

Why did John the Baptist say, "He must increase, but I must decrease"?
John 3:22-36

The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease." - John 3:29-30, ESV

As usual, John's Gospel gives us new material, rich insights into Christ that the other Gospels don't have. In today's passage, we have John the Baptist's explanation of his ministry as it related to the ministry of Jesus. Apparently, some people in the first century had formed a "John the Baptist Cult," asserting that he was the Messiah and the Lord's final messenger to His people. They denied that Jesus was, in any sense, better or higher than John, and so they taught that faith in Jesus is unnecessary.

It seems clear from today's passage that John the Evangelist, as the Gospel-writer is known, wanted to make sure people did not fall into this trap and follow an error that would lead them away from faith in Christ. So, John relates words from John the Baptist that Matthew, Mark and Luke did not feel like they needed to include. Here John the Baptist is explaining who he is in relation to Jesus and why he is happy to fade into the background and give the place of honor to Jesus.

The whole conversation begins with what looks like an attempt to provoke John the Baptist to jealousy over Jesus' popularity: "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." (v. 26) Far from being jealous at the rising popularity of Jesus, John takes time to explain why he's rejoicing and why Jesus must become more popular and gain more followers, while John himself fades to a place of lesser prominence.

To explain, John uses wedding language, comparing Jesus to the bridegroom and himself to "the friend of the bridegroom" - the best man, we might say. What would you think if you went to a wedding and the best man gave a toast that was all about himself and not pointing people's attention at the bride and groom? The best man's role in the wedding is to highlight the groom and his lovely bride, not himself.

Oh, that we would all have the mindset of John the Baptist! If we know Jesus, we should see how vital it is that people see Him clearly and come to know and believe in Him for salvation. We are not important, not compared to Jesus. We spend far too much time and energy trying to make sure people like us, people applaud us, people honor us, etc. Instead, we need to focus our energy and conversation on making much of Jesus. Though we do not have the same forerunner role that John the Baptist had in redemption, we can have the same attitude: He must increase, but I must decrease!