

'John the Baptist' Ch. 1:15-36 & 3:22-36

by Charles Alexander

John the Baptist's ministry was a sign of the New Covenant, preparing the way for Jesus and announcing the arrival of the Messiah.

Topics: "New Covenant", "John Baptist"

Description

Charles Alexander delves into the prophetic significance of John the Baptist, emphasizing the deep theological insights often overlooked by theologians. He explores the purpose of John's ministry, highlighting the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant through the baptism of John as a sign of the New Covenant. The sermon reveals John as a figure of towering significance, marking the end of an age and the beginning of a new world, as testified by all four gospel writers. The significance of John's ministry lies in his preparation for the arrival of Messiah and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Transcript

We are not aware that a full investigation of the prophetic significance of John the Baptist has ever been attempted by any former theologian, and we venture on a Herculean task without the aids for which normally we have so much reason to be grateful.

Why did John baptise? What did his baptism really signify? What was the purpose of his ministry? Was it just to announce the arrival of Messiah and point Him out? Was it just to assemble a small nucleus of disciples to welcome and to follow the Saviour on His appearing?

We search in vain for the answers to these questions among theologians past and present. The confusion which exists among them and the contradictory conjectures, the incursions and ventures into Jewish traditions of baptisms and washings and proselytisms, whether, under the Law or of rabbinical origin, leave us in a state of complete perplexity.

The answer lies much deeper than most of the theologians have ever dreamed. To be credible at all, John the Baptist must be seen as a figure of towering significance and his ministry as an earthquake shock marking the end of an age and the beginning of a new world.

To understand the purpose of God in so great and prophetic a man it is necessary to view him through the combined testimony of all four of the gospel writers. Luke gives us a graphic picture of his birth, and the

supernatural manifestations- which went before and after that event.

Matthew and Luke record a vital episode at the close of John's career when he sent from prison, on the eve of his execution, messengers to Christ Jesus to inquire "Art thou he that should come?" In the sequel Christ speaks of the greatness of His servant John and contrasts it with the standing of those who, though least in the Kingdom of God, are greater than he.

John the apostle supplies details which are not included in any of the preceding accounts, and in a close account of the latest utterances of the Forerunner, shows the amazing theological range of the Baptist's mind.

To understand the significance of John and his baptism we must therefore study the descriptions in all four gospels.

We state in advance our conclusions that the reader may pursue our inquiry with that clue to the significance of John which we believe will raise the highest expectations and yield the highest gratification.

John's baptism was the sign of the New Covenant. It derived nothing from the Law for it had no counterpart in any of the Mosaic ceremonies. The attempt to associate it with Jewish proselyte "baptism" so-called is a makeshift attempt to hide the confusion of the commentators. John's baptism was entirely original and unprecedented and if related to anything at all in the Old Testament, it could only be the crossing of the Red Sea when Israel was "baptised unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea"

(1 Cor. 10: 1-2).

As that national "baptism" was not embodied in any Mosaic code but was an historic event which stood absolutely alone as the inaugural fact of the nation's existence, so was John's baptism a sign of the rebirth of the Covenant people, the mystic Israel, the Kingdom of Redemption.

The prophets foretold that a time would come when it would no more be said "The Lord liveth who hath brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but the Lord liveth which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land" (Jeremiah 23: 7-8).

A New and Spiritual Deliverance

We do not at this stage pause to show and prove that these words are to be spiritually and not geographically or nationally understood, but to point out that a prophetic time was indicated when the memory of the Red Sea deliverance would be swallowed up by a far greater deliverance. The preceding verses of Jeremiah show this deliverance to be nothing other than the gospel of divine grace, the New Covenant, the "kingdom of God" introduced by the heavenly king, whose name is Jehovah TZIDKENU - "the Lord our Righteousness" (see Jeremiah 23: 5-6).

It was this "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God" (both terms are used indiscriminately in the gospels), which was the universal expectation of the Jews and which John the Baptist and Christ both announced as being "at hand".

Earthly Israel never understood the spiritual nature of these prophecies, nor does she understand them today - a veil upon their minds indeed, of which Paul the apostle declares, in the gravest of warnings:

"Their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which veil is done away in Christ". (2 Cor. 3:14).

