

John 1:6-8,15 John the Baptist

As in the synoptic gospels, so our gospel introduces John early on. But it's easy to get confused with names like John, (or Jenny, or Christine,) because there are so many of them! John the gospel writer isn't talking about himself but John the Baptist. Of course, John the Baptist wasn't a Baptist, in the sense of being a Baptist Christian. The first Baptists emerged in England in the early 17th century; John the Baptist was the 1st century contemporary of Jesus, before even Christianity had been thought of.

John the Baptist is more correctly called John the baptizer or, John the Immerser. He enters centre stage at the beginning of the gospel. But John's gospel has his unique take on John the baptizer, as we might expect. He introduces him in this way: *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John* (John 1:6). Let's look at the ministry of this man, also drawing on information from the Synoptic gospels.

An overview of John's ministry

- 1. What do we know about John's family background?** John's parent's were Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:13). They were beyond child bearing age, but the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah as he was serving in the Temple, and promised them a son. So, as with Jesus, John's birth was surrounded by miraculous events, including prophecies (Luke 1:13-17; 67-79.) John was filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). God had a set purpose for John even before his conception (like Jeremiah, see Jeremiah 1:5). Mary the mother of Jesus and Elizabeth were related, so this makes John and Jesus cousins, though probably not first cousins.
- 2. When did John begin his ministry?** Luke tells us, *In the fifteenth year of the government of Tiberius Caesar ... the word of God came to John* (Luke 3:1,2). This means that John's ministry began in 29AD. Therefore Jesus began his ministry in 30AD. John's gospel puts it simply like this: *He came as a witness, to bear witness about the Light* (John 1:7).
- 3. Why did John baptise?** John baptised because he preached a baptism of repentance, to prepare people's hearts for the coming of the Lord, so they would be more open to believe when Jesus came. John baptised those who responded to his message in the river Jordan. Ritual immersion, in a Mikveh (immersion pool), was common practice in the first century, with its roots in Leviticus. John emphasised the need for repentance from sin. Immersion didn't magically take you sins away. John said, *Bear fruits in keeping with repentance* (Luke 3:8,10). John expected to see a change in people's lives as a result of their repentance. John's baptising isn't mentioned in John 1, in the prologue, but it does get a brief mentioned in John 1:24, 3:23.
- 4. How famous was John the baptiser?** John was quite famous in his own right. He ended up with followers all around the world. For example, Apollos from Alexandria in Egypt (Acts 18:24-25) taught accurately about Jesus from the Scriptures, but knew only the baptism of John. Clearly John's teaching had spread as far as Egypt, even in the early days. There are still a few followers of John the Baptist today called Mandeans, in places like Iraq. They emphasise ritual washing as the means of spiritual cleansing. Anyone who follows John the Baptist today rather than Jesus is not really following John, because John always points us to Jesus (John 1:7).
- 5. How significant is John the baptiser in the Bible?** John is a hugely significant figure in the New Testament. He is mentioned 20x's by name in John's gospel, second only to Jesus. John was the last of the Old Testament prophets (Luke 16:16), and John the first herald of the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 3:1-2). John bridges the gap between the Old and New Testaments. Jesus had a very high

view of John (Luke 7:28). But I think it is in John's gospel that we see John's significance, and greatness, most clearly. This lay in his selfless testimony of Jesus as Messiah: *John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me'"* (John 1:15).

John's ministry was short lived but highly effective. The Synoptic gospels tell us in some detail about how John met his end, by beheading, at the hand of Herod (Mark 6:14-28). John's gospel only tells us in passing, *John had not yet been put in prison* (John 3:24), which gives the sense that he is assuming we have read the Synoptic gospels! Instead, in John's gospel we have these words of John the baptiser: *He must increase, I must decrease* (John 3:30). John the Baptist is the first human figure in John's gospel, but his prominence gradually fades, as Jesus, the One who reveals the Father, takes centre stage. John decreases and disappears, while Jesus increases.

- 6. How does John's gospel portray John?** John introduces John as, *a man sent from God* (John 1:6). John is the real deal; he is not false, but a true prophet. But who is John? In John 1:19-28 this question becomes a big deal. The prologue just introduces this issue: John is *not the light, but came to bear witness about the light* (John 1:8). He came to testify to *the true Light, which gives light to everyone, who was coming into the world* (John 1:9). The *true*, as opposed to the *false* is an important feature in John's gospel. For example, in the gospel we have: the true Light (John 1:9); true worshippers (John 4:18,23); the true bread from heaven (John 6:32); the true vine (John 15:1); the true God (John 7:28; 17:3); true sayings (John 4:37); true testimony (John 5:31,32; 8:17; 10:41;19:35;21:24.) John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the incarnate Word, and knows that he is in need of forgiveness of sins as much as anyone else. Even though John was 6 months older than Jesus, he said, *He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me"* (John 1:15).

How might John the baptiser challenge us?

- 1. He challenges us to follow Jesus.** John always points us away from himself and towards Jesus. Jesus Himself calls us to follow Him (Matthew 11:28-30). It is easy for Christians to slip into a guru mentality, where we are in fact no longer following Jesus, but our favourite spiritual teacher. God gives us teachers and prophets, but it is Jesus we should be following. Jesus is not *only* a spiritual teacher, He is the Word who was with God and who is God. (See Exodus 20:2, Acts 13:2).
- 2. He challenges us to be a truthful witness.** John was not the light but he came to bear testimony to the Light. We are not the Light, we are not little Christ's, but we have been called to testify to the Light through our words and deeds. Telling the truth is not only about not lying in a general sense, but it's also about telling the truth about God. The Scriptures say, *All men are liars* (Psalm 116:11). I typed this into Google and was surprised to find a song called, *All men are liars*, and was even more surprised to find that the song was written by Nick Lowe. Some of the words go like this: *All Men, All Men are liars their words ain't worth no more than worn out tires ... Among God's creatures man must be, the most slimy and slippery now. All men are liars and that's the truth!* The song is really about men who are unfaithful to their wives. But what he says is true of everyone, because as sinners we all give, or have given, false witness about who God is (see 1John 2:22). The Scripture says that the destiny of all liars is the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8). Where does this leave us? Have we given a true confession? For, *if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (Romans 10:9).
- 3. He may challenge us to get baptised.** Have you been baptised as a believer? Baptism is an act of obedience in following the Lord. It is a public confession of faith. Because it is public, it helps to seal our commitment, and to make us more secure in our faith. It ministers God's grace and brings his blessing when it is done as an act of faith. All committed Christians should be baptised as believers.