

John the Baptist
John 1:6 – 9
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
April 23, 2017

Who is John the Baptist?

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

John is a man whose life and memory are defined by what he did. He is John, *the Baptist*. He baptized. He was a man with a message, preaching out in the country side, near the Jordan River. The word of his preaching began to attract attention. People came from towns and villages, from places far away, to hear the message he proclaimed. He gave ethical advice and instruction, telling people how to live their lives and do their work in a manner which would please God. He declared to people God's anger at sin and sinful behavior and he called them to repent – that is to turn away from sin – and, as an expression of that change of heart, to be baptized. And people came in droves.

John, the author of our gospel, begins the story he is telling by introducing to us the Word of God. In four verses we are told that the Word is eternal; the Word is with God and the Word is God. The Word is the source of all that was made in creation and that the Word is the source of knowledge and understanding and the very source of life itself: all this in the opening four verses. But then, after declaring the Word to be light, in verse 5 John tells us that “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” The Word's presence in the world he has created is not comprehended by the world. The creation does not know its creator. The Word is not recognized, understood or perceived by the creation he has formed.

John, the gospel writer, tells us at this point that John, the Baptist, is the one sent by God to address this lack of comprehension by the world. John the Baptist is to be the witness to the truth of that which the Word of God was about to accomplish within the creation he has formed. So we will look carefully at John the Baptist and see what we can learn about him, his message and his work as Christ's herald. Who was John the Baptist?

He is a man

⁶There was a man

One characteristic style of John's gospel is his use of clear contrasts. The function of a contrast is to place ideas and things in sharp relief, enabling us to see their meaning and significance with increased clarity. We can see one example of this facet of John's style in verse 6: '*there came a man.*' Until this point John has emphasized the divine aspects of the Word making it clear that the Word is co-equal to God. John is introduced and the first thing we are told about him, even

before we are told his name, is that he is a man: nothing more, nothing less. The contrast is clear and stark.

He is a man on a mission

sent from God, whose name was John.

The very next thing we are told is that this man is a man on a mission: 'there came a man *who was sent from God.*' This man is sent by God. He has a purpose. As I mentioned earlier, John is a man who, in the collective memory of the church and history, is known by what he did more than who he was. John the gospel writer introduces him, telling us that he was a man *sent by God* before he tells us his name. John's mission is greater than John himself: his reason and purpose for living are larger than his own life. He is a man sent with a purpose.

John is a prophet and he is in the lineage of all the Old Testament prophets. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets. His work and ministry will be the bridge between the revelation of God's work, majesty and purposes as seen under the Old Covenant and the introduction of the New Covenant in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

There were two fundamental religious offices in ancient Israel: prophet and priest. The priest had the task of representing the people before God. The priest officiated at the sacrifices offered as part of ancient Jewish worship. The priest was the agent bringing the offering of the worship to God. The prophet, on the other hand, represented God to the people. The prophet spoke on God's behalf. He spoke the words of God, enabling the people to know and understand what God required of them.

John was a prophet. He declared God's expectations. He declared God's word. John's message to the Jewish people added a significant new element of obedience: he called the Jews to repent and be baptized. This was a radical innovation among ancient Jewish belief and practice.

Baptism itself was not a new thing. John the Baptist did not invent the practice of baptism. But, prior to John the Baptist, baptism was a rite that was used only in the case of persons who were converting to Judaism from a non-Jewish, presumably pagan, background. The symbolism of baptism was the washing away of the corrupt pagan past and being cleansed in order to be welcomed into the covenant community of God's people. A Jew who had been born a Jew was not baptized. He was already clean. He was already part of the covenant. He did not need to be baptized.

John's innovation was in his application to the Jewish people the need to repent, turn from sin, and be baptized. For this reason his preaching scandalized many rabbis and other religious leader. In preaching this message he was suggesting that Jews and Gentiles were on the same footing in their relationship before God. He was wiping away the distinction of the Jews as God's chosen

people. Chosen they may be, but when it comes to the reality of human sin, they too must turn from sin, repent and be baptized. In this regard, John was a man on a mission.

