The Gospel of John
Session Seven: John the Baptist's Final Testimony
Commentary

John 3:22-36
3:22–23. An argument was about to break out between two ministry teams regarding the popularity of one of the leaders. Jealousy seemed to be the motive and in the context of the times we can certainly understand the event. Remember, in the New Testament we still find adherence to John's baptism twenty years after Jesus' resurrection. Two different baptismal groups, headed by two different leaders, baptizing in two different cities—both claiming messianic connections. Two things seem important in the text: (1) John's ongoing baptism was hardly competitive because he still proclaimed Jesus and presumably attracted even more people to the Lamb, and (2) although verse 23 talks about Jesus baptizing, we learn in John 4:2 that he supervised the activity and the disciples themselves did the baptizing.

What kind of baptism was this? Probably not Christian baptism since it took place before the crucifixion, resurrection, and coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. According to Morris, "More probably it represents a continuation of the 'baptism of repentance' that was characteristic of John the Baptist. Both Jesus and his first disciples had come from the circle around John, and it may well be that for some time they continued to call on men to submit to the baptism that symbolized repentance … The tense of the last two verbs is continuous and we might give the force of it as 'they kept coming and being baptized'" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, 237).

3:24–26. Why did not John tell us more about the Baptist's imprisonment as the Synoptists did (Matt. 14:1–12; Mark 6:14, 29; Luke 3:19–20)? That event simply did not fit his purpose. John the apostle dealt with John the Baptist only insofar as the latter served the introduction and explanation of Jesus Christ. John and Jesus both understood this perfectly. Writing as we have seen with the benefit of lengthy hindsight, the apostle John could put the whole thing in perspective for his readers.

But the argument was real. According to the Dead Sea Scrolls, people at the time were interested in the finer points of ceremonial purification. John the Baptist hardly observed the finer points of anything. Petty bickering over church ritual has been a blind spot in the behavior of Christians since the days of Jesus. The very one who wrote these words, while still in his younger days, said to the one of whom he wrote, "Master … we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us" (Luke 9:49). Jesus replied to John the apostle, "Do not stop him … for whoever is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:50). This competition was encouraged neither by Jesus nor John. We would do well to notice that envy or jealousy over someone else's popularity, especially in ministry, can never advance God's kingdom but only deteriorate our spiritual lives.

We find the designation Rabbi in verse 26 interesting, since this is the only place in the Gospel it is applied to anyone other than Jesus. As Borchert points out, "The disciples of John the Baptist

were obviously concerned to protect the popularity and prestige of their teacher, and they wanted the Baptizer to counter Jesus' growing popularity by taking some affirmative action on his own behalf. Disciples of teachers are often more zealous for their teacher's perspectives than the teachers themselves, and thus history is replete with many examples of the excesses of disciples, as in the case of the Arminians and Calvinists" (Borchert, Gerald L. *John.* The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, 190).

3:27–28. What kept this popular prophet so humble? We see in this passage his awareness of God's sovereignty, of his own unworthiness, and of the preeminence of Christ in the world. This response by John almost becomes a standard Christian principle: man can receive only what is given him from heaven. The principle certainly applies to John, whose disciples seemed to have wanted his status elevated. It applies to Jesus, about whom many still had questions, but whose greatness John constantly affirms. And it applies to us, who dare not exercise authority or leadership in ministry beyond what God has gifted us and called us to do. The word heaven in this context refers back to God, since throughout this Gospel John saw everything as coming from the hand of the Father.

3:29–30. The bride/bridegroom theme introduces the church, although this Gospel says little about that important New Testament theme. The bride (the church), including the disciples who were then following John, belonged to the bridegroom (Christ). John described himself as the friend of the bridegroom, delighted to see him claim his own. Surely John 3:30 is one of the great verses of the Bible: He must become greater; I must become less.

This wedding scene builds on Old Testament imagery of Jehovah as the husband of Israel (Isa. 54:5; 62:4; Jer. 2:2; 3:20; Ezek. 16:8; Hos. 2:19). Now in the new covenant, the Messiah becomes the bridegroom of the church. This important theme radiates through the New Testament (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:32), culminating in Revelation 19:7–8. In the words of Calvin, "Those who win the Church over to themselves rather than to Christ faithlessly violate the marriage which they ought to honour."

