

L.S. Chafer and the Baptism of John:

A Lesson of Theological Method

By Pastor Mark R. Perkins, for the 2007 Chafer Theological Seminary Pastor's Conference

A Word to the Wise:

There is a danger in reading the theologies of our favorite authors in that we tend to accept their opinions as gospel without feeling a need to do a biblical double check on the jots and tittles of their work. It is the intent of this paper to demonstrate this by examining a few statements of the spiritual father of the seminary, Lewis Sperry Chafer himself, and at the same time achieving the noble goal of showing the superiority of the methods taught at his namesake seminary toward a refined biblicality of thought and action. The refined methods help prevent the transmission of error from one generation of theologians to the next, giving a better foundation for new men who take up the mission of grounding believers in biblical orthodoxy. The author does not intend to demonstrate a general laxity or tendency toward error on the part of L.S. Chafer. Far from it! But if an examination of a great man's error leads to an affirmation of belief in sound method, then a great purpose is served.

A History of Variety:

The doctrine of water baptism refracts a rainbow of theological positions and then some. Its colors paint broad swaths of the fields of soteriology, ecclesiology, and pneumatology, and touch other branches of theology as well. The result in many cases is a debilitating confusion that institutionalizes error and ritualizes falsehood. Additionally, dispensational theologians and doctrinal churches are not immune to variety when it comes to water baptism. Among the areas of division over water baptism are:

- Form: a division over immersion, sprinkling, dipping, pouring, and however else the person might be applied to the water or vice-versa;
- Continuation vs. Non-Continuation: a debate concerning the continuation of the ritual into the church age;
- Verbal formula: a debate on what words, if any, should accompany the ritual;
- Efficacious vs. Symbolic: a dispute over what the ritual accomplishes in the life of the believer, including salvation and the inauguration of the ministry of the Spirit;
- Dispensational distinctions: a comparison of John's baptism and believer's water baptism.
- There are certainly other disputes.

A Muddled Picture

Lewis Sperry Chafer described John's baptism in several significant passages. Below are excerpts from them, and I have underlined the statements in particular I wish to critique:

"The mission of John the Baptist was twofold: He was to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:17), and to manifest the Messiah. Of the latter he

said: “But that he [Christ] should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water” (John 1:31). John identified the Messiah by pointing to Him as the “Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, R.V.), and by inducting Him into His public ministry by baptism.”¹

“In accordance with kingdom requirements, the forerunner’s message was one of human works, a return on the part of a covenant people to right living before God. The student should read Luke 3:1–18 with attention, for it is the substance of John’s message and vindicates the assertion that John’s message was not a call to faith in a crucified Savior, but rather to a correction of daily life on the part of those who should be thus prepared for their King.”²

“Malachi also announced as the word of Jehovah, “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me.” This is followed by the anticipated message of John, the character of which is fully in accord with the recorded preaching of John—a comparison which should not be overlooked—for it relates John’s ministry, in the main, to the merit system of Moses and not in any way to the grace system which came into effect through the death and resurrection of Christ.”³

“As before indicated, great importance belongs to the coming and ministry of John the Baptist. His was a message and ministry in preparation for Messiah. With the rejection of the King and the postponement of His kingdom, John’s ministry failed, though one like it will yet be resumed before the second advent.”⁴

What we can gather from these quotes is that Lewis Sperry Chafer believed that John the Baptist was not an evangelist, but instead through baptism he called his people the Jews to a reformation of behavior in conformance with the Mosaic Law. Only by this would they be prepared for their Messiah. In his statements about John’s ministry there is mention of Malachi, Luke 1:17, John 1:29 & 31, and Luke 3:1-18. Although there are many more passages on John and his baptism (see Appendix B), these are the ones that Chafer employs in support of his thesis on the baptist. We need to examine whether John mentions the Law of Moses, directly or indirectly, and if not, what he declares instead. Perhaps now will be a good time to take a brief look at hermeneutical methodology.

Hermeneutical Methodology

¹Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Originally Published: Dallas, Tex. : Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 3:27.

²Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Originally Published: Dallas, Tex. : Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 4:294.

³Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Originally Published: Dallas, Tex. : Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 5:57.

⁴Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Originally Published: Dallas, Tex. : Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 4:391-392.

Regarding Grammatical Exegesis:

To exegete is to draw out. The biblical interpreter attempts to draw out from the Bible God's original meaning in the text, in the original languages of its writing. This requires intimate knowledge of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek of Scripture, so that the exegete comes to a thorough understanding of the intended meaning of what he studies. There are several excellent articles in the *Chafer Journal* in this field, including Chester Macalley's *Biblical Exegesis And Exposition* in volume 6, and Tim Nichols' *Reverse-Engineered Outlining: A Method For Epistolary Exegesis* in volume 7.

