

## Exaltation of Christ in the Ministry

Written by David Wise

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*“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.” – John 1:6-8*

John the Baptist was a very interesting character in the scriptures, to say the least. His ministry was prophesied of in the Old Testament (Isaiah 40:3-5, Mal. 3:1,4:4-6). He was to be filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb and was born again even before his natural birth (Luke 1:15,41-44). He would be God’s messenger to convert God’s children among the Jews back to a proper relationship with their heavenly Father (Luke 1:16-17). John the Baptist was also the forerunner of Christ who was to prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus Christ (Mal. 3:1, Isaiah 40:2-5). He was the “bulldozer” before Jesus Christ that filled in the valleys, tore down the hills, straightened the crooked paths, and smoothed out the rough places (Luke 3:4-5) to where the ministry of Jesus would be on a level and straight pathway. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets and came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 16:16, 1:17). Even with such an impressive resume, that was not the central theme of his life and ministry – that was to “bear witness of the Light”.

John the Baptist shows up in the early scenes of the New Testament gospels preaching a message of repentance in the wilderness of Judea. He appears to have been a very odd fellow, wearing clothes of camel’s hair, a leathern girdle about his loins, and eating locusts and wild honey, while residing only in the wilderness (Matt. 3:4). This led his detractors, mainly the Pharisees, to falsely conclude that “he hath a devil” (Matt. 11:18). John was bold to condemn the unrighteousness of the generation around him, and he sure didn’t pull any punches. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees a generation of vipers (Matt. 3:7-12) and called upon the general public, publicans, and soldiers to bring forth tangible fruit meet for repentance (Luke 3:10-14). Despite his coarse nature and ministry, he was still regarded by the people as a prophet (Matt. 21:26), and Jesus even declared that *“among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist”* (Matt. 11:11).

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Even though John the Baptist was commended so highly by Jesus Christ, his ministry is emblematic of the New Testament gospel ministry as a whole. At one time, John had great multitudes following him and coming out to hear him preach and be baptized (Matt. 3:5). Even while people were questioning if he was the Messiah, John's refrain remained the same the whole time – "I'm not the Christ. My ministry is just a temporary ministry to prepare the way for Who's coming after me." He continually deflected the attention away from himself and towards the coming Christ. While some were trying to elevate him to be the Messiah, Elijah, or that Prophet, instead of trying in any way to elevate himself, he instead debased himself while still pointing towards Him that was to come, saying that he wasn't even worthy to loose the shoe latchet of the true Christ (John 1:27). (Food for thought: Considering that the greatest among men was not even worthy to loose the latchet of Jesus' shoe, how astounding is it that the Son of God knelt down and washed the feet of such unworthy mortal men, John 13:4-17.) John never exalted himself above the proper role and position of his ministry.

When John the Baptist pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God, some of his disciples left John and started following Jesus (John 1:35-37). Was John offended by this? No, because he understood his whole ministry was to point others to Jesus Christ - to bear witness of the Light. Later, some of John's disciples were concerned about how many of their followers that they were losing to Jesus (John 3:26-36). In essence they ask John, "Do you remember that guy you baptized and you told us about? All men are coming to him now instead of us? What are we supposed to do?" They were concerned that they were losing their influence and notoriety, but what was John's opinion of the matter? He essentially says, "I'm the friend of the bridegroom and I love to hear the bridegroom's voice. My joy is fulfilled in that these men are following the bridegroom instead of me." John was not bitter about losing men from following him but rather was joyful because now those people were where they need to be all along and that was following Jesus Christ. John understood that the whole purpose of his ministry was to deflect attention away from himself and correspondingly to point people to Christ instead.

This is summarized so profoundly in the next verse. John declares, "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:30).

Notice the urgency of John's statement. He says Christ "must" be exalted, and I "must" be abased. It is of absolute necessity that the attention be centered upon Christ and not upon me.

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In John's case, this was especially true. Many were trying to exalt John above his proper position as the messenger and forerunner of Christ and for Jesus to be properly exalted and glorified as He deserved to be, it was of absolute necessity that John be decreased and abased in the eyes of men so that correspondingly those same men would glorify the name of Christ instead. This should be the mindset of every child of God, but this should especially be the mindset for every man who is called of God as John had been - for us to deflect attention away from ourselves so that all the praise and glory will be properly centered upon Christ.

John was simply a man, but he was called by God into a position for the purpose of bearing witness of the Light (John 1:6-8). In this way, the purpose of God's calling of the gospel ministry here today has not changed. The man should never be exalted above his proper position in the eyes of the church, much less be exalted in his own sight. As many ministers have noted "the best of men are only men at best". Man's best state is described as "altogether vanity" (Ps. 39:5), and that certainly applies to the men of the ministry as well. For that reason, the church should never exalt any man above his proper position which is simply to be an instrument of God to point others to Christ. If a minister loses sight of the purpose of his ministry - to be a flashing sign to point God's children to Christ - then if we inevitably lose any personal noteriety or lose numbers from our church, etc, similar what happened to John, then we are destined to be bitter and unfruitful in God's service. However, if we understand the whole purpose of our ministry is to promote the "increase of Christ" while at the same time "decreasing ourselves", we should be joyful any time the cause of Christ is increased and furthered in this world regardless of how much I am decreased in the process. Simply put, it's not about me, it's about Christ.

In 1 Cor. 2, Paul explains to the church part of the reason that God chooses to call very unimpressive people from the world's perspective to preach His gospel - so that God alone will be exalted. John the Baptist certainly fits that bill because he was very peculiar from a natural perspective, not at all impressive to men, but his ministry was all pointing to Christ. Jesus Christ picked out fisherman, publicans, political reformers, and other regular folks to be his twelve apostles, not the notable rising stars in the Jewish religion. Two of those apostolic fishermen were viewed in the eyes of the religious elite in Judea as "*unlearned and ignorant men*" (Acts 4:13), but they were instruments blessed by God to bring the gospel to multitudes of God's children in their ministries. God didn't send the Corinthians a great orator or speaker, lest they should be enticed by the skillful speech of the preacher and put confidence or praise in the man instead of in God. Instead, Paul was sent by God and he came to them

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*"in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling; not with enticing words of man's wisdom"*

. The reason the gospel resonated with the Corinthians was not based on the great speech of the minister, but because of the

*"demonstration of the Spirit and of power"*

. They looked past the messenger to the power behind the message, which should be the end result of every gospel sermon.

I believe John 3:30 could be viewed as a see-saw relationship. The more that I am exalted, correspondingly on the other end of the see-saw, Christ is actually decreased; but the lower I can decrease and abase myself, in that process the other end of the see-saw is exalted and Christ is properly increased in the church. With that in mind, we should seek to decrease and debase ourselves as low as possible so that in turn, Christ will be exalted as high as possible in our lives and in our ministry. There is absolutely no better example of that than the ministry of John the Baptist who was always purposefully deflecting attention away from himself for the purpose of the exaltation of Jesus Christ.

John's attitude of the exaltation of Christ from the personal abasement of myself should, in essence, be the purpose of every minister that has been called by God. Our entire ministry should essentially be a "flashing sign" that is pointing God's children towards Christ, instructing others to take their attention off of us and rather directing their attention and glory to where it deserves to be, which is on Jesus Christ alone. The theme of the New Testament gospel ministry is succinctly summarized here by John the Baptist's own mission statement for his own ministry *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:30).

*"He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."* (1 Cor. 1:31)