We might add that a corner of this veil is also on the minds of many evangelical expositors and preachers who unwittingly endorse the unbelief of the Jew of John's day and of our own, by maintaining the same earthly views of the kingdom of Christ which led to the martyrdom of John and the crucifixion of the Saviour.

Conversant with these divine mysteries, John was directed by the Holy Spirit to show, in the remarkable sign of baptism, that the time had come for that New Covenant which was to abolish the Old.

Hence the thunders which rolled from the waters of the Jordan as John denounced the Scribes and Pharisees as a brood of vipers who in vain sought to flee from that "wrath to come" which (in this instance) did not relate to the final Judgement Day but to the destruction of their place and nation, temple, priesthood and covenant, in one awful calamity which that generation would suffer scarcely 40 years on.

John's baptism indicated that a new people and kingdom were about to be born. The Red Sea type would be forgotten in a greater baptism - a baptism of the Holy Ghost and of fire - a baptism in which redemption would not be a typical thing but an actual deliverance from sin and its consequences such as Israel had never known except in those pious instances of individual believers who were the elect remnant in a nation otherwise given over to sin and pride, and engulfed, generation after generation, in the filthiness of idolatry and the sins of Sodom.

A mystic nation was to be born - a nation without national boundaries or national characteristics; a nation without a visible king or centre of worship or government; an elect nation of kings and priests whom the world would not see as such; a peculiar people whose only recognisable marks would be their personal holiness and separation from the wickedness of this world, their adoration of their heavenly Redeemer and King and their patient waiting for the glorious hope of His return and their own resurrection to those

"Eternal glories which gleam afar".

The baptism of John therefore was a sign of the New Covenant deliverance about to be introduced through Christ's atoning sacrifice. The death and resurrection and exaltation of Christ would introduce that "Kingdom of Heaven" in which should be fully realised the deliverance of man from the ruin of the Fall.

The Old Covenant established through Moses provided only for a typical and shadowy redemption which could not purge the conscience or truly take away sin. The people of God in the Old Testament waited in eager expectation for the full revelation of divine grace in Christ. They saw it afar off but died in advance of it, "God having provided some better thing for us" (i.e. the people of the New Testament) "that they without us should not be made perfect" (Hebrews 11: 40).

John the Baptist, the last and greatest of the Old Testament people also died in the expectation of this Kingdom of grace, and in that he did not live to see it, "he that is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he" (Matt 11:11) - words which few of the commentators have completely understood but which we shall attempt to elucidate at a later stage of this study.

The part of John the apostle was to fill out the record of the other three evangelists and add a new dimension to the ministry of John the Baptist - of whom he (the apostle) was an early and ardent disciple treasuring up every recollection and every word of the ministry of the great Forerunner.

John (the apostle) begins his history at a point after the baptism of Christ. The references to that baptism in the first chapter are retrospective. Important events have taken place since. Forty days have elapsed since Christ stood in the waters of Jordan with the Forerunner, when the voice of the Father acclaimed from heaven the Only Begotten Son and the Holy Spirit as a dove descended upon Him.

During those 40 days Christ had been in the wilderness, having been "driven" there by the Holy Spirit for the miraculous fast of 40 days and 40 nights and the subsequent temptation in which His divine nature was proved and His perfect Obedience and readiness for the task set before Him were demonstrated.

A Holy Week

He returns to the banks of the Jordan to reveal Himself to the first of the devoted young men who were to be His apostles. It is the second day of a "holy week" recorded by the apostle John. The first day an altercation takes place between the Baptist and emissaries sent from Jerusalem to interrogate him as to his ministry and credentials. He answers them that he is "the voice" described in Isaiah 40 of the one who was to prepare the way of Messiah.

Why then did he baptise? John's reply is solemn and searching:

"I baptise with water, but there standeth one among you whom ye know not; he it is who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose" (v. 26-27).

