

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part three

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THAT ALL MIGHT BELIEVE THROUGH HIM

John 1:6-9 - "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. [7] He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. [8] He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. [9] The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

It is, I suppose, somewhat strange that the Apostle John plops these words about John the Baptist right in the middle of this marvelously rich prologue about the pre-existent, incarnate Word. There is such a jump down from the sublime to the ordinary. It's a bit like tuning in to watch the Super Bowl, only to find the actual game replaced by a documentary special about the kind of machine they use to paint the lines on the field. It may be informative, but it's hardly as important as the game itself.

John isn't Jesus. And you and I aren't Jesus either. John **believed** in Jesus. John **followed** Jesus in faith. Again, just as you and I believe and follow. And John **told** people about Jesus with a passion. And in that sense too, he's at least a fair bit like you and I. John the Baptist is to Jesus, at least in some ways, as you and I are to Jesus. We love Him. We point others to Him. We honor Him. We worship Him. So perhaps this insert about John the Baptist isn't as out of place as we might first think.

Let's consider some ideas from this text together:

1) **THE APOSTLE JOHN REFUSES TO ALLOW ANY CONFUSION ABOUT WHERE SAVING FAITH MUST BE PLACED**

Look at the third verse of our text first - **John 1:8** - "He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light."

To us those words seem totally unnecessary. From our standpoint there is no question here. Of course John was not the light. **Jesus** was the light. But we've landed on that conviction about Jesus only because somehow, somewhere, at some point in time, we encountered the gospel of the **uniqueness** of Jesus Christ as God the Son, the Savior of mankind, the point-man for God's new creation. We were confronted by the life-giving truth about Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life.

But John the Baptist isn't preaching to those already persuaded. And the Apostle John isn't writing for those already convinced. And if people **are** going to find light and life in Jesus Christ, they mustn't be confused as to its source.

Think this through. What we learn from the Apostle John's approach in this text is we always need this **double emphasis** when we hear or proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ. We need to be told **both** who **is** the true light and who **isn't** the true light. It isn't enough just to know **Jesus** is God the Son and the Savior of mankind. That's absolutely true, of course. But we also need to know **no one else** is the way or the truth or the life. We need the truth about Jesus Christ **narrowed down**. All other options have to be removed.

And one of the reasons the Apostle John unleashes this clear sentence about who John the Baptist **wasn't** is there is pretty good evidence that people were already showing signs of confusion about the Baptist's identity:

Luke 3:10-15 - "And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" [11] And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." [12] Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" [13] And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." [14] Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." [15] As the people were in expectation, and **all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ...**"

We also know that even after the Baptist's death there were people who desired to be baptized in his name - **Acts 19:3** - "And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." Such was the appeal and magnetism of John's ministry. It just seemed logical for people to **attach themselves** to the Baptist.

This is why we need the emphasis of the Apostle John's remarks about the Baptist. We need to be clear in our witness to Christ that we don't, in some effort to appear user friendly and tolerant, give the impression that all good and prophetic voices are somehow **the same** as hearing Jesus. We need to be clear in telling people that there is only **one** Person and **one**

message to which we are witnesses.

The Apostle's honesty and the Baptist's humility are refreshing - **John 1:8** - "He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light." In this day when every ministry under the sun has the incredibly overworked adjective "incarnational" slapped in front of it, and every Christian is quite thoughtlessly told to "be Jesus" to everyone on the planet, it's both refreshing and helpful that one of the *first* things about John the Baptist we're clearly told is he was *not* Jesus.

You can't miss the Apostle's noble desire. It's the one thing the church simply must get right - **"Please, never, never, never, get anybody else confused with Jesus. True, you may and you must live and serve in His Name. You are empowered by His Spirit for great works. But never forget His redemptive works are absolutely unique and forever unrepeatable! I am not Jesus. I never will be Jesus. Only Jesus is Jesus!"**

The next point is closely related to this:

2) THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE MUST BE KEPT DISTINCT FROM THE ONE BEARING WITNESS TO IT

John 1:6-7 - "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. [7] He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light..."

We should take note the way John repeats that term "witness" two times in one verse. John's gospel is unique in this emphasis. The term isn't used at all in Matthew's gospel, only three times in Mark's, and only once in Luke's account. John uses the term *fourteen times*. In fact, the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) know John the way *we* know John - as "John the Baptist." John's gospel, strictly speaking, doesn't even record the baptism of Jesus by John. In John's gospel the *Baptist* becomes the *witness*.

So to what was John such a witness? Our text says he "....came as a witness, to bear witness about the light..." But to what does this refer? What does "the light" mean? Does the light refer to moral goodness and acts of righteousness? Is the "light" godly character and moral boldness? Is it compassion for the poor? Is it the shunning of the corrupt establishments of a godless society? These are important questions because John the Baptist *qualifies as light* in all those categories. So exactly what is this *light* to which John bore witness? Or, what does it take to bear witness to the light? How can we know if we're actually doing this?

