

The voice from heaven reveals Jesus' identity to Jesus alone, as Mark tells the story. Jesus and the reader of the gospel know who he is, but his identity remains a secret to his contemporaries until the end of the story.

Jesus identity is revealed, as is our identity, in baptism: *You are my son/daughter, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.* The way from the revelation of this truth to the realization of it is the way of discipleship.

From the beginning of Mark's gospel, *the way* is a key theological term. The Greek word *hodos* is variously translated as "way," "path," "road," "journey." Mark (1:2) substitutes a verb not found in the quote from Isaiah: he speaks of the *construction* of a way. This way, the way Jesus, the way of those who follow Jesus, is constructed with the pick and shovel of self-denial.

John's baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The fact that Jesus' baptism by John becomes an embarrassment for the early church is evident in the other gospels. Matthew reports that John protests when Jesus enters the river to be baptized. Jesus reassures John saying, *This is a way of fulfilling all righteousness.* Jesus submits to John's baptism as a way of identifying with the people of Israel.

Luke, ever more clever, has John in prison when Jesus is baptized. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is never baptized. Mark shows no awareness of a problem with Jesus submitting to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins or, doesn't believe it is a problem.

However you wish to understand this question, I think it is important to remember that all the people of Judea and Jerusalem who are coming to John for baptism are not pagans, not secular humanists, not criminals; they are religious folk, people who go to worship weekly, who pay their tithes, who feed the hungry. No one, however pious, is above the need for repentance and forgiveness of sins.

Self-denial does not come naturally to us; it is not a natural development of what we already know and do. Revelation—the voice from heaven—is that permanent revolution in our religious life by which all religious truths are painfully transformed and all religious behavior transfigured by repentance and new faith.

It is revolutionary since it makes a new beginning and puts an end to the old development; it is permanent revolution since it can never come to end in time in such a way that an irrefutable knowledge about God becomes the possession of an individual or a group. (H. Richard Niebuhr)

The Greek word for "repent" means a change of mind, or in the psychology of the first century, a change of heart. If we follow in the way of Jesus, our minds and hearts are transformed from serving our desires and wills to serving the will of God.

Another version of Acts 19:1 reads, *Although Paul of his own counsel wanted to go to Jerusalem, the Spirit told him to cross over into Asia. Passing through the upper country he came to Ephesus.* Paul's personal preferences are not what matters most. His will, his desire to go to Jerusalem, is subject to the whole will of God

The way of discipleship is constructed by having our wills governed by God's will. Since we struggle with self-denial—it is hard to think of a more counter-cultural way of life—continuous repentance for the forgiveness of sins is the only way to remain on the way.

Baptism does not make us safe, does not spare us from suffering, does not insure prosperity. Baptism initiates us into a way of life that pushes us further out from the certainties and habits of our culture.

Sarah Miles describes the consequences of her baptism this way: *It took me away from my family and launched me on this mad and frustrating mission to feed multitudes.* Sara is the Founder and Director of The Food Pantry, and serves as Director of Ministry at St. Gregory of Nysa Episcopal Church in San Francisco.

*It (baptism) had eroded my identity as an objective journalist and given me an unsettling glimpse of how very little I knew. I was no less flawed or frightened or capable of being hurt than I'd been before, and now, in addition, I was adrift in this water, yoked together with all kinds of other Christians, many of whom I didn't like or trust.*

*Baptism, if it signified anything, signified the unavoidable reality of the cross at the heart of Christian faith. It wasn't a magic charm but a reminder of God's presence in the midst of unresolved human pain.*

The way from the revelation of our identity as beloved children of God to the realization of God's delight in us, runs through the crossroads of repentance and forgiveness of sins.