In these words John did not seek to satisfy the prying curiosity of these evil and sceptical men. "Ye know him not", he declared, for it was part of his ministry to separate between Israel and Israel, between Jew and Jew. There was an Israel which would never recognise their King. There was an inner Israel, an election of grace, by whom alone He would be known. Moreover (says the preacher) He is already here among you. He has lately been on this very spot and I have baptised Him. The expected Messiah is already here in Israel - but you do not know Him, and never will. Yet He is God and Lord of all - He went before me, as I now go before Him, for He was from the beginning and He sent me and ordained me to this ministry.

Day Two of the "holy week" arrives (v. 29). "The next day" John sees Jesus coming to him and he says "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world".

How rich, thorough, and far reaching was the theology and the preaching of this son of Elisabeth! The Holy Trinity, the nature of the Incarnation, the coming Atonement, were all clearly apprehended by him.

This is the point at which it is advisable to refurnish our minds with the earlier history of John.

He was a cousin of Christ (Luke 1: 36) through his mother Elisabeth and the Virgin Mary. Born six months before the Saviour he never met the Son of God till thirty years later at the Baptism in the Jordan. Till then he knew Him not by face (John 1: 31 - 33). Christ was brought up in Nazareth: John in Jerusalem where his father Zacharias was a priest of the temple. In his early manhood John departed from the usual habitations of men and was in the deserts 'till the day of his shewing unto Israel' (Luke 1. 80).

All John knew was that the Messiah had been born. This he had from his mother Elisabeth, and his father, both of whom had prophetic experiences of most remarkable character in connection with the birth of the two children (fully described by Luke in his first chapter).

Christ was identified to John by a divine sign of which John had been warned previously: "Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on him, the same is he which baptiseth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw and bare record that this is the Son of God." (John 1. 33-34).

A difficulty arises from the fact that John appeared to know who Christ was when the Lord first presented himself for baptism in the Jordan. "I have need to be baptised of thee, and comest thou to me?" (Matthew 3: 14). From this it would appear that John was already acquainted with Christ's identity, contrary to the statement in John chapter 1, already quoted above. The two statements are reconciled when we remember that John did not baptise indiscriminately. He refused the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 3: 7), and he required proofs of repentance from all classes which came to him (see Luke 3: 7-14). He preached as well as baptised, and interrogated his 'candidates'. A prior conversation must therefore have taken place with the unknown Lord when He applied for baptism, and there can be no doubt that the nature of that conversation disclosed so superior a knowledge and holiness in the UNKNOWN ONE that John, guided by the unerring spirit of prophecy which was in him, perceived an awesome significance.

Day Three of the "holy week" (John 1: 35-42) records the "calling" of the first two apostles, John and Andrew, disciples of the Baptist who points out the Saviour to them and says again, "Behold the Lamb of God".

This is the function of his prophetic ministry, to stand athwart that division of Divine time when the Old Covenant yields its tribute to the New and passes into the mists of history.

"The Lamb of God" is a description which points back to the first passover, to Abraham's offering of Isaac ("My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering" Gen-22:8), and Abel's lamb (Genesis 4: 4). In the Baptist's ministry, Old Testament type passes into the reality of the fulfilment - "The lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world". Always John the Baptist stands at that same strategic moment of prophetic history.

Day Four records the calling of Philip and Nathanael (v.43) and the week is completed on the third day following, at the marriage in Cana (chap. 2:1). All is measured and weighed in the decrees of God and every day is His appointment.

John's account of the ministry of John the Baptist is resumed in Chap. 3:23, where, in the verses to the end of the chapter, are recorded the last words of the Baptist at the close of his public ministry and shortly before his betrayal, arrest, imprisonment and death.

Where Was "Aenon near to Salim"?

We must go carefully through these verses because they contain the highest theology of all. Every detail is significant, and the whole has bearing, not only upon the eternal purpose of God in Christ, but also upon exegesis, the interpretation of prophecy, and the understanding of the Old Testament.

That John was betrayed to Herod Antipas by the Jewish leaders and that the crime of that weak and foolish successor of Herod the Great (the Herod of the Nativity and of the slaughter of the babes of Bethlehem) was the crime of the Jewish people, is not open to doubt when the geographical details of John's last days are cleared. Very few commentators have perceived this but we recommend to the reader Hengstenberg's masterpiece on the Gospel of John for the true picture of events.