Regarding Biblical Theology:

*"A second way in which the term biblical theology is used is for that methodology that takes its material in an historically oriented manner from the Old and New Testaments and arrives at a theology. It is exegetical in nature, drawing its material from the Bible as opposed to a philosophical understanding of theology; it stresses the historical circumstances in which doctrines were propounded; it examines the theology within a given period of history (as in Noahic or Abrahamic eras) or of an individual writer (as Pauline or Johannine writings)."*⁵

"Technically, biblical theology has a much sharper focus than that. It deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God in the Bible. Four characteristics emerge from this definition.

(1) The results of the study of biblical theology must be presented in a systematic form. In this it is like other areas of biblical and theological studies. The system or scheme in which biblical theology is presented will not necessarily employ the same categories systematic theology uses. It does not have to use them, nor does it have to avoid them.

(2) Biblical theology pays attention to the soil of history in which God's revelation came. It investigates the lives of the writers of the Bible, the circumstances that compelled them to write, and the historic situation of the recipients of their writings.

(3) Biblical theology studies revelation in the progressive sequence in which it was given. It recognizes that revelation was not completed in a single act on God's part but unfolded in a series of successive stages using a variety of people. The Bible is a record of the progress of revelation, and biblical theology focuses on that. By contrast, systematic theology views revelation as a completed whole.

*(4) Biblical theology finds its source material in the Bible. Actually orthodox systematic theologies do too. This is not to say that biblical or systematic theologies could not or do not draw material from other sources, but the theology or doctrine itself does not come from anywhere but the Bible."*⁶

⁵Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997, c1989), 20.

⁶Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology : A Popular Systemic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1999), 14.

Regarding Systematic Theology:

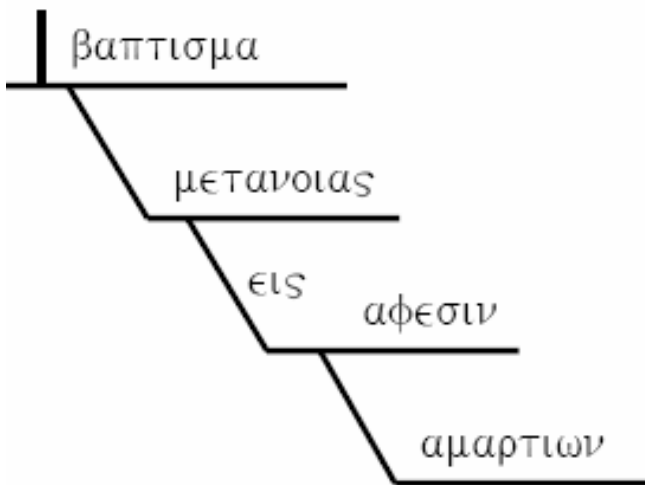
“Systematic Theology may be defined as the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works. It is *thetic* in that it follows a humanly devised thesis form and presents and verifies truth as *truth*.”⁷

“Systematic theology correlates the data of biblical revelation as a whole in order to exhibit systematically the total picture of God’s self-revelation.”⁸

“Erickson suggests five ingredients in a definition of theology. (1) Theology is *biblical*, utilizing the tools and methods of biblical research (as well as employing insights from other areas of truth). (2) Theology is *systematic*, drawing on the entirety of Scripture and relating the various portions to each other. (3) Theology is *relevant* to culture and learning, drawing from cosmology, psychology, and philosophy of history. (4) Theology must be *contemporary*, relating God’s truth to the questions and challenges of today. (5) Theology must be *practical*, not merely declaring objective doctrine, but relating to life itself.”⁹

A Brief Foray into Chafer’s Key Passage

When Lewis Sperry Chafer summarized his views on John the Baptist, he favored Luke 3:1-18. Part of Luke’s opening statement appears to make a good summary statement of Chafer’s position, Luke 3:3, “And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins...”¹⁰ The diagram of the latter part looks like this:



⁷Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Originally Published: Dallas, Tex. : Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 1:6.

⁸Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology : A Popular Systemic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1999), 15.

⁹Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997, c1989), 147.

