

John the Baptist—A Man with a Mission

Defining the Future of the Church in IAD

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Introduction

We have already talked this weekend about the importance of mission statements in organizational life. And we have considered yesterday the reality that the Holy Spirit superintends the mission. In our brief deliberation this morning, we shall reflect on the individual and mission. Our teaching example will be John the Baptist—a man with a mission.

Matthew chapter 11 records the story of disciples, sent by John the Baptist, to enquire about the identity of Jesus. After a brief conversation with Jesus these disciples leave and Jesus addresses the crowd:

“Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” —John 11:11 (NKJV)

The words of Jesus here are puzzling in a way. John the Baptist is the greatest, but he who is least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist. How are we to understand such language. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that in the kingdom of God human comparisons of greatness or smallness have no place.

What is so great about John the Baptist? What was there about him that merits this description? What did Jesus see in him but not in others?

At first glance he seems an unlikely hero or model. We are generally acquainted with John the Baptist because he forms an integral part of the story of Jesus. However, it is an introductory role—like the salad before the main meal, or the song service before the opening prayer. John the Baptist is prelude but Jesus is the main feature.

And there are other reasons also why John the Baptist is not often cited for our admiration and example. He appears to be somewhat of an

odd ball—wore clothes of camel’s hair and a leather belt. He lived in the desert and had a fairly sparse diet—locusts (the vegetarian variety) and wild honey. His manner of speaking was rather straight forward. Remember, he called the Pharisees and Sadducee a brood of vipers—not an endearing compliment.

His ministry career seems to have been rather short. He came on the scene as a brilliant light and then faded away from view. In terms that we might understand in our organization, “He didn’t even complete a full term.”

In spite of these apparent anomalies Jesus considers that there has never been someone greater than John—and could that possibly mean that John ranks among such luminaries as Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah and Daniel. True, Jesus also said that the person who is least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist so maybe there is no point in comparing people with people to figure out where John ranks. No matter how you settle the apparent contradiction Jesus wanted people to notice something significant about John.

I believe that John’s greatness comes in great measure from his awareness of the right answers to life’s great questions—the three questions with which every person wrestles:

Who are you?
What do you do?
What matters most?

Simple yet profound questions. The answers that one gives to these simple questions have the greatest impact on one’s life and mission.

1. Who are you?—A question of identity.

“Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I

am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD," ' as the prophet Isaiah said." — John 1:19-23 (NKJV)

The question, "Who are you?" is one of the most frequent questions in life.

We all have many identities and how we answer the question "Who are you?" depends on where we are and who is asking. I am a man, a husband, a father, a son, a brother, a relative, a friend, a colleague, perhaps an enemy, a graduate, a student, a Canadian, a minister, a mechanic of sorts. I am not a doctor, a musician, a lawyer, a banker or a cook. I am sometimes happy, other times sad, timid and occasionally bold, confused often and certain once in a while. No wonder it is difficult to answer the question "Who are you?" I have so many identities.

Look carefully at how John the Baptist answered this question. His answer came not from his ancestry, his family, his education, his citizenship or his hobbies. His identity was found in his calling: I am a messenger for God! This realization formed the foundation of his life, his behavior and his habits.

No doubt, like us, John had many other identities too. But the dominant identity which shaped and prioritized his life was the simple realization that he was a messenger for God.

Why is identity so important?

When a person is lost in the wilderness the most important question is "Where am I?" When a person is lost in life the most important question is "Who am I?"

We solve life's moral, ethical and behavioral questions on the basis of how this one question is answered.

Examples from life abound: A war of genocide was fought in Rwanda during the 90's and the key identity issue was "I am a Hutu, he is a Tutsi." There are numerous identity conflicts: "I am an Indian, she is Pakistani."; "I am white, he is black"; "I am a Christian. My neighbor is a Hindu"; "I am an Adventist. She is a Catholic."; "I've been an elder in this church for 20 years. You are a first-time deacon—and you expect to tell me how things should be run?"

What mother is there among us who has not heard words like this from her daughter: "Mom, I need those jeans. All the kids in school are wearing them. If I wear what you like I'll look like a freak."

The Bible record reveals that great moral issues have been resolved on the understanding of one's identity:

"By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward." — Hebrews 11:24-26 (NKJV)

Joseph, whom I presume had the normal range of men's passions, was paying more attention to his identity than to his hormones when he said. "...How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" — Genesis 39:9 (NKJV)

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, remonstrates with the Corinthian believers that their strife and divisions in the church proceed from a faulty sense of identity. "For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Appollos,' are you not mere men?" The he concludes, "For we are God's fellow workers..." and that is the realization that Paul urged in order to settle strife in the church.

"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ..." — Philipians 3:20 (NKJV)

2. What do you do?—A question of mission.

The leaders of the Jews didn't understand who John was nor did they comprehend what he was doing. So they asked him: "Why are you baptizing...?" (John 1: 24...)

"John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose." The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ... Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God!" — John 1:26-36 (NKJV)

John's work, his mission, was to bring attention to Jesus. For John, the question, "What do you do?" is not a question about action; it is a question about intention.

