

JOHN BAPTIST COMMENDS JESUS

Introduction

This part of the gospel starts with a puzzle. Why include a private conversation between John the Baptist and some Pharisees? Surely the gospel is about Jesus, not John. There must be an answer for we know the apostle is focusing our minds on Jesus and we know the Holy Spirit led him.

But it reminds us of two things that puzzle many people today. Some think of the church as an enigma; others are offended at the idea they might need cleansing from sin. The answer to both of those puzzles is pointing people to Jesus.

The conversation begins with a question, 'Who are you?' John's answer is along the lines of 'I will tell you who I am not – now listen while I tell you about Jesus'.

That is not the end of what our apostle records. Immediately he tells us. From verse 29 to verse 37 he tells us more of what John said about Jesus, this time to his own followers.

The first conversation

To understand anything we need to ask the right questions. John was telling the Pharisees they should be thinking about Jesus – 'whom you do not know'. This reminds us of our natural ignorance of the things of God – even if we have been brought up in a religious tradition as the Pharisees were. The natural man looks at outward things – what is the church? What are they on about? And they often conclude that what they see is merely cultural or a just set of beliefs. But eternal life is 'to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3).

The conversation took place with the people who administered God's household – a reminder that not all church leaders know Christ or understand the gospel. We begin to understand them when we remember where and when they lived.

They were responsible for ensuring good order so it was right they would question the Baptist. In the Old Testament baptism was seen as something done by the Messiah, so what right did John have to do this?

There had been no open prophecy for around 400 years. Was God starting to act in the nation again? For us, the days of prophecy are past (no new apostles or prophets, please!), but the Spirit takes the scripture he has given and still speaks to us through it.

For whatever reason there was a sense of expectancy throughout the nation – many people expected Messiah to appear soon. They were right to question John about this.

The question, 'Who are you?' refers to John's official capacity not his personal identity. When people today make comments about the church. They expected the Christ to come – John stated he was not the Christ. They expected Elijah to return in person (as distinct from someone with a similar mission and spirit to Elijah) - John stated he was not Elijah. On the basis of Deuteronomy 18 they expected a great prophet to arise – the ultimate prophet – John recognised the passage as a reference to the Christ and stated he was not that prophet. Such questions gave John the opportunity to point his questioners to Jesus whom he represented.

Accordingly he described himself as a 'voice in the wilderness'. The allusion to the Jews' return from exile in Babylon would not have been lost on his hearers. Those people faced a seemingly impossible journey – unless the LORD made a way for them they could not escape Babylonian control. Yet the LORD did make a way, and John's ancestors did return to their home.

John was telling them that their covenant God was making a way for the people to return to their spiritual home; their Saviour King was about to arrive, and John was announcing his arrival.

The Baptist points to Jesus

The Baptist starts his explanation with a reference to what he was doing – baptising, ‘John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.’ Luke adds to John record the words, He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16).

On another occasion the Baptist referred to the incident and said, ‘You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all’ (John 3:26-31).

He was saying in effect that his baptism was no more than a sign of the real baptism that Jesus the Christ would perform – giving people the Holy Spirit. That immediately directs our attention away from John to Jesus. Only God can send God. And only God can be our Saviour.

The Old Testament linked the Spirit’s work to the era of the Messiah and would be primarily a work of spiritual renewal that would be worldwide rather than confined to the Jewish people. ‘Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be my people, and I will be your God’ (Ezekiel 26:25-28. See also Joel 2:28-32).

We should beware of teaching about the Holy Spirit that relegates Jesus to second place, or emphasises particular gifts rather than moral and spiritual transformation and worldwide church growth.

The Baptist’s comments tell us more about Jesus especially his authority and his mission.

He identifies Jesus as Lord and God – ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God’ (Isaiah 40:3). Jesus is thus the God of the Old Testament, in covenant with the people of Israel, and their only Saviour.

John’s task was to ‘prepare the way of the Lord’. When we look at what he was doing we find he was preaching that people should repent because God’s kingdom was at hand. When Isaiah prophesied he was addressing people whose hostility to God had driven his blessing away. For the Baptist, preparing the way meant bringing the people to repentance. This prompts us to ask whether we acknowledge Jesus as our own Lord in every area of life.

His mission is referred to in the next conversation, where he refers to Jesus as ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’.

The term ‘Lamb’ alludes to the system of sacrifices designed to symbolically reconcile the people to God by bearing their sin away through the substitute’s death. The expression ‘take away’ has the twin ideas of lifting the burden off the people, and pardoning them.

The other aspect of his mission follows the removal of sin – the blessing of the Holy Spirit on those whom Christ has freed from guilt.

Responding to the Baptist's testimony

His statement, 'He must increase but I must decrease' is a measure of how we respond to Jesus; has the way into our heart been prepared?

He should increase in our estimation, while our estimation of ourselves decreases. That shows in our willingness to listen and obey, and to trust him with our life.

He must increase in the sense that we gladly acknowledge his authority over us. Are we willing to submit to his will both in the bible and in Providence?

He must increase in the sense that we recognise him as providing for all our needs – 'We have all received out of his fullness'. We went to him for forgiveness of sin. Do we now go to him for sanctification? Will we rest confidently on him at the time of death?

These things are the main part of our Christian privilege and duty.