

CALL THE FIRST WITNESS!

by Ray C. Stedman

A remarkable religious phenomenon broke out in the United States in the year 1948. It started in a tent near the Hollywood area of Los Angeles, under the preaching of a young evangelist by the name of Billy Graham. The crowds were a little sparse in that tent at first, but as the preaching went on they began to grow. Finally certain rather prominent Hollywood celebrities came to the meetings and were converted. At first, as often happens with gatherings of that sort, the press totally ignored them. But when some of the well-known names of Hollywood became involved, the media began to take an interest in what was happening. Eventually reporters were sent to investigate and to interview this rather strange young preacher, who dressed in pistachio-colored suits, wore flaming red ties, spoke with a pronounced Southern accent, and yet had incredible appeal to the masses. It was evident that God was doing something there. That was the beginning of Billy Graham's career. As news of those meetings spread across the country, other cities invited him to come and preach. He went on to Boston, where all of New England seemed to turn out to hear him. Thus began the great Crusades that swept across America in the latter part of the '40's and '50's under Billy Graham's ministry.

As it was with Billy the Baptist in 1948, so it was with John the Baptist in the late '20's of the first century. He, too, was a young man, in his early '30's, six months older than Jesus. He, too, dressed rather strangely, even for that day. He did not wear green suits; he wore animal skins, and ate a strange diet of grasshoppers and wild honey. This young man had a very powerful message, which seemed to have great attraction to people. At first they came out by dozens, then by scores, and finally hundreds and thousands forsook the cities of Judah and Galilee to hear this remarkable preacher out in desert places. Finally the response was so tremendous, and this man became so popular, that even the religious establishment of Jerusalem had to take note. They sent a delegation to investigate this remarkable preacher.

John the Apostle records for us the moment when the leaders of the Jews first took official notice of John the Baptist. This is found in Chapter 1 of John's gospel, Verses 19-23:

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" And he answered, "No." They said to him then, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." {John 1:19-23 RSV}

This is an official delegation from the Sanhedrin, made up of priests and Levites, who had been sent by the high priest himself. The leaders of the Jews were not very happy with John. They regarded him as an outsider, a maverick. He had gone to no seminary; he had sat at no one's feet; he had not been authorized by any responsible body; he had never been ordained. He had suddenly arisen out of the common people and many were flocking to hear him. The establishment could no longer ignore him. He was a threat to them, as any such individual is always a threat to the establishment anywhere.

When we read that this delegation's question to John the Baptist was, "Who are you?" we are quite justified in reading it as though they were saying, "Who do you think you are, anyway?" There is a sneer in these words. It is clear they had asked him about the popular rumor that perhaps he was the Messiah himself. John's reply, which John the Apostle puts very dramatically, was, "He confessed, he did not deny, but he confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.'" That is clearly emphasizing the fact that John wanted -- to quote a famous American -- "one thing to be perfectly clear" -- that he was not the Messiah.

So they tried again. They asked him, "Are you Elijah, then?" They asked this, of course, because the last verse of the Old Testament, in the book of Malachi, is a promise of the coming again of Elijah. God had said,

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes," (Mal 4:5). Elijah would have a special ministry of "turning the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to the fathers," i.e., rebuilding the homes of a decadent nation (Mal 4:6). Four hundred years earlier that prophecy had been given, and for four centuries there was a sense of expectation in Israel that Elijah was going to come back again. Elijah was a rugged, fearless prophet who called down the judgment of God upon people. When people heard John, with his rugged countenance and his fearless message, many of them were asking, "Is this Elijah?" That is what the delegation from the Pharisees asked him.

John's reply is very clear: "No, I am not Elijah." That is an important verse to us, because those who believe in reincarnation often refer to the fact that the New Testament and the gospel records in various places seem to refer to John as though he were Elijah. People who believe in reincarnation say here is an example of it. They hold that here is a man who once lived on the earth appearing again as another man -- Elijah reincarnated. But if you look closely at this text you will see there is no substance to that claim. John says very plainly, "No, I am not Elijah." His was not a reincarnate appearance.

Reincarnation, of course, is a non-biblical doctrine. It is really a doctrine of devils, of deceitful spirits trying to mislead people. Though it is popular today, we must realize that it is the devil's substitute for the doctrine of resurrection. You cannot believe in the resurrection of the body and the philosophy of reincarnation. John clearly denies it: "No, I am not Elijah."

