

“A Wonderful Example”

John 3:22-30

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Text Comment

We have now the second section in John’s Gospel given over to the testimony of John the Baptist to the Lord Jesus. In what follows I will try to make clear whether the “John” I am talking about is the Baptist or the Evangelist, the writer of the Gospel.

- v.22 As John will clarify in 4:2, the Lord himself did not baptize, but his disciples did.
- v.23 The NIV’s “plenty of water” is literally “many waters” which means “many springs.” “Aenon” means “springs.”
- v.24 This is an important clarification on John’s part. The Synoptic gospels begin with John’s imprisonment and the Lord’s ministry in Galilee that followed John’s imprisonment. People who knew the story would have known that the Lord’s ministry *followed* John’s imprisonment. John is explaining that the ministry of the Lord in Judea that he is relating here occurred *before* John’s imprisonment and the commencement of the Lord’s Galilean ministry reported in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is another indication that John is writing with the account of the other three gospels well in mind and is filling out the picture. Between the Lord’s baptism and the commencement of his ministry in Galilee, there was a time when the Lord and John the Baptist worked side-by-side.
- v.26 John doesn’t tell us the exact nature of the dispute. But, however it developed, it resulted in their asking their master about the rising popularity of Jesus and that he also was baptizing, as John was. Perhaps “the certain Jew” mentioned in v. 25 was impressed with Jesus and had asked about the difference between John’s baptism and Jesus’. Perhaps John’s disciples had picked the argument when they learned that this man was more impressed with Jesus than with John the Baptist!
- v.27 John replies in the form of an aphorism or universal axiom. A man does not have anything that he has not received from God. And the Baptist is applying that truth to his own case. He was called by God to be the forerunner; he can be nothing else; he aspires to be nothing else. To be envious of the Messiah’s position would be ingratitude to God for the ministry he had been given, rebellion against the calling the Lord had given him, and unbelief in the Messiah himself.
- v.29 “The friend of the bridegroom” was something like our “best man.” Clearly he does not take center stage, that is for the groom, but it is his pleasure, because he loves his friend, to help make the wedding a success.

Many of you have read, at one time or another, Andrew Bonar’s celebrated *Memoir* of the young Scottish pastor, Robert Murray McCheyne. McCheyne died, in March, 1843, just shy of his

thirtieth birthday, but left a legacy that continues to pay large dividends still today, more than 150 years later. That is all the more striking because McCheyne wrote no important books, he was not the leader of any movement, he was not the founder of any great institution. McCheyne was loved in his own time and has been famous ever since almost entirely for what he *was*, not for what he *did*. And what he was was a remarkably godly and Christlike man. He had once said, if you remember, that he aspired to be as holy as a redeemed sinner can be. And he must have come far nearer the mark than most Christians ever come, so great was the effect of his character on those who knew him.

Robert Candlish, a great Christian minister and scholar, a much more consequential man as we ordinarily measure such things, knew McCheyne and wrote this about him.

“Assuredly he had more of the mind of his Master than almost any one I ever knew, and realized to me more of the likeness of the beloved disciple.” [Smellie, 172] How would you like someone wise and important to compare you to the Apostle John?

Alexander Moody Stuart, another Scottish minister of the period, remarked that what impressed him about McCheyne was that his holiness, his Christlikeness seemed so natural. He was a man who impressed virtually everyone who met him with his humility, his sincerity, his grace, and, especially, his devotion to Jesus Christ. He had a weak body but a very great heart and in his love for Christ he has often been compared to Samuel Rutherford.

Well, you may remember the story. McCheyne and several other Scottish ministers, Andrew Bonar among them, were appointed by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to travel to the Holy Land – in those days a much greater adventure than it is today – to assess the prospects for missionary work there under the auspices of the Scottish church. This was a time when Christians were thinking again about Paul’s teaching in Romans chapter 11 and the place of the salvation of Israel in the Bible’s prophetic scheme. So there was a new enthusiasm for evangelism among Jews. There was no surprise in the choice of McCheyne to be a part of the deputation. He was an evangelist and a missionary *par excellence*. He traveled so much in Scotland on evangelistic endeavors that his horse's name was “Church Extension.”

At any rate, off they went on a journey that was to last from March to November of 1839. It was a most interesting trip with adventures of various kinds. But that is not the most interesting part of the story. While McCheyne was gone from his pulpit at St. Peter’s in Dundee, his replacement was William Burns – this the same Burns who would later be the celebrated missionary to China. How fortunate can a single congregation be, to have for its pastor Robert McCheyne and for its interim, William Burns? In any case, under the preaching of William Burns, revival, and an extraordinarily powerful revival, broke out in St. Peters. It was part of a revival that was sweeping Scotland at the time. In Dundee it was a case of Burns reaping what McCheyne had sown.

Communication was slow in those days, and reports of the revival in his congregation did not reach McCheyne until he was in Hamburg, Germany on his way home. It was a remarkable time in Dundee. Twenty, thirty, even forty people would come to Burns in a single day and ask, “What must I do to be saved?” Scores of people were brought to new life in Christ, often through

the most powerful experiences of conviction of sin and then ecstasy in salvation. The church was crowded beyond belief and the preaching of the Word was regularly accompanied by weeping as soul after soul fell under the spell of the Holy Spirit.

