

John the Baptist as Witness to the Light **John 1:19-34¹**

Before the class: Prepare the handout for the Transformational Exercise, “John the Baptist and Me - Witnesses to the Light.”

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin discussion, and to lead into the study)

When was a time you got credit for something you did not do?

When was a time you did not get credit for something that should have been recognized?

Information

Last week, we discovered that the major theme of John’s Gospel is “Who is Jesus?” Today, John’s Gospel addresses, “Who is (and isn’t) John the Baptist?”

As John’s Gospel drama begins, John the Baptist takes center stage to say, ironically, “I do not belong here - at the center of this stage.”

- Have a class member read John 1:19-28.

“John’s ‘I am not...’ prepares for the many later statements of Jesus beginning with ‘I am...’”² which we will look at later in our series. (I am the door, I am the good shepherd, I am the bread of life - and four others)

In other gospels, we have descriptions of what John wore and ate. We have samples of his preaching. We get a more personal portrait of John. We even learn that Jesus and John are cousins. But the author of John’s Gospel does not include these items. Why do you think he left them out of his gospel?

“The important Johannine theme of witness is introduced. John the Baptist is portrayed entirely in his role as witness to Jesus, rather than as a prophetic preacher of repentance.”³

- Have a class member read Isaiah 40:3.

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² David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 44.

³ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 40.

“The Isain passage originally referred to the role of the angels in preparing a way through the desert by which Israel might return from the Babylonian captivity to the land of Palestine. Like a modern bulldozer the angels were to level hills and fill in the valleys, and thus prepare a superhighway. But John the Baptist is to prepare a road, not for God’s people to return to the promised land, but for God to come to his people. His baptizing and preaching in the desert was opening up the hearts of [people], leveling their pride, filling their emptiness, and thus preparing them for God’s intervention.”⁴

“John, having just denied that he is the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet, now cites scripture to explain who or what he is: he is a voice crying out (cf. 1:15). This self-designation underscores John’s role as witness. His importance is captured in what he says about Jesus, so that others might recognize Jesus and follow him. As Origen put it in his commentary, John is ‘the voice pointing out the Word’; John is voice, but Jesus is speech.”⁵

- Have a class member read John 1:29-34.

“The image of the lamb has many biblical resonances. Above all here is the Passover lamb... In the Gospel of John’s account of the crucifixion, Jesus dies as the Passover lambs are being killed. ... In Isaiah’s Servant Songs [Is. 40-55], which were extraordinarily important to the New Testament and later church traditions as ways of understanding who Jesus is, the servant is described in ways that could be seen as an expansion of ‘the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.’”⁶

- Have class members read Isaiah 42:1-7 and Isaiah 53:1-12.

Isaiah did not know how or when the Savior of the world would come. Why did the early readers of these texts not think of them as describing the coming Messiah?

Why is it difficult for 21st century Christians to hear these passages and not think of Jesus?

“The Gospel of John has far more to say about the Holy Spirit than do the Synoptic Gospels [Matthew, Mark, and Luke], just as it is more explicitly and repeatedly concerned with the question of who Jesus is... He omits many of the details of the Synoptic accounts and many important

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 50.

⁵ Thompson, 45.

⁶Ford, 46.

Synoptic events (birth stories, temptations, transfiguration, institution of the Eucharist, ascension) in order to combine simplicity with concentration, above all on who Jesus is.”⁷

“Here, a comparison with the Synoptic accounts of the baptism of Jesus shows what John wants to concentrate on: the Holy Spirit remaining on Jesus as the ‘one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ and on Jesus identified as ‘the Son of God.’ John does not mention that John the Baptist baptized Jesus, although that is probably assumed. Nor is there mention, as in the Synoptics, of the voice from heaven. . . . *Instead, the focus is on the Spirit being permanently intrinsic to who Jesus is (remaining on him) and to what he does (baptizing with the Holy Spirit).*”⁸

“The word remain (from *menein*, ‘to abide, stay’) contrasts the permanence of the Spirit resting on Jesus rather than the sporadic inspiration of prophets and teachers; it may further reflect the view that the Messiah was the bearer of the Spirit. This one has the Spirit and he has it uniquely and permanently; hence, he subsequently confers it on others as one breathes out one’s own breath.”⁹

- Have class members read John 3:34; 7:37-39; 20:19-22.

“The baptism received from Jesus will be qualitatively different from and better than that received from John the Baptist. This seems to anticipate Jesus’ ministry and, more important, the sending of the Paraclete following Jesus’ death.”¹⁰

- Have class members read John 16:5-15 and John 20:22.

“The Gospel proper begins with the testimony of John the Baptist given on three days (1:29, 35), days which have symbolic rather than strictly chronological import. On the first day, John the Baptist’s testimony about his own role is largely negative; on the second John the Baptist testifies positively to what Jesus is; on the third John the Baptist sends his own disciples to follow Jesus. . . . This threefold progression is simply spelling out the pattern defined in advance in 1:6-8: first, John the Baptist himself was not the light; second, he was to testify to the light (= Jesus); third, through him all men might believe.”¹¹

The last half of John 1, the ministry of John the Baptist, is a fleshing out of what we read earlier in this chapter. Hear again John 1:6-8 (NIV).

⁷ Ford, 49.

⁸ Ford, 50.

⁹ Thompson, 47.

¹⁰ Mark A. Matson, *John*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 16.

¹¹ Brown, 44.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

None of us would dare compare ourselves to John the Baptist, a man Jesus held in great esteem. (According to Matthew 11:11, Jesus stated: "There has not risen one greater than John the Baptist.")

But John did not want glory for his preaching, his baptizing, or his role as a prophet. Instead, his highest aspiration was to testify to Jesus so that others would become Jesus' followers, as well.

Transformational Exercise

How are we doing as witnesses to Jesus? For John, this was manifest in his preaching and baptizing. If we are not called to follow God in these ways, we are still called to follow Jesus and to point others to him.

[Distribute the handout. "John the Baptist and Me - Witnesses to the Light."]

Here is the text from John 1:6-8, but with blanks to put in your own name and pronoun. In the next few moments of silent prayer, fill in the blanks, being sensitive to how God is leading you to be "a witness to the light."

There was a _____ sent from God whose name was _____. _____ came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through _____ all might believe. _____ self was not the light; _____ came only as a witness to the light.

Close in a prayer something like this: *We thank you, God, for the witness of John the Baptist. As he pointed to you, may we do the same. As he was a witness to the light, may we do the same. As he humbled himself so that you would be glorified, may we do the same. Amen.*

John the Baptist and Me - Witnesses to the Light

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. (John 1:6-8 NIV)

There was a _____ sent from God whose name was _____. _____ came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through _____ all might believe. _____ self was not the light; _____ came only as a witness to the light.

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