

The Witness of John the Baptist

John 1:19-28

A remarkable religious phenomenon broke out in the United States in the year 1949. It started in a tent near the Hollywood area of Los Angeles—a revival meeting under the preaching of a young evangelist from North Carolina. The crowds were a little sparse in that tent at first, but as the preaching went on day after day they began to grow. At first, as often happens with gatherings of that sort, the press totally ignored them. But when some of the well-known names of Hollywood came to the meetings and were converted, the media began to take an interest in what was happening. Reporters were sent to investigate and to interview this rather strange young preacher, who dressed in pistachio-colored suits, wore flaming red ties, spoke with a pronounced Southern accent, and yet had incredible appeal to the masses. It was evident that God was doing something there. The revival meeting was extended from the scheduled three weeks to eight weeks. The tent was expanded to more than 9000 seats. Some 11,000 people attended the final meeting overflowing onto the sidewalks and streets. Perhaps 300,000 people heard the gospel during those meetings and over 6000 were converted. That was the beginning of the Billy Graham crusades.

Even more significant than the religious sensation of Billy the Baptist in 1949, was the ministry of John the Baptist in the first century. He, too, was a young man, in his early '30's, six months older than Jesus. He, too, dressed rather strangely, even for that day. He did not wear green suits; he wore camel's hair, and ate a strange diet of locusts and wild honey. This young man had a very powerful message, which seemed to have great attraction to the common people. At first they came out by dozens, then by scores, and finally hundreds and thousands came from the cities of Judah and Galilee to hear this remarkable preacher out in the wilderness. Finally the response was so tremendous and this man became so popular, that even the religious establishment of Jerusalem had to take note. They sent a delegation to investigate this remarkable preacher. (Ray Stedman, [Call the First Witness](#))

Listen to the apostle John's account in John 1:19-28,

19 Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

22 Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

23 He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord," ' as the prophet Isaiah said."

24 Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees.

25 And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

26 John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.

27 It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

28 These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

In our journey through the Gospel of John so far we have spent the last few weeks studying the prologue, John 1:1-18. At this point, we leave the prologue and begin a long section (1:19-12:54) that amasses testimony for Jesus as the Son of God, the one in whom all should believe. The Gospel of John is almost like a courtroom drama. The apostle John has made his opening statement in verses 1-18. He has declared the truth that he will prove in court. Now he calls his first witness to the stand, John the Baptist.

Back in 1:6-8, we first met John. There we saw three aspects of the Baptist's witness: (1) he was not the Light; (2) he was sent to bear witness to the Light; (3) his aim was that all might believe through him. Those three points outline the rest of chapter 1 beginning in verse 19. In 1:19-28, John testifies that he is not the Light, not the Christ; in 1:29-34, he bears witness to the Light; and, in 1:35-51, we see John's witness bear fruit as several of his disciples believe in Jesus and begin to follow Him.

Today's message will focus on the first of those three; that John was not the Light. And what we learn from John's witness is that it is all about Christ, not about us.

1. John's Confession (19-21): He testified about who he was not.

Messianic expectations were running high in Israel as people longed for deliverance from Roman rule. In fact Luke, who tells us the most about John and his ministry, says in Luke 3:15, **"Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not,"**

So when the religious leaders in Jerusalem heard about John's popularity, they decided that they had better check him out. Verse 19 says, **Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"**

"The Jews" who send the delegation to investigate John the Baptist and his ministry are the religious elite of that day, those in authority in Jerusalem. John must have been a puzzling man to them. He was of priestly descent but rather than rubbing shoulders with the other priests in Jerusalem, he was living and preaching out in the wilderness. His preaching called for repentance to prepare for the coming of the Lord. His message resonated with many common people, but it wasn't friendly toward the religious establishment. Verse 24 tells us that

these priests and Levites were Pharisees. Luke tells us that the Pharisees and scribes **"rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him (John),"** (Luke 7:30).

Matthew 3:7 informs us what John said to the Pharisees, **"But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'"**

So this is not a friendly delegation that comes to interrogate John. Their question to John is, **"Who are you?"** They do not ask directly, "Are you the Messiah?" But John knows this is the essence of their question. Thus he answers, **"I am not the Christ"** (verse 20). In fact the apostle John piles up phrases to indicate that the Baptist vigorously denied that he was the Christ (1:20): **"He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'"** The Baptist's strong reply left no room for misunderstanding.

This prompts a sequence of follow-up questions. Verse 21, **"And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?'"** Why Elijah? Really, it was not a bad guess. John looked like the description of Elijah, both in his rugged wilderness lifestyle and in his fiery message of judgment (1 Kings 17:4-6; 2 Kings 1:8-10).

Malachi, the last O.T. prophet, prophesied about 400 years before Christ, **"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse,"** (Mal. 4:5-6). This was taken to mean that before Messiah came, Elijah would come.

Again John's answer is clear, **"He said, 'I am not.'"** (v. 21). Here we run into a problem when we compare this to what Matthew and Luke write about John. Before John is born in Luke 1 the angel Gabriel tells John's father Zacharias,

13 But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 'And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 'For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 'And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 'He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' (Luke 1:13-17).

Also Jesus will later say this about John in Matthew 11:

11 'Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 'And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the

violent take it by force. 13 "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. 14 "And if you are willing to receive *it*, he is Elijah who is to come. (Matt. 11:11-14).