Why then do some passages in the gospels treat John as though he were Elijah, and refer to him as such? In fact, Jesus himself on one occasion said to his disciples, "If you will have it, he is Elijah," {cf, Matt 17:12, Mark 9:13}. What did Jesus mean? The answer is given very clearly in the opening chapter of Luke's gospel, where Luke records the visit of the angel Gabriel to John's father Zechariah. The angel predicted that this old couple, who were long past the days of childbearing, would have a child by a miraculous birth. His name was to be called John ("God is gracious"). God, not Zechariah, selected that name. The angel said of John, "He shall go before the Lord in the spirit and the power of Elijah," {cf, Luke 1:17}. There is the fulfillment of the Old Testament predictions that before the Lord would appear, Elijah the prophet would come. John's ministry was like Elijah's -- he went before Jesus in the spirit and the power of Elijah -- but he was not Elijah.

"Well then," the delegation asked John, "who are you? Are you that prophet?" They were referring to the popular expectation that one of the prophets was going to return, based on the statement of Moses in the 18th chapter of Deuteronomy, "The Lord shall raise up unto you a prophet like unto me, and him you shall hear," {cf, Deut 18:15}. Some thought that prophet would be Jeremiah, and in certain of the gospels we read of that expectation. But others, because they did not know which prophet would return, called him, "that prophet." To this question, John's response is simply, "No." Notice the increasing bluntness of his answers. "Are you the Messiah?" "No, I am not." "Are you Elijah?" "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" "No."

Finally, they say to him, "Who are you, then? We can't go back to Jerusalem without an answer. We've been sent to find out who you are. Give us a break! Tell us something we can take back to Jerusalem." We can discern a lessening of their belligerence here. They began by saying, "Who do you think you are?" but they end up saying, "Come on, give us a break. We need to tell them something about you."

To this John replies, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord,' {Isa 40:3} as the prophet Isaiah said." In other words, "If you want to know my job description, read the prophet Isaiah. It's written there for you." This indicates that John himself had learned about who he was and what he was to do by reading and studying the prophecy of Isaiah. Undoubtedly his parents had told him the wonderful story of his birth, and the predictions of the angel. He knew from his childhood that he was a chosen vessel of the Lord. (We are told that he was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb.) But when he asked himself, as he must have as a young boy, "What does God want me to do?" he found the answer in the prophecy of Isaiah: "I am to be a highway builder. I am to prepare a highway in the desert for our God." Not for men to get to God, but for God to get to men.

Isaiah tells how highways are built: "Every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill brought down; the crooked made straight, and the rough places plain," {Isa 40:4 KJV}. Check with a modern road builder and he will tell you that is exactly how a highway is built: the low spots are filled in, the high spots are leveled, the

crooked ones are straightened out, and the rough ones are made smooth.

This beautiful description of John's ministry to people is still the way repentance works in the human heart today. If you feel low and worthless, depressed, insignificant, your life is meaningless, you are in a valley -- then look unto God and he will lift you up, exalt you: "Every valley shall be exalted." That is where God will meet you. If you feel proud and self-sufficient, able to handle your own affairs, thank you, then come down: "Every mountain and hill shall be brought low." That is where God will meet you, and nowhere else. If you are handling things in a crooked manner, if you are devious in your business dealings and untrustworthy in your relationships with others, then repent. That is what John preached: "Repent." Decide to straighten out your life; God will meet you right there. If you are given to riding roughshod over people, your life is filled with a lot of tough, rough situations, repent, change your mind; decide to smooth out those places, deal with those things, and God will meet you right there. That is a highway for God to come to you. That was John's ministry all through his life; and the symbol of having done that was to be baptized with water, to be willing to be cleansed of the old way.

Having clarified his own role, John now goes on to fulfill the major work for which he came: to identify Jesus. Verse 24:

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" {John 1:24-25 RSV}

Baptizing was a new thing in Israel. No prophet in the past had ever baptized. Under the Law there were certain washings provided for those who were unclean or who had defiled themselves in some ceremonial way. (New converts washed themselves before they entered the ranks of Judaism.) But nobody went around baptizing as John was doing. When they asked him, "Why do you do this?" they were emphasizing the rite that John was performing.

John answered them, "I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. {John 1:26-28 RSV}

John's words are in answer to the question, "Why are you baptizing?" He simply points out that the emphasis was not to be on what he did, but on the contrast with who he was compared to Jesus. When he said, "I baptize with water," you would expect that he would go on to speak of the one who would baptize with the Spirit. But he does not; that will come the next day, as we will see.

In the construction of the original text, the emphatic word is not *water*, it is *I*: "I baptize with water." That is, "I am simply dealing with externals. That is my ministry. But there is one standing among you" (and here John uses the present continuous tense), "there is one standing among you right now whom you do not know, whose dignity, whose person is such that I am not worthy to untie his shoestrings."

