, worldliness, pride, dishonesty, hypocrisy, deceit, self-love, and so on.
7. Man cannot free himself from the onslaught of vain and selfish desires save through the confirming grace of the Holy Spirit. That is why it is said that baptism must be with the spirit, with water, and with fire—that is, with the spirit of divine grace, the water of knowledge and life, and the fire of the love of God. It is with this spirit, this water, and this fire that man must be baptized, that he may partake of everlasting grace. For otherwise, of what avail is it to be baptized with material water? No, this baptism with water was a symbol of repentance and of seeking remission of sins.
8. But in the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh this symbol is no longer required, for its reality, which is to be baptized with the spirit and the love of God, has been established and realized.