¹⁰ All Bible Reference are from the New King James Version, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982)

The first significant matter here is that according to Luke, John came not baptizing, but preaching. He preached about baptism, and no doubt he baptized. But Luke's focus is that John preaches about his baptism, giving meaning to the ritual he administers. John preaches that his baptism is of repentance, giving it a category. It is the repentance kind of baptism. When he baptizes with water, immersing his baptizee, the individual understands that this is really about repentance. There is an outward ritual, but the symbol of the ritual is repentance. Much has been made of the semantic range of *metanoia*. Does it mean only to change one's mind, or must it include a change in behavior? May it even mean belief without any expectation of a changed life? The BAGD lists its range of meaning for *metanoia*: "*a change of mind; remorse; repentance, turning about, conversion.*"¹¹ It also comments: "Mostly of the positive side of repentance, as the beginning of a new relationship with God."¹² In this context John indicates that what happens in the mind results in *aphesin*, the pardon or cancellation of the guilt of sin.¹³

The repentance results in forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness is a doctrine found in both Testaments, and covers a multitude of scenarios, from salvation to individual sin and even to national sin. To find other descriptions of forgiveness, one may go to Ephesians 1:7, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace..." And one may go backward as far as Genesis 50:17, "'Thus you shall say to Joseph: 'I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.' ' Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.'" And Joseph wept when they spoke to him." But to do our biblical theology properly we should investigate Luke's Gospel first. There we find a key statement, in Zacharias' prophecy regarding the ministry of his son John the Baptist:

Luke 1:76-79, 76 "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, 77 To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, 78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace."

Zacharias saw clearly that his son would serve the people of Israel as an evangelist and teacher of doctrine leading to peace. The salvation Zacharias mentions may include deliverance from enemies (vv.74-75), but must first receive the forgiveness of sins through Messiah. Though evangelism is not the sole ministry of John the Baptist, it is nonetheless an essential one, and as we as Christian leaders know only too well, it is first in priority.

To further strengthen Luke's theology of forgiveness, we can look at Luke 5:18-26, where he identifies Christ with the forgiveness of sins. The climax of the passage is verse 24, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the

¹¹William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, c1979), 512.

¹²Ibid.

¹³BAGD, 125.

man who was paralyzed, “I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” Luke 7:48-50 does much the same, but also brings in the concept of saving faith:

“Then He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” 49 And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” 50 Then He said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” And finally, Luke’s version of Christ’s great commission (given on a different occasion than that of Matthew 28) adds great strength to the idea that John is an evangelist, Luke 24:46-47, “46 Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

Yet the most convincing statement comes from the continuation of Luke 3:3, Luke 3:4-6:

“4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; 6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” Isaiah directs our attention to the Savior Himself.”

If we now turn back to the statement “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” we find encouraging evidence that this is none other than the great gospel of salvation. But what of the good works we find in the rest of Luke 3, which L.S. Chafer points to as evidence of the “works” ministry of John, the return to Moses? Next we must undertake to perceive John’s warning to his audience. In verse seven he calls them a “brood of vipers.” Although there have been a number of suggestions for the source and meaning of this description, I believe the very best match is Isaiah 59:1-8:

“1 Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear. 2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear. 3 For your hands are defiled with blood, And your fingers with iniquity; Your lips have spoken lies, Your tongue has muttered perversity. 4 No one calls for justice, Nor does any plead for truth. They trust in empty words and speak lies; They conceive evil and bring forth iniquity. 5 They hatch vipers’ eggs and weave the spider’s web; He who eats of their eggs dies, And from that which is crushed a viper breaks out. 6 Their webs will not become garments, Nor will they cover themselves with their works; Their works are works of iniquity, And the act of violence is in their hands. 7 Their feet run to evil, And they make haste to shed innocent blood; Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; Wasting and destruction are in their paths. 8 The way of peace they have not known, And there is no justice in their ways; They have made themselves crooked paths; Whoever takes that way shall not know peace.”

The passage refers to the separation from God which occurs on account of sin. With reference to the vipers, note especially verse five, which makes the connection to Jesus' description. The hatching of a viper's egg is meant as the illustration for the conception of evil and the birth of iniquity. Not only are these sinners, but they are willful deceivers, bringing forth new generations of degenerates. Although John is not quoting directly, he is making an allusion to the passage, and the essence of the passage is separation from God on account of sin. By calling all those who come to him a brood of vipers, he is making them realize their separation from God and need for a Savior, and all the more so by indicating the depth of their depravity. They are like the viper's eggs, poisoning all those who would "eat" their deception. John calls this brood of vipers to repentance, to faith in Jesus Christ resulting in the forgiveness of sins.

Back in Luke 3:8, John commands these to bear fruits worthy of repentance. The important detail to note here is that the fruits are not the repentance itself, but fruits worthy of repentance. He does truly call them to works, but not as a direct part of the previously mentioned repentance.

Confirmation Through the Broader Text

The thesis is this: that John's ministry of preparation of Israel for her Messiah focused on evangelism and spiritual growth, through grace. Next we will examine a few other passages to see if they confirm this. We will begin with the positive statements.

According to Matthew, the reason for the call to repentance is the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 3:1-3, "1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!' 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.'" The former tax-collector goes on to identify John as the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3-5.

John 1:7 indicates that John's ministry was Christ-centered and had the intended result of belief in Christ. "This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe."