John 3: 23-24 tells us that the Baptist was not yet cast into prison but was baptising at "Aenon near to Salim" because "there was much water there".

The words "not yet" convey ultimacy. The time was about complete. We are, in fact, dealing with the very last phase of John's ministry, recorded only in the Fourth Gospel.

And where was "Aenon near to Salim"? Hendriksen, the modern commentator, a safe man, indeed but without the full equipment for his task, falls into the same error as many another expositor by concluding too readily that "Salim" means "Salem" in Samaria, part of the dominion of Herod Antipas, who reigned also in Galilee.

Hendriksen and the others might have been warned of the error by the note "there was much water there" - an entirely unnecessary piece of information unless it related to a region which otherwise was desert. In fact, the location was not in Herod's domain at all but was in the wilderness of Beersheba south of Judea, far from Herod's country and divided therefrom by Judea itself, where Pontius Pilate was the governor.

The commentators (including Hendriksen) who have blindly followed each other to Samaria for their "Aenon" seem never to have seen the folly of their theory. The idea that John should have baptised Jews in Samaria, the territory of the hated Samaritan people with their mongrel faith and pretension to the inheritance of Abraham, is so impossible as to be positively ludicrous.

Aenon is a contraction of En-Rimmon and means "the fountain (or the oasis) of Rimmon" to which the note "there was much water there" is specially relevant. Salim is the "Shilhim" of Joshua 15:32, located in the vicinity of Ain and Rimmon (same verse) which names, as we have already pointed out, were contracted in the course of the centuries to Aenon.

The topographical details are of great prophetic importance and it is a pity that Hendriksen, with all the aids available to him, did not perceive this.

John the Baptist had incurred the displeasure of Herod because of his denunciation of Herod's unlawful marriage, and under threat of arrest, had left the scene of his former ministry in Herod's dominions, and removed himself to "Aenon near to Salim" where he could pursue the remainder of his task without interference. He was betrayed by the Jewish leaders who hated and feared him for the reasons already described. Without Jewish participation Herod could not have effected his purpose, just as later on, Pilate also was goaded and forced by the Jewish leaders to consent to the crucifixion of Christ. Theirs was the guilt - the crowning guilt - of this two-fold crime by which they denied the testimony of the Old Covenant and the New and proved themselves and their nation to be unfit for the Kingdom of God (see Acts 13:46).

It is of the highest prophetic significance that John the Baptist's flight from Herod followed the same route as that taken by Elijah, in the spirit and power of whose ministry he acted.

It was in the wilderness of Beersheba that Elijah left his servant and pursued his journey alone to Horeb where that Law was promulgated on Sinai, the token of which were repeated to him in the earthquake, wind and fire.

All the circumstances of John's presence at Aenon for the last days of his ministry are a remarkable vindication of Elijah against the merciless attacks of the commentators who allege that Elijah fled through cowardice and not by divine impulse (see our treatise on the Vindication of Elijah).

The repetition of the prophetic flight in Elijah's successor, John the Baptist, clearly shows that the divine appointment was paramount, and superseded all merely human motives and decisions in these two great prophets who are so powerfully linked together across the centuries. Israel should have been warned by the startling coincidence, but Israel was blind and deaf (Isaiah 42:18-20).

John's testimony was concluded. He had spoken his last word. The people of the Old Covenant had rejected their last prophet and their last warning sign. They knew not the time of their visitation.

Henceforward it was to be Christ's day; the dawning of that mystic Kingdom of Grace which was the everlasting purpose of God (see Ephesians 3: 9-11).

The Old Covenant hands over to the New. Moses makes way for Christ. The day dawns. The shadows flee away. Man's redemption has come. Let the whole world know. Let the light shine upon the gentiles. Let those who sit in ancient darkness see a great light and upon those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death, let the light now shine.

After very anxious pondering, we have come to the same conclusion as Hengstenberg, Alford and others, that we have the words of John the Baptist recorded to the end of chapter 3 and not the words of John the Apostle.

It is true that the diction is typical of the apostle, but as he was from the beginning the close and attentive disciple of the Baptist, it could well be that his style was fashioned upon that of his old master.