He is a witness

⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.

John the Baptist played an important role in establishing Jesus' ministry. He is the prophet who prepared the way of the Lord. The people of his day asked John (1:22-23), "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." Among the Jews of his day, John was almost universally acknowledged to be a prophet sent from God. There was character, persuasive power, in the person of John. He declared that the Messiah was coming – and the people believed. When he pointed to Jesus and said that he is the one – the people believed his testimony.

Witness, in the Biblical sense, means something more than we usually associate with the word in English. In English, a 'witness' is simply someone who reports what he sees, such as a witness to an accident, or of a crime, or of a sporting event. A witness tells what was seen. A witness tells what he or she has seen or heard. But the Biblical emphasis is stronger. The biblical word for *witness* is *martyr*. A witness is someone who stands behind his testimony. A witness puts his life on the line on behalf of his testimony. He speaks a true word of witness, even if that word of witness is personally costly.

In Aristotle's classic work on Rhetoric he articulated three ways in which we give our assent to the believability of what we are told by others. We can be convinced by the power of their argument. This is logic at work: through it our minds are convinced. But, Aristotle argued, logical argument was the least effective of the three means of persuasion. A stronger means was through well told stories which appeal to a person's imagination and emotions. As a preacher I know that people will remember the stories I tell more readily than the arguments I employ. This emotional appeal through the telling of stories can have a powerful persuasive impact upon us. Nonetheless, Aristotle would argue that there is still one more, greater, means of persuasive impact: our faith and belief in the character of the one who is giving witness to us. Our belief in the character of the one who is speaking is the most powerful means of persuasion. If we believe in the person then we will believe what we are told. This is the power of persuasion through character.

This points to another important sense in which John the Baptist is a witness: as mentioned earlier, the Greek word translated 'witness' is *martyria*, from which we get the English word, *martyr*. A martyr is a witness. A martyr believes in the truth of his testimony and is willing to die on behalf of it. John the Baptist became a witness in this fullest sense, dying by order of the wicked King Herod. In

this sense the word 'martyr' has a persuasive element. We are inspired by the witness of one who is willing to die on behalf of his beliefs. He stakes his character and life itself upon his testimony to the things he has seen, heard and believed.

As an aside, the word '*martyr*' as it is used in the Christian West is different from the word '*martyr*' as it is used in the Islamic world. In the Islamic world a '*martyr*' is one who dies in battle. The battle may be a religious battle, a jihad, or 'holy war.' '*Martyr*' in this sense has a strong military sense in contrast to the Christian accent of submissive sacrifice.

John the Baptist was a man on a mission. He was a witness. In addition he was a lighthouse.

He is a lighthouse

⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

Technology has largely eclipsed the practical role of lighthouses today, but there was a time in the past when a lighthouse performed a very important role in sailing, commerce and trade. A lighthouse was a tall, round building constructed at key points along the coastal waterways. At the top of each was a special glass room containing a powerful lamp capable of shining far out into the darkness of the sea. At night the keeper of the lighthouse had the important job of keeping the lamp lit, for it provided an essential point of reference for ships traveling at night, enabling them to avoid treacherous waterways or running aground on the coast. Ptolmey's lighthouse in ancient Alexandria, Egypt was one of the '*Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.*' A lighthouse is something which helps us avoid danger on the one hand and assists us to arrive safely at our goal on the other.

The key thing to remember regarding a lighthouse is that its function is not to attract ships to itself. A ship which aims for the lighthouse is missing the mark and is aiming for destruction. The lighthouse points the way. It gives guidance as to the direction the ship must take. In this sense John is the perfect lighthouse. He says of Jesus that "[Jesus] must increase and I [John] must decrease." We see John the Baptist giving instructions to disciples who had been following him to instead transfer their allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus presents himself to be baptized John tells him that he, Jesus, should be baptizing him. Publicly John declares to the crowds gathered that Jesus of Nazareth is the 'Lamb of God who comes to take away the sins of the world.' In every way John points people to Jesus. He points people to the way. He is the perfect lighthouse.

