

The Importance of Our Witness to Jesus Christ

Mankind generally is very capable of justifying anything that we want to do and convincing ourselves to believe anything that we want to believe — whatever works best for us at the moment.

I once heard a story told of a man who went to his doctor's office and declared that he was dead. The doctor tried to understand, saying, "Of course, we will all die." The man replied, "No. I mean I am now actually dead." After more discussion the doctor finally tried an experiment. He asked this man if he agreed that dead men don't bleed. The man agreed that dead men did not bleed. The doctor then pricked the man with a needle and blood starting flowing. "I guess I was wrong," the man exclaimed. "Dead men do bleed!"

This humorous story reminds us that there's no limit to the things that we can convince ourselves are true — or not true.

Let me give you a biblical example of what I mean. We live in an age when people don't want to hear about God's wrath against sin and a very real final judgment that's coming. Many today — if they talk of God at all — only want to talk about God's love, generally defined in our favor no matter how we're living our lives. But, if we never speak of God's wrath and judgment against sin, people will see no need for Jesus.

A survey of the gospels reveals that Jesus spoke more of hell and judgment than he did of heaven. Again, the idea is not that people fear hell itself as much as that they rightly fear this holy God who must judge sin. Listen to these words from Jesus: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in Hell." (Mt. 10:28)

In this series of articles from John 1, we'll begin looking at the important witness of John the Baptist as he prepares the way for the public ministry of Jesus. As we unpack this text, we'll have the opportunity to ponder our own witness to Christ, in our homes as well as in other relationships in our day to day.

It's important to acknowledge that John the apostle, in his gospel, doesn't place an emphasis on the ministry of John the Baptist in reference to his "baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins." (Mk. 1:4) And yet, all the other gospels do.

John the Baptist cried out to all who would hear that they must "bear fruit in keeping with repentance." To the Jewish leaders, who generally found themselves opposing both John and Jesus, he also said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Mt. 3:7-8) The wrath of God must be poured out against sin!

Early in Chapter 1:6-8, we saw that John the Baptist was a "witness sent from God to bear witness about the light." There was a brief parenthetical statement given in Verse 15 touching

again on John the Baptist. Now, here in Verse 19, John the apostle picks up the witness of John the Baptist again.

What type of witness does John give of Jesus? Let's begin our look at this under the main heading "***Strong Denial.***"

The importance of the ministry of John the Baptist cannot be overstated. He's mentioned in all four gospels and was very well known in the 1st century. It's interesting to note that all three synoptic gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — call him John the Baptist, but John the apostle in this gospel never uses that phrase — not once. Although he'll mention that John was baptizing, that's clearly not John the apostle's focus. Witness is an important theme in John's gospel, and John the Baptist was an important witness to the coming of Jesus. "And this is the testimony (witness) of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'" (1:19)

Who is John calling "the Jews?" Scholars note that, even though this phrase is rarely used by the other three gospel writers, John uses it 71 times in his gospel. Although it can be used in a neutral sense — e.g., "used by the Jews in ceremonial washing" (2:6) — and even in a good sense — "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22) — in the overwhelming majority of times that it's used in this gospel, it's used to speak primarily of the Jewish leaders, who were hostile to Jesus (e.g., 9:22) "He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'" (1:20)

Scholars generally agree that the point of this somewhat-awkward sentence is to emphasize John's statement in the strongest of terms: "I am not the Christ." We see this same type of thing back in Verse 8. Speaking of John the Baptist: "He was not the light but came to bear witness about the light."

Why would this group want to know if John was Elijah? The Jewish people of the 1st century were well aware of Malachi's prophecy. Four hundred years earlier, Malachi had given a prophecy from God: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes." (Malachi 4:5)

John's statement here can be confusing. You may remember that Jesus himself declares about John the Baptist in Mt. 11:13-14: "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."

But notice these words from Luke 1:17, where the angel of the Lord is speaking to Zechariah about the birth of John the Baptist: "... and he (John) will go before him (Jesus) in the spirit and power of Elijah ...to make ready for the Lord and people prepared."

John did fulfill the ministry that was spoken in the prophecy of Malachi; John even dressed like Elijah; we can certainly see how John's ministry was foretold by Malachi while knowing that John was not Elijah come back from the dead.

The interrogation continues: “Are you the prophet?” This is almost certainly a reference to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, where it’s spoken of a “prophet like (Moses) who would come.” Moses declares that when he comes, “it is to him you shall listen.” (Deut. 18:15-19) As before, John continues to give a strong denial: “I am not.” Finally, in what might be termed a statement of desperation, this group that had been sent from Jerusalem now declare that they have to take something back to the ones who sent them: “What do you say about yourself?”

John the Baptist begins this section of scripture by pointing to Jesus by his words and actions (1:19-23). In our 21st century witness to Jesus, this is still a good example to follow.

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