What *is* the light and *how* do we bear witness to it? There are clues in our text but you have to think them through carefully. One clue is given in the verse from our previous point - **verse 8** - where we're specifically told John the Baptist, while "bearing witness to the light" (7), was "not the light" (8). So we know the light can't be a reference to godly character and acts of righteousness because John the Baptist *was* godly and righteous and we're still plainly told he *wasn't* the light.

Jesus Himself said there was no one born of a woman who compared with John on these counts - **Matthew 11:11** - "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist...." And yet the Apostle John is quick to point out that John was *not* the light (1:8).

This is so important. We know from Jesus' words that John's life shone with obedience, divine calling, faithfulness, unflinching dedication, and a zeal for the call of God. And there is a limited sense in which such devotion and service help shine light.

The Apostle John will actually *call* the Baptist a light in this very gospel - **John 5:33-35** - "You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. [34] Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. [35] He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light."

And that's not all. We too are said to light up this world with our righteous lives - **Matthew 5:14-16** - "**You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. [16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**"

So if we put all these Scriptures together with **John 1:8** we discover we *are* lights but we *aren't the* light. We *do* have this capacity to *illuminate*. We can be lights in this dark world in a limited sense. We can enhance the credibility of the gospel message. But coming to the light isn't just a call to compassion or morality.

If you look carefully, you'll actually see this distinction right in that seventh verse of John chapter one - **John 1:7** - "He came **as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.**" Note the distinction - "**...as a witness**" - "**...to bear witness about...**" John the Baptist came **as** a witness right in his character and nature and ministry. But he came to "**bear witness about**" Jesus in terms of what he said - the **content of his words regarding Jesus.**

So John, as all faithful disciples, illuminates in the sense of **pointing others to the light.** But no one is **the** light except Jesus Christ, God the Son. In other words, **the** light is the **unique redemptive truth** about Jesus Christ, God the Son. So when the Apostle John states so bluntly that John the Baptist was **not** the light we know the light to which the Apostle John is referring in **John 1:8** **isn't** godly deeds, faithful service, or righteous character. John had **all** of these but wasn't the light.

Our second point still stands - **The content of the gospel message must be kept distinct from the one bearing witness to it.** The **unique truths about Jesus come first.** There are many good leaders and motivators. There are many examples of love and compassion in this world. Some of them are atheists. There are people of other faiths who work unexplainable miracles and wonders. But they are **not** the light.

So here's what we've learned under this second point. John gives us a **working definition** of bearing witness to the light. By definition, the light to which we give witness has to be the things you **can** say about Jesus that you **can't say** about any one else, including any of His followers. It's the **unrepeatable** accomplishments of His person and redemption that constitute the light.

3) **THE PRESENCE OF THE LIGHT DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY CREATE YIELDING TRUST IN THE LIGHT**

John 1:7 and 9 - "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him....[9]....The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

I think it's important to link these two verses together. We are shocked that this divine light should ever be rejected. One would think the power of such a **divine** light could simply ban disbelief and create trust in Jesus Christ.

And, on the opposite end of the issue, if people are so darkened - as John says they are - that they actually **prefer** darkness to the light - **John 3:19** - "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil." - if **that's** the kind of darkness in human hearts, what hope is there that anyone would ever believe in the light?

Those are the two huge issues John addresses in these two verses. And he says, **first**, the situation **would** be hopeless were it not for the fact that Christ through his divine coming, person, and work, has accomplished something for every human that has ever drawn a breath.

John 1:9 - "The true light, **which enlightens everyone**, was coming into the world." Just take those words seriously. He has put a spark of light in every heart. He has, through His own universal, prevenient, resistible grace, limited the damage our rebellion would have done to our capacity to respond, if He hadn't graciously held it back in measure. As the Scriptures so clearly teach, in our own unaided selves we are truly, as Paul says, **dead** in sin.

In other words, we would **all** be totally incapable of ever believing in Christ if He hadn't first of all kept the door open for belief in every heart that has ever lived. This gracious act doesn't **insure** saving faith. But it makes it a **possibility.**

And **second**, witness to the light is still a necessity. The light **invites**, but it doesn't **coerce**. A choice is made possible by prevenient, resistible grace. And a truly **responsible** choice is called for.

And the upshot of this truth is we are all called upon to do two things. **First**, we are called upon to **know the content of the gospel.** We are called to **know** something deep and wonderful and unique about Jesus Christ. And **second**, we are called upon to demonstrate our own living **trust** in this truth in a way that fleshes it out before a watching, often critical world - "**...that all might believe through Him**" (1:7).

And everyone said....