John the Apostle records that this took place at a very significant spot, in Bethany, beyond the Jordan. The old name for Bethany is Bethabara, which means, "the place of passage." Tradition held that this was where the Israelites entered the promised land under Joshua. John the Apostle identifies that as a significant location, and it was there that John the Baptist first pointed out who Jesus was. Joshua was a type of Jesus, the true Leader into the promised land.

It is clear from this passage that Jesus was actually standing in the midst of the crowd. That helps us know when this event took place. When John's gospel is compared with the other gospels it is evident that the incident recorded here took place at least six weeks after Jesus had been baptized by John in the Jordan River. (John will say the next day that it had already taken place.) According to the other gospels, Jesus had left immediately to go into the desert for that remarkable experience of forty days and forty nights, tempted by the devil. All this had taken place before the delegation came from the Sanhedrin as an official investigating body. By this time Jesus had come back from the desert and was now standing in the crowd. John recognized him,

and said to the delegation, "There is one standing among you whom you do not know. But I know him, and I know that he is far, far greater than I."

How did John know that? He undoubtedly learned it from studying in Isaiah the prophecies of the Messiah. His words, "There is one standing here among you whom you do not know," must have sent chills up and down the spines of those present. Can't you see them craning and peering to see who he was talking about? He does not identify Jesus any further at this point except to imply, "He is the one whom the prophecies are speaking about, who is far greater than I. He came after me in time but he was also before me in time." That is the significance of this word, "He is the one who comes after me, who was also before me."

Read through the prophecies of Isaiah and you will see what John learned. Isaiah predicted the coming of one who would be born as a babe to a virgin. He would grow up and "the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,'" {Isa 9:6 RSV}. He would be the one who would emerge at last in that tremendously descriptive passage in Isaiah 53, as the one who would bear upon himself the transgressions of mankind: "All we like sheep have gone astray; ... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all," {Isa 53:6}. Finally he would be the one who would come with crimsoned garments from Bozrah, the one who had been treading out the winepress of the wrath of God, who would bring judgment on the nations. John the Baptist learned all of this from Isaiah. He says, in effect, "I am in Isaiah, too, but I am merely a voice in the wilderness. Listen to what I say because I am talking about one who is far greater than I. In his eternal character and in the nature of the work that he will perform he is so far above me that, compared to him, I am a servant who takes off his master's shoes when he comes into the house; and I am not even worthy to do that." In other words, this one is the Messiah!

From the very beginning of the Old Testament there is a whispering hope that grows stronger and stronger all through the record that Someone is coming. In the promise to Adam and Eve as they are driven out of the Garden of Eden there is the hope that there is coming One who would bruise the serpent's head. That hope increases through the whole of the prophetic record as an ever-growing promise. But by the end of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, he still has not come. The Old Testament is a book of unfulfilled prophecies. Now John announces that there is one standing among them who is the fulfillment of those prophetic predictions.

Then John proclaims a second truth about Jesus. Verse 29:

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me [I think that should read, "who was before me"], for he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." {John 1:29-31 RSV}

Once again, if you read through the Old Testament, you will find it is a revelation of unexplained sacrifices. Abel, the son of Adam, offered a lamb to God and God smiled upon that sacrifice. Later Abraham made offerings unto God. Then the children of Israel were taught at the foot of Mount Sinai to bring certain animals to slay and to offer the blood and meat of those animals unto God. Many are offended by the fact that the Old Testament is replete with animal sacrifices, of actual blood being spilled. Every morning and every evening there were animals slain in the temple in Jerusalem. On the great feast days of Israel thousands of animals were sacrificed. A stream of blood runs all through the Old Testament. But nowhere are these sacrifices ever explained. In Leviticus we read, "the life of the flesh is in the blood" {Lev 17:11}, and it is clear there would be no remission of sins without the shedding of blood. But nowhere is it explained why God demands blood.

Every sacrifice, however, was a testimony that Someone was coming who would supply that explanation. Now, at last, there is an answer to the cry of Isaac, as Abraham his father was taking him upon the mountain to offer him, "Father, where is the lamb?" and Abraham replied, "God will provide a lamb." Centuries later, as John sees Jesus coming toward him, knowing who he was, having baptized him six weeks earlier, he says to the crowd, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Here is the one who will fulfill all the promise of the sacrifices of the Old Testament.

When John says, "I myself did not know him," he means, "I did not know him as the Messiah, as the Lamb of God." John was Jesus' cousin; they must have known each other as boys. In those tightly knit Hebrew families it would have been unthinkable that they did not know each other. But even Jesus' own brothers did not understand who he was, though they grew up with him. John says, "I didn't know who he was. I had heard some strange things about him, as I had learned some strange things about myself, but I didn't know who he was until I came baptizing with water. I was sent to baptize in order that I might come to know who he was."