We like Alford's even "weightier reason" - "the inner coherence of the discourse itself, in which John (the Baptist) explains to his disciples the reason why the Lord must increase, whereas his own dignity was to be eclipsed before Him".

We proceed therefore:

The Theology of John the Baptist

The theology of John the Baptist was amazingly complete. As a prophet his was an inspired knowledge of course, but it was none-the-less matured and established during those years of meditation in the deserts when, in the full knowledge that he was "the Elijah who was to come" he pondered over all the prophets who had gone before him.

"Filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb" he dwelt deeply in the sacred writings and received direct communications from the Holy Spirit concerning his office and destiny, with a fulness of revelation unexampled in all the annals of Israel's history. Something of his great grasp of the meaning of Holy Scripture is to be noted in that disciple his, Apollos of Alexandria, who later became famous for being "mighty in the Scriptures" even before he received through Aquila and Priscilla the full N.T. enlightenment (Acts 18: 24-28). Apollos "mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the Scriptures (i.e. the O.T. Scriptures) that Jesus was Christ".

Why John Was Rejected

Perceiving that he was the herald of the New Covenant, John visualised a dynamic change in the divine economy when Christ should appear. None more clearly than he understood that law, temple and priesthood were only preparatory to Messiah's kingdom and must give place to it when it arrived:

"Think not to say within yourselves, we have

Abraham to our father...." (Matt. 3:9)

"It was for this very reason (that is, his "Spiritualising" of prophecy concerning the Kingdom of Messiah), that John's ministry was rejected by the rulers of the Jews. Contrary to all that the rabbis taught (and still teach), John held that the expected kingdom was spiritual and not earthly, and the O.T. prophets must be understood in that sense and no other.

We have already pointed out that his baptism was not a Jewish rite and had no place in the Mosaic code. It derived nothing from the Law but was a sign of the New Testament Kingdom of Heaven, the abolition of the old economy, and the establishment of an order which should never pass away.

A Mighty Peroration

John's mighty peroration to his ministry (John 3: 27-36) arises out of a dispute between his disciples and the Jews about "purifying" (v.25). The increasing fame of Christ and the fact that more were attending HIS baptism than John's, roused the disciples of John to apply to their master for an explanation. His time fast running out, John in a few noble and tremendous sentences summarises his entire ministry and its significance in relation to the Messiah.

What a majestic procession of thought is here! What a symphony composed of theology's grandest chords! What a crescendo of revelation, its diapason swelling louder and louder till it reaches its fullness in words which ascribe to Christ the supreme authority of deity - the right to determine the issues of life and death eternal, in all creatures.

In this incomparable passage the Baptist completes his public function as the appointed representative of the Old Covenant. He hands over to the Son of God the completed mission of the Old Testament, yielding to Him of whom the Scriptures had testified from the beginning, all the honours and tributes of a passing dispensation. Its dignities and glories he places beneath the feet of heaven's eternal King who now comes to reign. The long night has ended. The moon yields its silvery splendours to the glorious gospel dawn.

John's final statement of his theology and the significance of his ministry arises (John 3: 25) from a dispute between some of his disciples and 'the Jews' about purifying. The relative importance of John's baptism in relation to that now being more and more extensively practised by the disciples of Christ, was an inevitable subject of dispute. Which one was valid? Did the one displace the other? The question was referred to the prophet John himself and forms the basis, as we have pointed out, of one of the grandest of all theological statements.

John says in effect that his task was completed when Christ Himself moved into the public view.

Already (chapter 1) John had shown the nature and extent of Messiah's work and kingdom. Messiah was to be no mere Jewish king, but was appointed to be the Atoning Lamb of sacrifice whose reconciling work would extend to earth's utmost bounds. He (Messiah) would be in Himself divine, for only God could baptise with the Spirit of God ("He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire"). John's theology contained the essential elements of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, for he was witness of the baptismal announcement when the voice of the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son" and the form of a descending dove alighting and remaining on Christ indicated the presence of the Third Person in His office of communicating through Christ the powers of the Godhead.

Now as he was about to lay down his completed task, John enlarges upon this revelation of the "mystery of Christ". "A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven" (John 3: 27).