So the bride and bridegroom imagery is well established in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. As the friend of the bridegroom, John emphasized his delight and joy rather than jealousy over Jesus' arrival and instant popularity. It is said of the pioneer missionary, William Carey, that when he was close to death he turned to a friend and said, "When I am gone, don't talk about William Carey; talk about William Carey's Savior. I desire that Christ alone might be magnified."

3:31. In the words of Tozer, "A spiritual kingdom lies all about us, enclosing us, embracing us, all together within reach of our inner selves, waiting for us to recognize it. God Himself is here waiting our response to His Presence. This eternal world will come alive to us the moment we begin to reckon upon its reality" (Tozer, p. 52). That is what this verse offers—the understanding of God, both Father and Son. All human beings, including John the Baptist, are from the earth and belong to the earth. But twice John told us that Jesus, who had his origin in heaven, is above all. Hear Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of verse 31: "The One who comes

from above is head and shoulders over other messengers from God. The earthborn is earthbound and speaks earth language; the heavenborn is in a league of his own. He sets out the evidence of what he saw and heard in heaven. No one wants to deal with these facts. But anyone who examines this evidence will come to stake his life on this: that God himself is the truth" (The Message).

3:32–33. John expected an avalanche of faith from the nation of Israel. They had waited four hundred years for a revelation from God and many more centuries for the coming of the promised Prophet. Isaiah could not have been more clear in his predictions, and John's own personal witness was as bold and lucid as he could make it. Almost no one responded—but the few who did affirmed God's truth. The word truthful at the end of verse 33 demonstrates its emphatic sense by its placement in the sentence. Truth is one of John's major themes, and all truth originates with God.

3:34–35. No fewer than twenty-three times in this Gospel Jesus refers to the one who sent him, and John describes that in this paragraph. We find here a strong Christology developed either by John the Baptist or John the apostle (interpreters are not in agreement on who speaks in vv. 31–36). The matter of authorship aside, consider the central themes:

- Jesus comes from above; he is sent from God (vv. 31, 34).
- Jesus is above all; he has all things in his hand (vv. 31, 35).
- Jesus speaks things he has seen and heard from the Father (vv. 31, 34).
- Jesus gives the truth to those who receive him (v. 33).
- Jesus gives the Spirit to those who trust in him (v. 34).
- Jesus is loved by the Father for he is the Son (v. 35).
- Jesus can communicate life which is everlasting (v. 36).

The intimacy between the Father and the Son guarantees Jesus' complete authority for universal reign. He speaks the words of God, this time not logos but rhema—a message offered by a living voice. The Bible is the Word inscripturated; Jesus is the Word incarnate.
Verse 34 is a trinitarian statement—Father, Son, and Spirit all appear in the same short verse. Borchert points out: "The idea that the Spirit was not given in a limited or measured way (Ek Metrou, 3:34) is here applied particularly to Jesus because of his unique relationship within the godhead. But that idea of the unlimited Spirit is applicable to believers in a derivative sense by the act of Jesus in passing on the Holy Spirit (cf. 20:22)" (Borchert, Gerald L. *John.* The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, 194).

3:36. Before moving on with his narrative of Jesus' ministry and message, John wanted to state one more time the essence of the gospel—believing people receive eternal life; rejecting people receive God's wrath. What is the wrath of God? By his very nature which is perfect, God opposes the disobedience and rebellion which come from unbelief.

The word orge, from which we get our English word orgy, describes the anger of disapproval. It can arise gradually and is usually guided by reason and understanding. Hundreds of passages in

the Bible refer to God's wrath. Morris quotes Hodgson: "The wrath of God and divine punishment are essential elements in a doctrine which is to face the facts of evil and retain a fundamental optimism. The belief that God has sworn in His wrath that men who do certain things shall not enter into His rest enables the Church to open its worship each day with the words, 'Come let us sing unto the Lord. Let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation'" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, 250).

Any approach to God apart from Jesus Christ is futile. Religions, cults, and civic groups miss the message of the Bible when they talk frequently about God but do not want to disturb the pluralistic harmony of their members by emphasizing Jesus Christ. God allows no approach to himself apart from his Son. Whoever rejects the Son has forfeited eternal life and receives instead the wrath of God. This is what the Bible means when it says life is in the Son.[1]

[1] Kenneth Gangel, *John*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).