In Verse 32 John goes on to declare a third thing about Jesus:

And John bore witness. "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" {John 1:32-33 RSV}

Once again, if you read through the Old Testament you find in it a deep sense of unsatisfied longings. From the very beginning of the Bible people are longing after righteousness and holiness; longing to be better than they are; longing to be free from the struggle with evil within; wishing somehow they could get hold of the evil, self-centered tendency within themselves, and eliminate it.

Have you ever felt that way?

There have been times when I wished I could have had a surgical operation to remove my tendency to be sharp, critical, harsh and caustic; when I saw the hurt I caused I wished somehow to be able to stop doing those kinds of things.

That longing has been in the human heart ever since the fall of man. All through the record of the Bible it increases, as men and women cried out for a way of deliverance, to be free at last from the power and the reign of sin. They longed for beauty of character, for reality of life, and for freedom from evil.

The record of the Scripture is that it takes God himself to do that. The work of the Spirit is to do that very thing. What John is saying is, "I deal with the externals, with what manifests men's change of mind as to what they want to be. That is as far as I can go. But, when I baptized Jesus, I saw the Spirit coming down like a dove and lighting on his shoulder. The one who sent me to baptize had said to me, 'When you see that happening, that is the one who will not only change men outside, but will change them from the inside, by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.' When that happened I knew who he was. My own cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, was the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit."

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he picks this up: "For by one Spirit have we all" -- all believers in Jesus, all, ALL -- "been baptized into one body ... and have all been made to drink of one Spirit," {1 Cor 12:13 RSV}. You cannot be a Christian and not be baptized by the Holy Spirit. It is not something you feel, some experience that happens to you that you can sense happening at the time. It is a change deep within your humanity; a change that God himself does, when he breaks you loose from the family of Adam and places you in the family of God. That is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said it would happen to all who received him. In the seventh chapter of John's gospel Jesus said, "He who believes in me, ... 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive;" (John 7:38-39). That is the baptism of the Holy Spirit!

John understood that his ministry was limited, that he could only go so far. He could express in some dramatic, symbolic fashion the changed desire of a heart that wanted to be right. But he could not change it. That had to be the work of Jesus. From that time on, Jesus has been the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. When we enter the family of God, he is the One who does it. Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfiller of the promises; he is the Lamb of God, the fulfiller of the sacrifices of all the Old Testament records; he is the satisfier of the longings of men for purity and freedom, the baptizer with the Holy Spirit.

And if Jesus is all those things, he is one more thing. Verse 34:

"And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." {John 1:34 RSV}

That is a claim to deity. Every Hebrew would understand that if you say of someone, "He is the son of something," you are claiming that he is characterized by that very thing. If you say that he is the son of peace, he is characterized by peace; if he is the son of encouragement, that is the kind of a person he is. And if Jesus is the Son of God, then he is God himself. That is what John claims.

That is a greater claim than to say that Jesus is Messiah. As the Messiah, Jesus is no longer on this planet. As the Messiah, two thousand years ago he ascended into the heavens; and he has been seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven waiting to come back again. He is not here, as the Messiah. We join with our Jewish friends in looking for the coming of the Messiah because he is not yet here in that capacity. But, as the Son of God, he is the One standing right in our midst.

I spoke in Phoenix yesterday at a singles' conference. There was a fine young singer there from the Los Angeles area who sang several great songs that both blessed us and entertained us. Some of the songs were on the theme of what happens after we go to be with the Lord -- the hope of a believer of life beyond this life, the glory of it, the expectation of being with friends and loved ones, of seeing the Lord Jesus face to face. But one of his songs particularly moved everybody there. We could feel the tug of the Spirit as he sang. The words were something along these lines: "There is plenty of power in this place, enough to do what you need to do. There is love here, plenty of love, enough to reach out to all the loveless, hungry and forsaken among us and fill them. There is hope here, enough hope to dispel all the gloom of any heart present. And the reason why all this is true is because Jesus, the very same Jesus, is standing in our midst."

That is what John declared: there is One standing among you whom, perhaps you know not, but he is the fulfiller of all the promises of old, all the predictions of the Old Testament. He is the answer to all the unexplained sacrifices; he is the satisfier of the unfulfilled longings of men, because he is the Son of God. That is the good news for us today.

Prayer:

Lord, we thank you for the truth of this great promise. Here we are, almost twenty centuries away from this event, and yet the glory of it and the truth of it is as real to our hearts as though we too had stood beside the Jordan River on that day. We recognize there is standing among us here this morning the Lord Jesus himself, the One who can fulfil our longings, take away our sins, satisfy our hearts, be King of our lives. We thank you in his name, Amen.

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