We accept the view that John is speaking of himself and not of Christ or of them both. John was not the kind of man to bracket himself with the Lord of Glory in a mere generalisation. We like how Hengstenberg puts it:

"It can scarcely be doubted that 'anthropos' (man) here is emphatic, containing in itself the ground of the axiom, and corresponding to verse 31 'of the earth', to which it stands in all the closer relation because 'the man of the earth' occurs in the original passage, Psalm 10:18. The use of 'anthropos' and the reference contained in it to his inferiority of position, who must be content with whatsoever lot is assigned to him, is explained by Ecclesiastes 6:10, 'That which he is, he hath long been named, and it is known that he is man; neither may he contend with Him that is mightier than he' (Heng. trans.). And the words, 'given from heaven' apply more appropriately to John than to Jesus, who according to the following verses comes from above, is God's Son and representative on earth, and possesses what He has, not as a free gift, but as the emanation of His whole personality."

"The Friend of the Bridegroom"

John's theology ranges through every portion of the Old Testament prophecies. From the Song of Solomon he takes the poetic description of Christ as the mystic bridegroom:

"He that hath the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. This my joy therefore is fulfilled." (John 3: 29).

The "friend of the bridegroom" is the person responsible for the marriage arrangements. All things are made ready and then he stands aside to make way for the bridegroom. Thus does John the Baptist fulfil his mission as the Servant of the Old Covenant, setting the scene for the great New Covenant marriage, and faithfully completing his task of preparation till the Bridegroom's voice is heard.

That the reference to the bridegroom and the marriage was no casual figure of speech is confirmed by the words of the Saviour when replying to the question put by John's disciples: "Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?"

The Lord says: "Can, the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast".

(Matt. 9: 14-15)

"He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3: 30).

No, John was not providing a convenient tag-text for Convention speakers vaguely struggling to find a persuasive to self-abnegation. John's religion was more real and robust than that. He was proclaiming in these words the fading out of that Old Covenant, the last word of which was vested in himself as its latest voice. The son of Elisabeth (the daughter of Aaron) and of Zecharias, the godly priest of Israel, had been taught the prophetic song uttered at his birth: "The dayspring from on high hath visited us" (Luke 1: 78) and he proclaimed in those terms the disappearance of the Law before the full glory of the gospel Kingdom of Christ.

No note of self interest ever darkened John's utter consecration to Christ. He had too full and close a view of the awful supremacy and dignity of the One for whom he acted as herald.

Well would it have been for the evangelical cause in the last 100 years if "convention" doctrine had dwelt more upon the overwhelming greatness and sovereignty of the Redeemer than upon His alleged helplessness until the eternal powers vested in Him were granted a favourable release by the omnipotent will and pleasure of the creature.

Alas for these fervid appeals for 'consecration' addressed year by year to Christians whom the platform thrashes unmercifully to the altar with the formula "You have taken Christ as Saviour but not as Lord". So monstrous a disfigurement of true conversion could surely have obtained a footing only in a day such as ours when the flame of true theology has been dimmed and a dreamy devotionalism which loves itself almost to distraction has taken its place. Conversion without repentance, sanctification without mortification, faith without the cross of discipleship and holiness without conflict, are only too congenial to the modern Christian palate.

Errors of this nature could never have been found in the Baptist. "He must increase - I must decrease" was a plain enough statement that the Old Covenant of which he was the spokesman was fading away so that the light of the New might shine with brightness ten thousand times more glorious.

"He that cometh from above is above all; he that is of the earth is earthly and speaketh of the earth. He that cometh from heaven is above all". John 3: 31

John the Baptist shows in these words that he clearly perceived in his theology that Messiah was not just a remote descendant of David but was in fact the King of Heaven, the Lord of Creation and of the Ages, the Eternal God come down.

Christ "cometh from above". He, John, was of this earth, earthly. Here is John's doctrine of the Son. His theology presented Christ as the Revealer of the Father - no mere prophet like himself. He saw Christ as One who spoke direct from Himself of what He only knew or could know, who dwelt eternally in the bosom of the Father.