As Bonar tells the story, upon his return McCheyne fell immediately into the work, the revival continued, and Burns went on to other fields of fruitful ministry. But, as you might have guessed, there was more to the story than that! Just imagine the temptations produced by such a circumstance: a revival of tremendous power and producing tremendous change in people's lives, all while the pastor is gone and another is in his place! Think of all the people who owed their eternal life to William Burns and what they thought when McCheyne returned to take up again his pastorate. McCheyne himself says somewhere that envy is the besetting sin of the ministry. Was he telling us his own inward struggles at that time?

Other writers fill out the picture. It is remarkable to read with what joy the largest part of the congregation did welcome him home and immediately set their desire to hear the Word of God upon his sermons instead of those of William Burns. But, as you might have guessed, there were those who made no secret of the fact that they were disappointed to have their pastor back, and for awhile in the church there was a situation in which some said, "I am of Paul" and others, "I am of Apollos."

Well, I tell you that story to help you feel what must have been in the hearts of John's disciples as they saw the great man to whom they had given their love and loyalty and who had been so instrumental in their lives, displaced in the affection of the multitudes by another. You can hear the resentment, the envy, in their words: "everyone is going to him." They were afraid that they were already seeing the setting of the great John the Baptist's sun. They resented the building popularity of Jesus of Nazareth. While the two great men were working nearly side by side it was becoming evident that more were going to the Lord than were any longer coming to John. Jesus worked miracles, after all. John did not. Perhaps it was this "certain Jew" who brought this information to John's disciples and asked them what they thought about it. As so often, the actual question that was discussed was the nature and effect of ceremonial washing, such as John's baptism and the baptism of Jesus. But, what was really being discussed, perhaps, was the relative value of each. Whose baptism was more important?

It is a good comparison of situation, this between McCheyne and John the Baptist, both of which had been displaced by another in the Lord's work. Because many said of McCheyne that he was the greatest man, the godliest man they ever knew. But it was the Savior himself, on another occasion, who said of John the Baptist, that he was the greatest man ever born of woman.

And now, after what must have been a relatively brief, although meteoric career, his disciples could already see the handwriting on the wall. The great man's time had come and gone; already there was a new star on the horizon, already the multitudes were preferring the ministry of another.

So, it was entirely natural for them to take the occasion of a theological discussion they had with someone to raise the issue that was really on their minds. What about Jesus, Master? What do you think of him? You can hear the envy, the jealousy in their voices. It isn't right that a man as

great as John the Baptist should be so quickly displaced. You can hear the irritation at Jesus in those words, “well, he is baptizing – he has taken a page from your book, he is copying you, he is using *your* method – and *everyone is going to him!*”

But what an astonishing reply they got back from John. What a truly great man he was. This is what the greatest man ever born said when other men would have found some subtle way to express their envy.

“The Lord gave me a summons. It was a remarkable calling and it was an immense honor for someone as unworthy as I to fulfill it. What is amazing to me is not that the crowds are heading after Jesus, but that the people came in such numbers to hear a man like me. It was all the Lord’s doing. What is more, remember, I told you that I was not the Christ; only the forerunner of the Christ. Jesus, however *is* the Christ of God. You heard me say that he is the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. It is joy for me to see him, to know that he is here in the world, to know that the age of the Messiah is dawning over the world. I am like a best man at a wedding. I feel honored to stand next to the groom, to be known as his close friend, and it is a great pleasure to attend the ceremony precisely because I am Jesus’ friend and his pleasure is my pleasure. Listen, my friends, what you see now, the crowds leaving me and going over to Jesus, that is just the beginning. It will continue. It must continue, until everyone is with him and no one is left with me. And, when that has come to pass, I will feel, with a perfect satisfaction, that I have done the work that God graciously gave me to do. Jesus must increase, I must decrease, because he is the Son of God, I am not; he is the Savior of sinners, my Savior, I am not; he is the Messiah, I am not; he can baptize with the Holy Spirit, I cannot.”

Now, John the Evangelist is interested in this magnificent testimony, in the first place, because of the evidence in it of Christ’s messiahship. No one knew better than John the Baptist that Jesus was the Christ the Son of God, and to hear him say so means a great deal. Which is why we now hear him say it for the second time in the Gospel.

But John is also interested in faith, in the response of the heart and mind to Jesus Christ. He wants to elicit faith in Jesus Christ and it is essential, therefore, that people know what faith is, what it means to believe in Jesus and follow him. And John the Baptist here provides a nearly perfect illustration of this true and living faith in Jesus. John the Baptist is the first great Christian believer in the Gospel of John. He is the exemplar of true faith in Jesus Christ.

Because John knew that Jesus was the Christ and the Savior, he realized that he must look to him, not to himself. Jesus Christ had to be first, not himself, John’s life had to be lived for Christ.