John is a man sent by God on a mission. He is one who is a true witness. He is a lighthouse, pointing the way in the darkness. And he is a pathfinder. '*He came to bear witness to the light,*' John's gospel says.

He is a pathfinder

to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.

A pathfinder is the person who uses the combination of his observational skills, his knowledge of the terrain and the tools available to him in order to find his way. In the military the pathfinders are the ones who are sent in first, marking the targets and guiding those who come next.

The ancient world, like ours today, was a place of great spiritual and religious confusion. The world was awash in sects, cults, secret societies, and pagan gods. Even within Judaism there was significant disorder as the number of religious options multiplied: there were Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Essenes, Zealots, and more. Like a secret agent dropped behind enemy lines, John the Baptist is sent in first with the mission to blaze the path in the jumble of religious options that were available. It was John the Baptist's job to enable men and women to see and know that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of the promised Messiah. This was his job and he discharged it faithfully.

John is a man sent by God on a mission. He is one who is a true witness. He is a lighthouse, pointing the way in the darkness. And he is a pathfinder. It is important at this point to remember John's purpose: he points us to the true light that is Jesus Christ.

John points to the true light

⁹The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

The means by which John the Baptist discharges his mission, witness and duty is by pointing people to Jesus of Nazareth and declaring that he is the true light who has come from God.

When we say that Jesus Christ is the **true** light, we mean true in four distinct senses. The first is true – the word is undecieving.

True – The Word is Undecieving

The first sense in which Jesus Christ is 'true' is that in him what you see is what you get. This is an important affirmation, for the key competitor of Christ is Satan, who is known as the great deceiver. It is said that Satan has the ability to appear as an angel of light. He looks to be something he is not. Christ is the true light, in contrast to the false light that deceives. There is no deception in Christ. Jesus Christ is God incarnate. He is God the Son. He is the Messiah. Jesus Christ is the essence of truth.

First, Christ is undecieving. Second, Christ is true in that he is real.

True – The Word is Real

The second sense of the word is to say that it is real. When a person accomplishes something real, or noteworthy, or significant in life, we often mark such things by the giving of awards, privileges or special titles to mark the

achievement. If you are a British subject and the Queen confers a knighthood upon you, then you have the right to be addressed as 'sir.' Doctors have 'M. D.' after their name, lawyers have 'esq.', and military officers often carry their rank as an honorary title even after they retire and enter civilian life. Titles and honors such as these mark and honor outstanding members of our human fraternity. It is significant that when we introduce persons at formal occasions we typically do so by reciting a list of the honors and titles which have been earned or awarded to the person. The number of titles and honors possessed by an individual is a reasonable gauge of that person's place and importance within his time.

Jesus Christ is, without a doubt, the most titled person in human history. I heard the story told once of a famous New Testament scholar who had been invited to a seminary to give a lecture and the community anticipated an insightful, scholarly study of some aspect of New Testament studies, for this man was justifiably revered. He approached the podium and in a slow and steady voice he began to name and list the titles of Jesus Christ: Lamb of God, Light of the World, Prince of Peace, Rose of Sharon, Shoot out of the Stump of Jesus, High Priest, etc., continuing in this manner for forty-five minutes.

What is meant when we say that Jesus is the 'true light' in this sense is to say that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all that was suggested, implied, and promised in the types, shadows and imagery of the Old Testament. He fulfills it all. He is the true Temple. Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah. Jesus Christ is the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God. He is the Light of the World. He is our Daily Bread. He is the one who intercedes before God the Father. He is the Lion of Judah, the Rose of Sharon, the Root out of the tree of Jesse. He is the true and perfect king of Israel. He is the chief cornerstone. He is Prince of Peace. The purpose of Jesus Christ's many titles is to show that he is the fulfillment, the completion, of the foreshadowing and promises of the Old Covenant. Everything that the Old Testament pointed toward, finds its real, complete and full fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In the first sense, Jesus Christ is the true light in that he is undeceiving. In the second, that he is real. In the third, he is the true word. He is underived.

