

Jesus Must Increase

SS/HN 20/06/04 am

Reading: John 3, I Corinthians 3

Study: John 3:22-36

Psalms: 16:6-9, 61:1-4, 146:1-6, 131

One of the characteristics of a cult is strong leadership by a particular person and followers who are devoted to that person. Some cults have in fact started within churches. A strong leader is able to manipulate the people and lead them away from Christ and toward himself. As we look at some churches today we must keep this in mind. We must ask 'are these people blindly following the teaching of a person or are they following the teaching of Christ'. And 'is the leader pointing them to Christ or to himself'.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That was the cry of John the Baptist when he saw Jesus coming towards him. Some disciples heard him and followed Jesus. John and Andrew were the first two. But some did not hear. They kept on with John and were very loyal supporters. John the Baptist had moved on. He was looking to Jesus but some of his followers were still looking only to John.

It is quite strange when this sort of thing happens. There are some old mission stations in India that retain British traditions long after they have moved on in Britain itself – in fact they will try to be more British than the British themselves. They will spread out the white table cloth every afternoon at 4:00pm sharp, along with cups, saucers and side plates for tea.

It can be the same in theology. There are people who are more Calvinistic than Calvin was himself. In fact there is a book titled 'was Calvin a Calvinist'. John's disciples were more concerned about his ministry than he was himself.

Before we examine the attitude of John's disciples and his own response to them, let us firstly set the scene of this passage. Jesus had moved out of Jerusalem into the rural parts of Judea. He had probably gone down towards the Jordan for we read that he baptised – or his disciples did (4:2). What the theology behind this baptism was we are not told. It could hardly be full Trinitarian baptism as in Matthew 28 for Jesus had not yet sent the Holy Spirit. It was probably more a baptism of repentance like that of John.

John was still baptising further north. He had moved to a place near Salem where there was plenty of water – some suggest that there were seven springs there. We see here an overlap in the ministries of John and Jesus, something which is not seen in the synoptic gospels – see Matthew 4:11-12. They do not record this early ministry of Jesus in Judea. The writer therefore makes it clear that John had not yet been thrown into prison – which is what we might understand from the other gospels.

What then do we find John's disciples doing?

In Dispute

Earlier the Jews sent a delegation to question John about his baptism. Why did he baptise and what authority did he have to do so. They probably questioned the way in which he did it also. But John did not get into a dispute with them. He simply said *I baptise with water but there stands one among you whom you do not know* (1:26).

His disciples were not so wise. They go into an argument with some *Jews about purification*. This was a big issue at the time in Israel. Not only was John baptising, and now Jesus, but we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that the Qumran community was big on ceremonial washings. We are not told the details but only that they got into a dispute about purification or ceremonial washings.

Martha was distracted with much serving. Mary sat at Jesus' feet to hear his word. One thing is needed said Jesus – *listen to my words* (Luke 10:38). Paul warned Timothy about such distractions in his ministry – *foolish and ignorant disputes* (II Timothy 2:23). In fact Paul had to deal with a dispute himself at Corinth (I Corinthians 1). It was also about baptism it seems. The Christians were forming parties depending on who baptised them.

This reminds us of how easy it is to get caught up in disputes about peripheral matters and fail to point people to Jesus himself. Who baptised you, when were you baptised, how were you baptised, are still disputed today, along with many other outward things. Why do you wear that, why do you sing that song, why do you read that version, why do you take communion that way and so it goes on? Disputes about outward things! Paul warned that such disputes have the effect of emptying the Cross of Christ of its power (I Corinthians 1:17).

Discontent

Such disputes result in discontent. They are not edifying. All John's disciples could see was the crowd flocking to Jesus for baptism. *All are coming to him* they said in exaggerated exasperation. Again they were only looking at the externals – counting the numbers going elsewhere. Maybe they were concerned for John in some way. But they had not listened, or not understood what their Rabbi had said about Jesus.

Jesus had himself been baptised by John. And now he was going off to form his own party – this is what it seemed like to these disciples. But John was the more senior preacher. 'How could people be so foolish as to go to this newcomer?' His disciples must have been thinking in this worldly way. They were upset by all this. But had they not heard him say of Jesus *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. Were they too busy running around, too busy arguing with Jews, to hear the Word of the Lord?

John calmly answered this concern of his disciples. He had to remind them of what he had said about Jesus and to teach them a few spiritual truths in the meantime. John was not jealous. He was not upset at Jesus baptising. He was a remarkably humble man as we have noted before. We learn here in his response to his disciples concern why he could be so humble.

Recognise that God is sovereign.

V.27 – *John answered and said 'A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven'*. We can read 'God' in place of 'heaven', for Jews tended to avoid using the name of God. John was reminding them that God is sovereign in the affairs of men. He is the one who gives gifts to men; he is the one who appoints them to certain ministries. Some think John was referring to Jesus and his ministry, while others that he was referring to himself and his own God-given ministry. In fact both Jesus and John recognized their ministries as being given by God, and ministered under the direction of Almighty God.

Jesus came from God – he was sent by God. He did nothing of himself but only those things the Father taught him (John 8). Although John did not come from God as Jesus did, nevertheless he ministered according to what God had called him to do (through the prophet Isaiah). God called him and empowered him to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Each one of God's children receives a gift from God to be used in the fellowship of His people (Ephesians 4). These gifts are varied but all are essential to the building up of the body of Christ. *I planted, Apollos watered but God gave the increase* wrote the apostle Paul (I Corinthians 3:6). We are not to envy the God-given gifts of others but like John we are to recognize Gods great and sovereign purpose in equipping us for his service. We humbly accept what he has given and use those gifts for his glory.

Remember your task/role.

V.28 – John reminded his disciples what he had said before about his ministry. He openly declared *I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him*. His role was to prepare the way for Christ. Jesus had come and his ministry was expanding just as God intended. John's role as forerunner was coming to an end – prison and death

were around the corner for him.

This is what John had accepted and what he had declared all along. He may have had to remind himself sometimes, but here it is his disciples whom he reminded. They must not have false expectations about his ministry. He was pointing them to Christ and Christ alone.

Rejoice

V.29 – *This joy of mine is complete/fulfilled.* Far from being envious of the crowds going to Jesus, John said that he was full of joy at what was happening. This is what happens when we humbly accept the gifts and the ministry God had given to us. We can rejoice in the ministry of others.

John used a familiar analogy to demonstrate the joy that he had – a marriage. Jesus himself would later use this analogy (Matthew 9:15), as did the other inspired writers. Jesus is pictured as the bridegroom and the church as the bride. John saw himself as the friend of the bridegroom, or more like the best man. His duty was to ensure that everything was ready for the bridegroom to come. When the wedding day came he was to slip into the background, having completed his task. He was not to take the bride but rather he rejoiced when he hears the bridegroom said 'I do'.

This was how John saw his ministry. God had given it to him and he rejoiced when his ministry was complete – he rejoiced in the greater ministry of Jesus. His disciples on the other hand were distracted by side issues, so much so that they failed to see this great and wonderful ministry given to Jesus, *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*

Ministry centred on self and the outward things of religion. Or ministry centred on Christ and the kingdom of God. We see both types of ministry going on around us today. The question is which ministry are you engaged in?

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