

See the Son. Believe for Life. – How the Light Spreads

John 1:19-51

I've always loved studying and reading history and the last couple of years I've read several books on the Roman Empire and the early church. Probably my favorite book is one I've told you about before called *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*. It describes the remarkable growth of Christianity during the first 400 years after Christ. Here's how the book begins.

“The growth of the Christian church in the Roman Empire is mysterious. Scholars who spend their entire lives studying this phenomenon continue to find it surprising. Why did this minor mystery religion from the eastern Mediterranean – marginal, despised, discriminated against – grow substantially, eventually supplanting the well-endowed, respectable cults that were supported by the empire and aristocracy? What enabled Christianity to be so successful that by the fifth century it was the established religion of the empire?” – Alan Kreider

The book then goes on to try to answer those questions over 300 or so pages. And the answers he gives are remarkable consistent with the picture of the growth of the gospel in the book of Acts. In other words, the early church basically continued the work begun in the book of Acts and the Gospel went forth. So, what is that picture in the book of Acts? I think we find the same method right here at the beginning of John's Gospel and this is what we will look at today in John 1:19-51. We're going to see **2 Essentials to Spreading the Light so that Others Can See.**

1. Primary Testimony (vv. 19-34)

Look with me at the beginning of verse 19. We've already met this man named John back up in verses 6-8 and look what we read about him there. He was sent from God in fulfillment of Malachi 3:1 and he came to bear witness to the light so that all would believe. He's clearly not the light but came as a witness.

The Gospel writer, John, picks up on this word “witness” and uses it again in verse 19. John the Baptist marks the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus Christ in all 4 gospels. But why is he so significant? He's not just an eccentric crazy guy in camel's hair eating locusts. He matters because of the way in which he witnesses to Jesus. He is promised and expected in the OT and his message was rooted in

the OT. The OT Scriptures are the primary witness and John's ministry helps us to see how Jesus fulfills the expectations of the OT. Look at the rest of 19 and verse 20.

It's clear to the religious authorities that something is happening through John and so they send a delegation to investigate. John's response is emphatic in verse 20. It's clear John knows why they are asking. They want to know if he is claiming to be the anointed one. Others had done this sort of thing before. Listen to Acts 5:36. Well, the delegation reasons, if you are not the Messiah, surely you must view yourself as some other key eschatological figure from the OT. Look at verse 21.

Why do they ask this? Remember that Elijah never actually died but was taken up in a whirlwind to heaven. And you have Malachi 4:5 which predicts the coming of Elijah before the great day of God's return and judgment. John denies this. Of course, in the other gospels Jesus views John as Elijah, but John denies this here either because he is not literally Elijah, or he just doesn't know this about his own ministry yet.

The delegation asks another question in verse 21. This question is taken from Deuteronomy 18:15, 18. Based on this text the people expected a Moses like prophet to come in the last days. They want to know if John is this prophet. Again he answers no. So, verse 22. This time John does give an answer. Verse 23. Here he quotes Isaiah 40:3. The point of this in Isaiah is that a herald will come and announce the return of God to Israel that would signal the end of the exile for the people. John understands his ministry to be the fulfillment of this passage.

This delegation, from the Pharisees (v 24), then ask him to explain why he is baptizing if he is none of these end times figures from the OT. Look at verse 25. We don't read of a formal baptism, like what John is doing, in the OT. But, during this time there were Jewish groups that practiced "proselyte baptisms" for Gentiles to participate in the covenant God had made with Israel and to begin worshiping Yahweh. But in "proselyte baptism" you immersed yourself. Here, John is immersing the one coming and it's unusual enough that they want to know why he is doing it.

Look at verses 26-28. John initially almost sidesteps his water baptism. He acknowledges that he's doing it but then immediately begins to talk about the one coming, which matches what we saw in verses 6-8.

Now look with me at verse 29 and take note of that phrase "the next day". You will see this again and I'll explain why these are so significant next week. But here, John identifies the one coming after him and begins to explain who this one is and how the coming one's identity fits with his ministry. I want you to notice four things John says about Jesus in verses 29-34. He's the lamb of God, the one on whom the Spirit descends and remains, the one who baptizes with the Spirit, and the Son of God. Each of these descriptions are rooted in the OT and John is bearing witness to their realization in Jesus.

First, lamb of God. Isaiah 53:7. We don't know exactly what John the Baptist understood about Jesus, but he identifies him as the lamb of Isaiah 53:7 by using the same word. John the Apostle puts a major emphasis on the Passover in this gospel and he may be highlighting this statement to present Jesus as the Passover Lamb. Second, the Spirit coming on Jesus. Isaiah 11:1-2. The Spirit will come on the Davidic King and empower Him. Third, He will baptize with the Spirit. Ez. 35:25-27. The Spirit's work is tied to the New Covenant and that will come through Jesus. And finally, John calls Jesus the Son of God. While this title can indicate the deity of Jesus and of course, we know from John 1:1 that Jesus is God, it can also point to God's covenant with David. 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7.

John's witness matters in the Gospels because he was sent from God, testifies to what he has heard from God, and because his ministry is rooted in the OT Scriptures. So, what is the primary testimony that we are talking about here that forms the basis for the light spreading? It's the Scriptures. John testifies to the way the Scriptures point to Jesus. It's the Word of God.