Illustration: Three workmen at a construction site. Each is asked the question, "What are you doing?" The first worker is cutting a piece of wood and he answers, "I am making a door." The second is using a shovel and he answers, "I am digging a hole." The third is carrying stones and he answers, "I am building a cathedral."

Which of these three employees experienced the greatest satisfaction from his work? Obviously, it is the one who had the biggest view of mission.

The challenge to the church through all centuries has always been to keep the focus on Jesus. Church history, even our own, has too often been a story of doctrinal debate—this formulation of truth and correction of that error. Attention has been directed to standards and boundaries and when these become the central focus they always bring imbalance. We need to learn how to make Jesus the center, then all the boundaries will find their proper place. John opened the curtains and leaves Jesus occupying center stage.

Who are you? I am a messenger for God.
What do you do? I bring attention to Jesus.

Let's pause here long enough to observe what effect identity and mission had on John. His sense of identity enabled him to solve moral and ethical challenges. His sense of mission released him from the prison and pressures of local culture. This dominating sense of identity and mission enabled John to live counter to the prevailing culture. He was not concerned about fashion in clothing, diet or lifestyle. He was an ambassador for the King of Kings and he followed a discipline that enhanced his message.

Now the question is, "How does the prevailing culture affect the church?" A person without a sense of identity and mission is going to become a victim of the prevailing culture in which he lives. And the danger for the nominal Christian is that he/she will soon regard the prevailing culture as being acceptable in Christianity.

The church that marries the spirit of an age becomes a widow in the next generation. —Dean William Inge, quoted in *Context* (3/15/1997)

3. What matters most?—A question of priorities.

"Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. And they came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified--behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!'" — John 3:25, 26 (NKJV)

Notice what is happening in this episode. The ministry of Jesus and John apparently overlap. For a while John has been the center of attention. People flocked to hear him. (See Luke 3:1-19.) John preached a message of personal integrity and social responsibility in the light of a new kingdom. He was just reaching full stride when Jesus began His ministry—and then people began to go to Jesus instead of to John. There is a threat, a transition in leadership, a shift in influence and popularity.

Some of John's disciples came to him and asked about the rising popularity of Jesus. Can you just feel the tension in the air?

John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." —John 3:27-30 (NKJV)

How easy it would be for John to feel injured, neglected, threatened and forgotten. Sometimes the sympathy of a friend can be the worst possible thing. It can make us feel sorry for ourselves. And when we start feeling sorry for ourselves we lose the capacity to be honest.

How often we wish we had a more prominent role in organizational or public life. Why didn't God give me a voice like Pavarotti, why couldn't I be a famous evangelist like Alejandro Bullon? The time is coming in our Church cycle of events when elections will take place that GC, at Divisions, Unions and Local Fields. Some people will be appointed and some will be disappointed.

Why do some people always get jobs in the cities while I have to work out in the country? Why are some people always in the limelight and I am in the shadows? Why does Pastor X always have his name in the headlines and I never appear in the footnotes?

But John didn't fall into that trap of self-pity and comparison with others. He had settled the question of what was most important in life. For him, the most important thing was the kingdom of God and therefore he could joyfully say: "He must increase but I must decrease." What an astounding statement! He was prepared to play a subordinate role. What happened to him mattered not as long as he could be involved in the emerging kingdom of God.

John the Baptist teaches a critically important lesson about ministry and influence. If God wants to use you He doesn't need to give you a

position of leadership.

John saw himself unworthy to untie the sandals of Jesus' feet. In John's day there was a rabbinic saying that "a disciple might do for his master anything that a servant did, except only to untie his sandals." Untying one's sandals was the most menial task and was relegated to slaves.

John's view was that it is a noble thing to serve God where you are. If you are a tax collector be a good one. If you are a janitor, do your job to the glory of God. If you are a teacher, a secretary, a department director, or a receptionist—view your work as ministry for God. Whether you are in the limelight or in obscurity it makes no difference for a God-given task of any size is a noble calling.

The subtle question that lay behind the questioning of John's disciples was really this: "What ultimately concerns you? What are you spending and being spent for? What cause consumes your life? To what or whom are you committed?"

In the 1950s theologian Paul Tillich published a book that became a classic. *Dynamics of Faith* challenged us to think with new honesty about priorities and the hungers we have in life. Real idolatry, according to Tillich, is not the worship of statues or pagan altars. Idolatry is the business of committing ourselves and betting our lives on finite centers of value, on things of transitory worth.

John wasn't influenced by visible measurements of success. The normal human tendency is to become so personally identified with our project and our activity that we are unable to make an objective assessment regarding its discontinuance. John retained a healthy humility regardless of circumstances.

And in the midst of that reality he faced a horrible injustice of imprisonment and death. Just imagine the misery of a man who has grown up with the vast wilderness of the desert for his home who now is confined to a few square feet of space in a dark prison cell. He is there because he spoke courageously against immorality. And he suffers death

at the hands of a fickle ruler and vengeful woman.

Perhaps now we can understand why Jesus said what he did about John the Baptist. The three great questions which he faced are questions for people of all time. John's answers deserve careful consideration:

Who are you?	I am a messenger for God.
What do you do?	I bring attention to Jesus.
What matters most?	Nothing here is as important as the kingdom of God.

He was truly a man with a mission!