John 1:29-31 provides some essential truths about the baptist, "29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.' 31 I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.'" First, John pointed to Jesus as God's sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world, second he understood Jesus as superior in rank because of His deity, and third, his baptizing was meant to reveal Jesus to Israel.

A look at Acts 19:4 leads to an interesting conclusion, that John told people to believe in Christ at the same time that he baptized them, "Then Paul said, 'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.'" The present tense adverbial participle *legon* modifies the baptizing action of John, indicating the teaching that came from John occurred at the same time as his baptizing. He baptized and taught belief in Jesus Christ all at the same time.

Mark 1:4 confirms this simultaneous idea: "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." Both baptizing and preaching are present adverbial participles in the Greek.

Matthew 3:5-6 records at least one of the responses to John's baptism, "5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him 6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins." People confessed their sins as they were baptized. Just what those sins were, Matthew does not say. Even as John baptized while preaching belief in Christ, so the people were baptized while confessing their sins. This does not in any way equate confession of sin with belief in Christ, but nonetheless it was the simultaneous response of the people there.

On the negative side, there is not a single statement in the Scriptural corpus on John with direct reference to the Law of Moses. There are allusions to some elements of the Mosaic Law, like Jesus as the Lamb of God, or the practical aspects of the fruit of repentance given in Luke 3, but nothing at all which directly says, "Get your life back in line with the Law of Moses."

Conclusion: Systematizing the Baptist

John's baptism was for Israel and dispensationally distinct as a ministry of that age. John employed baptism as a symbolic device for identification of sinners with the only Savior, Jesus Christ. He identified Christ as the Messiah of Israel, almighty God, and the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. It was his practice to preach the Gospel of Christ and at the same time to baptize. His preaching on changes of behavior is limited to post-salvation life rectification. In other words, with some small qualifications, his ministry and mission was not at all that far from that of the modern preacher. The one ready for the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is the one who has believed in Him and continue in the second phase of spiritual growth.

Appendices

Appendix A: Major Teachings on John the Baptist In L.S. Chafer's Systematic Theology

Note: The index of Chafer's Systematic Theology lists the following for John the Baptist:

John the Baptist: 5.56-5.59
forerunner of Messiah: 5.57-5.59
ministry: 3.27
prophesied: 5.57
Nazarite: 5.57
priest: 5.59
prophet: 4.290-4.294, 4.391-4.392; 5.57-5.59
supernatural birth: 5.57¹⁴

Appendix B: The Scriptural Record of John the Baptist's Life and Ministry

Note: Some repetitions in the synoptic Gospels have been omitted.

Isaiah 40:3-5.
Malachi 3:1.
Matthew 3:1-17; 9:14-17; 11:1-19; 14:1-13; 16:13-14; 17:9-13; 21:23-32.
Mark 1:1-11; 6:14-29; 8:27-28; 9:11-13; 11:27-33.
Luke-Acts: Luke 1:1-80; 3:1-22; 9:7-9; 16:16; Acts 1:4-5; 10:36-38; 13:23-25; 18:25-19:5.
John 1:6-8, 15, 19-37; 3:23-36; 5:31-36; 10:40-42.

Appendix C: What I Have Left Untaught

I left out the rest of the Bible, of course. But I thought I would comment on the significant exclusions that were made for the sake of brevity.

I did not cover the symbolic nature of water baptism as an identification ritual. There is a very important vein of that in John's baptism of Christ. If Jesus did not need to repent, then why did John baptize Him? It is naturally because Jesus was the point of identification. Essentially, all the other people that John baptized "met" Jesus in the water, so that they connected their repentance, their forgiveness, and the Lamb of God who would take away their sins. Even as the priest laid one hand each on the animal and on the sinner to symbolize the imputation of that person's sin to the animal, so also both Christ and sinners were baptized into water.

I did not comment on the connection between the Great Commission given in Matthew 28:18-20 and the baptism of John. Dispensationalists typically shy away from this because John is of Israel, and the Great Commission is for the church, and because the incidents of Acts 18:25-28 and Acts 19:1-5 seem to indicate that John's baptism was somewhat inadequate with reference to further revelation that came with Christ and the New Testament. The exegesis alone for the one Great Commission passage takes up many pages.

Furthermore, no reference has been made toward the practice of water baptism as revealed in Acts, or the doctrinal statements regarding baptisms made in the epistles. They all

¹⁴Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Originally Published: Dallas, Tex. : Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 7:133-134.

come together to form a fascinating history and doctrine that is edifying indeed. What is the essence of water baptism for the church? How do current practices conform to the original intent? We can be certain that the answers are in the text!

Finally, I am currently suspicious that L.S. Chafer has transmitted his opinion about John's baptism from the generation of dispensational theologians before him. I was unable to substantiate this at the submission deadline, but I am still trying...