We can put John’s thinking this way. If Jesus is God the Son now come into the world to take away my sins; if he is really the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; if Jesus is really the Messiah, the one for whom the people of God have hoped for through such long ages; if Jesus really is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire; if Jesus and no other is my hope for eternity, the greatest gift the Father in heaven has ever given, that those who believe in him may have eternal life; then it is not enough that I simply acknowledge these things to be true. *My life must be the demonstration of them. My commitment to Jesus Christ must put Him in the ascendancy in my heart and life.* If I really believe that God the Father has sent his

one and only son for me and my salvation, then Jesus Christ absolutely must have the first place in my heart, in my affections, in my priorities and my commitments.

In 1923, while a very young scholar, J. O. Buswell, late Professor of Theology at our Covenant Theological Seminary, wrote an article that was published in the Journal *Bibliotheca Sacra* entitled "The Ethics of 'believe' in the Fourth Gospel." The interesting thing about this article is that you will find it in very distinguished places. It is one of a very few entries under the word "Faith" ("pistis") in the standard scholar's lexicon or dictionary of NT Greek. Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich (BAG). Imagine how many articles or books on "Faith" might be listed. You also find this article in the bibliography of what was, alas, perhaps the most influential book of NT theology published in the 20th century, Rudolph Bultmann's *New Testament Theology*. The article is listed in such places because Dr. Buswell proved the point so well. In John's Gospel, to believe in Jesus means to follow him, to serve him, to put him first in heart, speech, and behavior. There are ethics in 'believe' in the fourth gospel. John shows it here. To believe in Jesus is to put him first in everything.

Anything less than this would be an outrage against the goodness of God and the magnificence of the gift he has given to the world. If I believe that Jesus is the Christ, it follows by a rigorous necessity that he must increase and I must decrease.

In speaking those words, John the Baptist spoke for every believer, for every and all time. In speaking those words John was the Christian *par excellence*.

I don't say that it was an easy thing for John to do. He was a sinful human being as you and I are, though far greater in the things of the Spirit of God than you or I. But, we have no difficulty appreciating the fact that it would be very hard to lead multitudes of people – to have multitudes of people streaming to hear you, hanging on your every word, thinking that to be baptized by you must be the greatest privilege – I say, it must have been very hard to lead multitudes of people *and then* find that another is leading greater multitudes and that many of those who used to come to hear you are now going instead to hear him!

But that John should bow to Jesus, that Christ's kingdom and not his own should be his primary interest, that everything that advanced the cause of Jesus should be a matter of rejoicing to John – all of that was perfectly clear in the Baptist's mind. "He must become greater; I must become less." That is what it means to confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

And it remains what it means to confess him still today. It is what must be in your heart and mine if we are true followers of Jesus Christ. Is it the aspiration and the commitment of your heart that you should decrease and the Lord should increase?

How do you know? You are not a great evangelist with huge crowds coming to you who must watch as those crowds begin to make their way instead to Jesus of Nazareth. How can *you* measure your aspiration that Jesus be first and that you take the back seat to him? How can you know whether that is really your own commitment, the demonstration of your own true faith in Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God and the Savior of the world?

Well, you measure it in the same way. You measure it, as John did, by the willingness to submerge yourself beneath the interest, the honor, and the pleasure of Christ. You measure it, as John did, by your willingness even to suffer loss, embarrassment, diminishment, by your willingness to give up yourself for the Master's sake. If he is really the Master and you love him as the Master, surely you will be willing to see him prosper even to your own cost; surely you will!

We've had a couples' retreat over the past few days. You men, your testiness at home, your lack of a true daily interest in the happiness of your wives, your far too little engagement with your children at the level of their hearts and minds: what is that, but far too much of you and far too little of Jesus Christ. Are you willing to lay your interests down, even acknowledge your wrong before your wife, to see Christ increase? Are you willing to become less and him to become greater in your life?

You women, your spirit of complaint, your incessant desire for more, your critical spirit – be entirely honest with yourselves – what is that, but far too much of you and far too little of Jesus Christ. In how many ways, in how many different ways, would your life change, your attitudes, your behavior, your speech, if it were more the aspiration and the commitment and the determination of your life that you decrease so that Jesus might increase?

What things would fall away – both sins and behaviors that are not in themselves sinful but simply take up too much of your time without really advancing Christ's interests, honor, and pleasure in your life. Over how many things in your life *could* it now be written: "He must become greater; I must become less." Over how many things in your life *should* it be written, "He must become greater; I must become less."

What a perfect exemplar of the Christian John the Baptist was that day. And what a perfect honor John the Evangelist paid to his former teacher. Remember, John, the author of the Gospel, was first a disciple of John the Baptist before he was a disciple of Jesus. How John the Evangelist loved and admired John the Baptist!

It was no accident that in John's Gospel the very last words of John the Baptist, the last words we hear the great man speak, are some of the greatest words ever spoken. "He must become greater; I must become less." John's silence there after in the Gospel is the Evangelist's tribute to his former master. John did become less; it wasn't just words for him.

And so those words are the last echo of John's voice, coming down to us across the ages. The Lord Jesus said of John the Baptist, "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John..."

Put those two facts together and ponder them for your own life. And if you aspire to Christ's approval and the heavenly Father's approval, then you cannot do better than make the motto of your life, all day and every day, "He must become greater; I must become less!"