True - the Word is Underived

In John 8:58 Jesus says something surprising about himself and his ministry: ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am. Note the change of tense: before Abraham was, I am. Jesus claimed to be eternal. He is the second person of the Trinity. What this means is that he is underived. You and I have beginnings. Jesus does not. He is the true word from all time.

Let me explain what is meant by this affirmation with a humorous illustration. Years ago I owned a copy of the *New Geneva Study Bible* in the *New King James Translation*. I liked it a lot. The man behind the production of this Bible as its

General Editor was R. C. Sproul. As we know, Sproul is orthodox and Reformed. Sproul is one of my personal favorites when it comes to contemporary theologians.

I happened to be present when a pastoral colleague pointed to the dust jacket of the New Geneva Bible. It read, "*Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture*." My colleague said to Dr. Sproul that "does not sound quite right. Is it?" Sproul immediately perceived the problem, thanked my colleague for pointing this out and, smiling, he promised that as soon as the next edition came out we could be sure that it would be corrected. (It was.)

What is the problem with this statement: *Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture*? It is this: that the Reformation has no light of its own. Jesus Christ alone is the only underived light. It is the light of Christ that shines, not the light of the Reformation. For the most part, the Reformers got it right – theologically. However, insofar as the Reformation did 'get it right' it did so because it captured and reflected the one true light of Jesus Christ. It has no 'light' of its own to *bring* to scripture.

Jesus Christ is the true light: he is undecieving; he is real; he is underived. Finally, he is supereminent.

True – The Word is Supereminent

Lastly, he is the supereminent light. What this means is simply that Jesus Christ is separate from all that is ordinary and common. The moon has light. The stars have light. The sun has light. But all the lights of nature pale before him. Theirs is reflected light. Jesus Christ *is* the light. Jesus Christ is superior. His is the highest eminence, rank, and dignity.

Close: John Points to the Pathway of Repentance

As was mentioned, one of John the Baptist's roles was that of a pathfinder and now, in closing, we need to reflect together upon the path he revealed and proclaimed. In the ancient world, as today, there was and is a confusing mix of spiritual and religious options available in our world. When I visit a new town I like to check out the church scene. I have a list of all the Presbyterian, and some other churches, in the New Bern, NC area, where Lois Ann and I will move come September. It's amazing the variety of churches that are out there. Every new church, every storefront, every new philosophy, each new movement, each wave that breaks upon us offers us a path to follow. In the spiritual maze of religious faith and practice there are lots of paths available to be traveled. The problem, of course, is that not all of them lead to a satisfactory destination. For some, perhaps many, the way is a spiritual dead end. They are the road to ruin, the way of spiritual destruction.

John is the pathfinder. He found the right path. John's declaration was a call to repentance. He prepared people for the coming of Jesus Christ by

pronouncing God's anger at sin and speaking of the need to turn from it in sorrow and remorse. John's message prepares the heart by prompting an awareness of sin.

Every now and again I am approached by someone who has heard or read one of my sermons and they take objection to calling people 'sinful.' Typically these folk wish to emphasize God's love and acceptance, looking primarily for that which is seen as positive, upbeat and emotionally uplifting. Telling someone they are a sinner under the judgment of God miserably fails that litmus test.

The problem, of course, is that if you want the right prescription for healing you must first make the right diagnosis of the disease. You do not get healed until you are hurt a little. You have to hear the truth and the truth might hurt a little but it is the truth that will ultimately set you free. The message of John the Baptist to us is that the pathway to God is through Jesus Christ and coming to Jesus Christ involves repentance. The way to God is through repentance.

I am inviting you to Jesus Christ today. Like John the Baptist, I am pointing you towards him. He is the one in whom you should place your faith and trust. Repent; give your heart to him. Ask him to enter your life and make you whole and complete.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

John 1:6- 9

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