How can John the Baptist say he is not Elijah, when Jesus says that he is? John probably knew that some Jews were expecting the literal Elijah, who did not die but was carried to heaven in a fiery chariot, to himself return in some spectacular way as he left (see 2 Kings 2:1-17). John rightly denies being Elijah in person. Yet, as Luke wrote John does before Christ **"in the spirit and power of Elijah"** (Luke 1:17). He is Elijah in spirit; he is not literally Elijah in the flesh. John was not interested in building a following after himself as a latter-day Elijah, but rather in pointing others to Jesus as the Christ.

If John is not Elijah, then is he **"the Prophet"**? **"The Prophet"** must refer to the **"Prophet like Moses,"** prophesied in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy: **"The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear ... I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him,"** (Deut. 18:15, 18).

John answers with a simple and emphatic **"No."** We learn in the book of Acts that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment here. He is the prophet like Moses, not John. John the Baptist was clear in his confession about who he was not because his witness was not about himself, it was all about Christ.

So far these Pharisees have nothing definite to report to the leaders back in Jerusalem, so they press their question (1:22): **"Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"**" This leads to our second point, John's plain statement of who he is:

2. John's Claim (22-23): He testified about his mission.

John was clear on who he was and on what his mission was from God.

John is a voice (v. 23). Verse 23 says, **He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord," ' as the prophet Isaiah said."**

He was citing Isaiah 40:3. He is just a voice, calling attention to the coming of the Lord. The focus is not on the voice, but on the Lord who is coming. The prophecy of Isaiah pictures a messenger going before the to announce His coming so that people would be ready for the king. The people would need to clear away the obstacles and fill in the washed out parts of the road to smooth the way for the king's coming. The messenger didn't call attention to himself, but to the coming king.

John the Baptist called people to prepare for the coming king when he called them to repent. That was the heart of John's message, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"** (Matt. 3:2). Mark 1:4 tells us, **"John came**

baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins."

John was a voice crying out for the people to make a highway in their heart for the Lord through repentance of sin. John said, "I am just a voice," because his message was not about himself, it was all about the Lord.

So we have seen John's confession of who he was not, and his claim of who he was, finally we see,

3. John's Christ (24-28): He pointed people to Jesus.

Some Pharisees in the group were still not satisfied with John's answer. So they ask (1:25), "**Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?**" Why was baptism an issue for these Pharisees?

Baptism was not a new practice in Judaism. It was the regular rite in the admission of converts from other religions. When such a conversion took place, the males of the family were circumcised and all, of both sexes, baptized themselves. This baptism was seen as the ceremonial removal of all the pollutions of the Gentile world. Now you can see the problem. All Jews were prepared to accept the view that gentiles were defiled and needed cleansing.

But John's baptism was unique. John was baptizing Jews. The self-righteous Pharisees thought this was unnecessary and unacceptable. John's baptism was offensive to these racially and religiously proud Jews. How would John respond to their concern?

Again, instead of going into a long explanation of his role as the forerunner and baptizer, John points away from himself to Christ. This delegation wants John to talk about himself and his ministry. But John's ministry is to magnify the Christ—to focus Israel's attention on Him. He cannot do so by talking about himself. So instead of giving them a theology of water baptism and its importance, he says that it is all about someone more important. Verses 26, "**John answered them, saying, 'I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.'**"

John is saying, "You come asking about me and my baptism. But it's not about me. It's all about someone else whom you do not know, the one who comes after me." John says, "**there stands One among you.**" In other words, He is already here in Israel. John knew that for certain because he had already baptized Jesus some 6 weeks before this. He had already seen the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus (1:32) and he heard the voice from heaven. John says, "He is here." We will see next time that Jesus is walking toward where John is baptizing and will arrive the next day.

So John points them to Christ. As with his role of a voice crying out in the wilderness, so with his role as baptizer: He was not baptizing to build up his own following, He was preparing people for the coming of the Lord, the Christ. Listen to how John describes him in verse 27, "**It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.**"

For the Jews, loosing the sandal was the task of a slave. Consider this common rabbinic saying, "*Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the losing of his sandal-thong*," (cited by Kostenberger, p. 65). John chooses the very task that the rabbis said was too menial for any disciple, and declares himself unworthy to perform it. This is how John saw the greatness and glory of Jesus.

We'll see more of how John pointed to Jesus next time in verses 29-34. In the study following that, we will see how he pointed his own disciples to Jesus. He wasn't trying to hang onto them for himself or to build a following or a legacy for himself. John the Baptist's motto, according to John 3:30, was "**He must increase, but I must decrease.**"

The world and our won sinful pride will always give us opportunities to esteem ourselves more highly than we ought, but those who are growing in godliness see themselves as unworthy slaves (Luke 17:10). That's the way John saw himself. In commenting on John's humility, J. C. Ryle (3:44-45) said, "Never shall we feel the need of humility so deeply, as when we lie on our deathbeds, and stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. Our whole lives will then appear a long catalogue of imperfections, ourselves nothing, and Christ all."

In one of Billy Graham's last messages he said, "With all my heart I want to leave you with the truth...to use my energy that I have left to share this important message...and that message is Jesus." I think John the Baptist had that same attitude as Billy Graham did. Graham said about his ministry, "The work has been God's and not man's. I want no credit or glory. I want the Lord Jesus to have it all."

That is what it looks like to be a witness of Jesus Christ. It is all about Christ, not about us.

Let me ask you today, do you know Jesus Christ? Have you believed on Him as the sacrifice for your sin? Do you have a relationship with Him because He is the risen Lord? Have you repented of your sin and turned to Jesus to save you? Do you really know Jesus? J. C. Ryle (3:48) observed, "It will be better at the last day never to have been born, than to have had Christ 'standing among us' and not to have known Him."