Christ came down from the eternal glory - stepped down from the throne of omnipotence - descended in Person from the majesty of the Godhead to fulfil that redemptive task given to Him in the Everlasting Covenant before the foundations of the world were laid.

"He that is of the earth" is John's description of himself as a member of Adam's race. "Dust thou art". "He remembereth that we are but flesh, a wind that passeth away".

Who then is John? Who is Paul? Who is Peter? Who is Apollos? Let no-one suppose that God has hinged His everlasting glories and His allwise plans upon the wills and dispositions of men. Redemption is dependant upon His, own eternal decrees, determinations and counsels. By all-wise predestination He has purposed all that comes to pass and has pledged Himself in unbreakable Covenant that the Son should be glorified and the Father in Him and that the Bridegroom should have His Bride and eternity its great Marriage Day.

John's "earthly" things were the things of the Old Covenant which was only an outward and visible portrait of the inner and spiritual glory of redemption. Paul fills this out in the Epistle to the Hebrews. "The Law, having a shadow of good, things to come and not the very image of those things ..."

(Heb 10: 1)

The Old Covenant dealt in earthly things - sacrifices of birds and beasts, washings, feasts, temples, robes of priests, oil of anointing and a thousand other temporalities. Christ proclaimed the end of all these and brought in the eternal realities - invisibilities all, belonging to the Spirit and not to the earth.

"Neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem...." (John 4: 21).

How say some, therefore, that Jerusalem and all its earthliness, its temple and priests and earthly monarchy, will be re-established in defiance of this spiritual word and kingdom?

"And what he hath seen and heard that he testifieth: and no man receiveth his testimony". (John 3: 32)

What a revelation is this, which the son of Elisabeth has to give to us, of the awful dignity of that One who came to testify what He only had "seen and heard".

He who is above all and "cometh from heaven" brings with Him from the everlasting glories a revealing of the Godhead which only One who dwelt there eternally in the bosom of the Father could disclose.

"And no man receiveth his testimony", for no man can of himself grasp so glorious a word as this. Only they can receive it to whom it is the pleasure of the Son to reveal it (Matthew 11: 27).

"He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true." (John 3: 33).

Here is the reversal of the lying insinuation of Eden and the fall of man. The essence of every sin is the denial of the truth of God, and carries the imputation that God is not good. The gospel revelation vindicates the character of God and asserts His truth: "that God might be just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus" (Romans 3: 26). The testimony which Christ brings from above is the full, eternal truth of the character of God and the faith which receives it vindicates the name of God from every lying insinuation and slander that sin has ever put upon it.

Higher yet soars John in this dramatic peroration. This Christ, this Only Begotten Son, is given the Spirit without and above measure. And truly He who has the Spirit of God without measure is God manifest in the flesh. The message Christ brings from heaven is the direct speech of the Godhead. That the Spirit was so given to Christ belongs to His incarnation. Therefore in His incarnation he suffered no diminution of His Godhead but remained what He always was, in obedience to the Father's will.

Now is the supreme point of all theology reached. This is the inaccessible summit of all divinity:

"THE FATHER LOVETH THE SON AND HATH GIVEN ALL THINGS INTO HIS HAND" (verse 35)

Herein John expresses the heart of the Eternal, the REASON for all things, the meaning and purpose of Creation, and the secret of the life of God. All things are for Christ in the eternal love of the Father, returning again to the Father in the filial love of the Second Person, in an act of holy submission to the Father's will, so that the Father is glorified in the Son, and the obedient Son receives all things as His eternal reward.

This love of Father and Son in the mysterious communication of the Third Person, the Holy Spirit, is the central fact of all being. In that love lies the secret of the Everlasting Covenant, the meaning of Redemption, and the guarantee that all things which God ever set out to do will be gloriously and

completely fulfilled.

The 'all things' include the Father's name and glory, wisdom, power and truth. The 'all things' include the Son's wedding gift - a glorious bride whom He loved from the beginning and for whom He left heaven's glory to become the poorest of all that He might make her rich. The throne of heaven is His reward, and the promise that all foes shall be made His footstool. He inherits the glory that was always His

(John 17:5).