We saw John's goal in verse 7 that all would believe. So, let's make this connection for you and I today and the growth and spread of the light in our time. It's through the Scriptures that faith grows and is built. Romans 10:17. Understanding the Bible is paramount to true faith. Think about the nature of faith...all faith has an object that it trusts or believes. What is the object of your faith? How can your faith be placed in Jesus if you have not heard about Him? And how can you truly know him if you do not know the Bible?

Listen, at this church we don't claim to have all our ducks in a row. We aren't ministry experts in any sense of the word. Times are confusing and we all have access to more information and perspectives than we could ever read and understand in a thousand lifetimes. But here's what we cling to: Faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the Word of God. When things get foggy we throw ourselves back on this book and the God who wrote it. And when we do that, it leads to a very simple methodology for spreading the light.

2. Plain Technique (vv. 35-51)

It's really quite simple how this happens. John testifies to what God has revealed to Him through the OT Scriptures and watch what happens. Look at verses 35-37. John uses the same phrase he used the day before. John's disciples were with him and had heard him explain all of what we just read in verses 29-34. They heard him say what he said in verse 15. They understood that his ministry was preparing the way and pointing to someone else.

So, when John identified that someone else, they followed him. And this is the first part of this process of spreading the light. John spoke of Jesus, and they followed him. Notice the second part in verses 38-39. They follow him in order to be with him. Now, the word "staying" here could be translated "abide" and it's used elsewhere in John's Gospel to speak about the relationship between disciples and Jesus. Listen to John 15:1-9.

The point here is that disciples of Jesus want to be with Jesus, in His presence. There's a vital connection between a disciple and his or her Lord. Life and spiritual vitality comes from abiding in the Lord, staying with the Lord.

So, the first two pieces of this process of making disciples are, follow Jesus and be with Jesus. Then, there's a very natural third part that happens without a lot of coaching up. Look at verses 40-42. Andrew, Peter's brother, was one of the two and the other one was most likely John the Apostle, the author of this Gospel. But Andrew is so thrilled with the possibility that this is the Messiah that he goes and finds his brother. And it doesn't stop there.

Look at verse 43. Now, this grammar of this verse in Greek is a little tricky but here's how I think it should read. "The next day he decided to go to Galilee and he found Phillip. Jesus said to him, 'Follow me'." Part of the reason for this is what it

says in verse 41 about Andrew “first” going to find Peter and what it says in verse 44 that they knew one another. So, Andrew goes and finds Phillip and then look what Phillip does in verses 45-46.

Now the process is going out further in this third step. John has testified to the OT Scriptures and his followers have followed Jesus to be with him. Now they go and tell this news to others they know, and they speak of Jesus from the Scripture too. Remember Andrews words (v. 41) and notice Phillip’s words here (v. 45). And notice that Phillip just tells Nathanael that he needs to meet Jesus for himself.

And Nathanael’s interaction sets us up for the rest of the Gospel. Look at verse 47. As Nathanael approaches Jesus comments on his character. His point here is not that Nathanael is without sin but that he isn’t a hypocrite. He doesn’t have double motives. Instead he’s honest and straightforward, as evidenced by his comment on Nazareth. This is shocking to Nathanael. Look at verse 48.

Jesus clearly demonstrates supernatural knowledge here and Nathanael is instantly convinced of what Phillip has said. Now, this sets Jesus up to point us to the rest of the Gospel as the light spreads. Look at verse 50. The rest of this book will reveal more and more of Jesus to the reader through demonstrations of greater signs. And what will these signs be doing? Look at verse 51.

Now, if you are familiar with the OT, then when you read this you will recognize that Jesus is alluding to the story of Jacob, one of the patriarchs. Jacob was the son of Isaac, and was the recipient of the blessing and the covenant promise that God made to Abraham. On his way to find a wife he stops for the night and has a dream. In that dream he sees angels going up and down from God in heaven to the earth below. In Genesis 28, where this is recorded, it gets translated ladder in English, which causes us to think of something you might get at Home Depot.

It’s better to think of this as a flight of steps up an ancient ziggurat or temple. Of course, a temple is the meeting place between men and God and the connection point between heaven and earth. In his dream God affirms the covenant He made with Abraham to Jacob. Listen to what Jacob says when he wakes up the next morning. Genesis 28:16-17. Jacob understood this to be an encounter with God and the coming together of heaven and earth.

So, what is Jesus saying here? Jesus is the place where heaven and earth meet. It's the same idea as 1:14 where Jesus "tabernacles" among us. So, He's telling Nathanael that those who follow Him and see the great things that are coming will see heaven meet earth and receive divine revelation from God through Him.

And this is how the light spreads. Through a primary witness and a plain technique. So, a couple of questions for you today as you think about this passage and what is to come in the Gospel of John. Are you a person who listens to the primary witness, the Bible? Do you love the Scriptures? Do you learn the Scriptures? As you learn the Scriptures and encounter Jesus, do you have someone else that you are bringing to also encounter Jesus, to see the light? Who is it, in your life, that you are introducing to Jesus? Or, who are you helping to abide with Jesus? Do you have someone that you are helping along this process of discipleship? It's a plain process. Hear the witness of the Bible. Follow Jesus. Abide with Jesus. Bring others to meet Jesus. Let's pray.