All was determined and decreed in the Everlasting Covenant established before the world was when in the incomprehensible depths of the Father's bosom the Son accepted the Father's will that He should glorify the Father's Name, vindicate that Name, from all that would ever be uttered against it, and in the process of death and rising again, bring in a new and redeemed creation in which God should be all in all.

Creation ends as it began, with a marriage, and redeemed humanity finds its true destiny with Christ its head, as partner in His throne and His glory.

John the Baptist saw it all and so expressed it to his disciples as thus he concluded his ministry in the solemn words,

"He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life. He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but, the wrath of God abideth on him." (John 3: 36)

All is determined in Christ and for Christ. There is a faith in Him which issues even now in eternal life. There is an unbelief which places the soul finally and irrevocably beyond the region of grace - a sin against the Holy Ghost which has no forgiveness either in this world or in that which is to come. That sin, even while John was speaking, was in process of being committed by the Israel to whom his ministry came as the last warning before the Old Covenant in which they boasted was shaken down.

"It is with this final word of promise and of terror that

John closes his ministry" - Lange

The Old Covenant Hands Over to the New

The last prophet of the Old Testament hands over his commission to the Great Prophet of the New Covenant. He has performed his last and greatest office - the public inauguration of the Mediator of the New Testament by the last man vested with the authority of the Old.

O, great and worthy man! Representative of all the grandeur of that order which now dies with thee! Thy task is done. The ministry of the Law is ended. Now let the Gospel begin in all its effulgence and glory.

Thou, John, hast most worthily upheld the righteous authority of the Law. Here before thee now stands the greater than Moses, than Abraham, than David. He, like thyself, born a child of the Law and subject to all its righteousness. Presented in thy holy temple, the sacrifice of the poorest worshipper offered there thankfully for His birth. Knowing that thy day is over and done as the splendour of the dayspring from on high dims the lesser light of rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices, thou didst conduct thy Lord into the waters of the Jordan and there immerse Him in that great stream, which divides the ages, conferring upon Him all the honours of the Old and acknowledging publicly that the Old ends where He and His New Covenant begin.

Let Israel take notice. Her last and greatest prophet bows the knee before Him who is the Lord of heaven and earth and declares "I am not worthy to stoop down and unclasp the latchet of His shoe. Who am I? I am but the friend of the bridegroom. His voice now I hear. This my joy is at last fulfilled. Let me retire now into the honourable shadows of a martyr's death and let the nuptials proceed henceforth between Christ and His glorious bride, the Church".

This is the significance of John. This is why his ministry was necessary - not just to herald and announce Christ' coming but beyond all that to confer upon Him the blessing and the worship of the Old Covenant and show that in Him the Old is fulfilled, prophecy is complete, and the Kingdom of God is established.

O that Israel had given heed! "Oh that my people had hearkened unto me and Israel had walked in my ways!" (Psalm 81: 13)

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killest the prophets and stonest them whom God sends unto thee! Behold thy house is left unto thee desolate. Verily I say unto thee, thou shalt not see me henceforth until thou say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord".

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT TO THIS ISSUE

"THE PROPHETISM OF THE FOUR GOSPELS"

Following up this instalment of the Spiritual Exposition of John's Gospel, a special supplement will be issued to all our readers on

THE PROPHETISM OF THE FOUR GOSPELS.

This supplement will be issued free and will not be counted against any subscriptions paid for the series. The object will be first of all to amplify the study of "The Significance of John the Baptist", by the important testimony born by Christ to His forerunner in Matthew 11 (also recorded in Luke) with the exposition of the eleventh verse of that chapter, wherein Christ declares that "he who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John the Baptist".

Secondly, the opportunity will be taken to show the prophetic purpose of the first three Gospels (especially that of Matthew) by an Introduction to the study of the Gospels designed to lift them above, the category of "synopticism" so beloved by theologians ill-equipped to perceive the deep purpose of the Holy Spirit in preparing for that great transition from Old Covenant to New upon which so much true interpretation of the Word of God depends.

The supplement has grown to dimensions which make it impracticable for issue except as a separate undertaking. It will be delayed by the vacation period and issued as soon as possible thereafter.

We have been greatly encouraged by the general reception of our series on John, and are grateful for all correspondence testifying to help and enlightenment received.

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