

3. Preaching in the New Testament

John: preaching the baptism of repentance

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John prepared the way for Christ, the valleys, mountains, crooked ways and rough places in Isaiah 40 representing different groups of Jewish people. The prophecy in Malachi 4 shows how John sought to move the Jews away from reliance on the works of the Law and towards faith in the promises to Abraham. It can be shown that John preached about Christ even before he saw Christ.

THE MINISTRY of John the Baptist links the Old and New Testaments. His ministry was prophesied in the last book of the Old Testament and led up to the ministry of Jesus. His ministry was the culmination of the ministry of the prophets under the old covenant: "all the prophets and the law prophesied until John" (Mt. 11:13); but his emphasis was on the principles involved in the new covenant.

Three passages from the Old Testament are quoted in the New regarding John's work: Isaiah 40, Malachi 3 and Malachi 4. A further prophecy of his ministry was given by the Angel Gabriel when he appeared to Zacharias and told him he was to be the father of the one who would fulfil these Old Testament prophecies. Each of the four Gospels deals with John's ministry before moving on to that of Jesus. Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3 use the phrase "baptism of repentance" regarding his ministry; Matthew 3 speaks of the need both for repentance and baptism but not in the same phrase; and John 1 only of baptism, but with a significant reference to the work of Jesus.

Preparing the way

Both Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 speak of John's work as preparing the way for the coming of a greater one, who was of course Jesus. John's call to the Jews to repentance and baptism showed

how the way was to be prepared. Thus Mark, after quoting both the above references to preparing the way, says, "John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (1:4). Luke puts it the other way round; having said that John "came . . . preaching the baptism of repentance for the remis-

sion of sins", he goes on to cite Isaiah 40, with its reference to "prepare ye the way of the Lord", as being fulfilled by the work of John (3:3-6). Matthew speaks of John saying in his preaching, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand", and he cites Isaiah regarding preparing the way of the Lord (3:2,3).

But what is the link between preparing the way and repentance and baptism? In Isaiah 57 we have a similar verse to Isaiah 40:3: "Cast ye up, cast ye up, *prepare the way*, take up the stumblingblock out of the way of My people". This is followed by: "For thus saith the high and lofty One That inhabiteth eternity, Whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones" (vv. 14,15). Connecting the two verses together, preparing the way is to bring about a spirit of contrition and humility in people, to get them to acknowledge the greatness of God and humbly to acknowledge their own sinfulness. This is what John the Baptist did in his call to repent and be baptized.

Returning to Isaiah 40, the figure used in verses 3 and 4 seems to be that of preparing a level road for the visit of a king. The four aspects of this seem to correspond to four groups of people to whom John preached:

- 1 **“Every valley shall be exalted”**. The common people, the “multitude” of Luke 3:17.
- 2 **“Every mountain and hill shall be made low”**. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, referred to in Matthew 3:7. These were the leaders of the nation, lifted up in their pride, but who came to hear John, and were exhorted to repent and be baptized (v. 11).
- 3 **“The crooked shall be made straight”**. These were the publicans (tax collectors), noted for the dishonest way in which they sought to make the maximum gain from their profession (Lk. 3:13).
- 4 **“The rough places plain”**. These were the rough soldiers, who acted with violence towards people and exacted money from them (v. 14).

These various elements of society to whom John preached all had in common the fact that they were sinners, who needed to humble themselves before God in recognition of their sins and subject themselves to baptism. Here we have a very fundamental aspect of preaching the gospel: to get people to recognise the righteousness of God, their own sinfulness and their need to accept humbly the way back to God. They varied in their willingness to receive his message; many publicans seem to have been responsive, for we read in the Gospels how they came to Jesus to listen to his teaching. In contrast, the Pharisees and Sadducees were too proud to acknowledge their need to repent.

Back to the fathers

Malachi 4 does not on the face of it have anything to do with John the Baptist, for verses 5 and 6 speak of a coming again of Elijah. However, both the Angel Gabriel and Jesus clearly apply it to John, for Jesus said to the people regarding him: “if ye are willing to receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come” (Mt. 11:14); and Gabriel, quoting Malachi 4 in relation to John, says that he will go forth “in the spirit and power of Elias” (Lk. 1:17). It is this application of the prophecy that we will consider, therefore, since it is John’s ministry we are dealing with.

Gabriel declared to Zacharias, John’s father, “many of the children of Israel shall he [John] turn to the Lord their God”. He would “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just” (vv. 16,17). This compares with Malachi 4:6: “And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers”. The first

statements are identical, the second very different. To interpret Malachi as simply referring to family reconciliation is surely too limiting, and this is supported by Gabriel’s very different wording. So how are we to understand this?

There are indications that the preaching of John the Baptist was aimed at drawing people away from their reliance on the works of the Law for their righteousness, and taking them back to the promises to Abraham and the faith that was counted to him for righteousness. It is the promises to Abraham that are the foundation of the gospel, no less for the Jews of John’s day than for ourselves today. Faith in those promises is required of us today, as it was of the Jews of those days. The Jews, however, considered themselves to be right before God solely on the grounds of their physical descent from Abraham; but John, as did Jesus later on (see John 8), said that this counted for nothing: “Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Lk. 3:8). It was not that “works” had no place in their lives, but that they needed to be done with an Abraham-like faith.

Returning to the words of Malachi and Gabriel, can we therefore interpret them as saying that John’s work was to turn people away from reliance on the works of the Law to the faith of Abraham? Abraham was pre-eminently the “just” or righteous one because of his faith, and with him we include Isaac and Jacob, with whom God was also pleased because of their faith in His promises. In this they were indeed wise. But what of “the hearts of the fathers to the children”? This is a problem, for the fathers were, of course, asleep in the grave. Are we being told that if the Jews of John’s day went back to an Abrahamic faith there would be a unity between them and the founders of the nation? I can think of no other explanation.

The coming of the saviour

Those who responded to the call of John to repent and be baptized would still have been sinners, on the way to eternal death. Something else was required, and, as we have seen, both Isaiah and Malachi speak of John’s work as preparing the way for one to come. That one to come would be the saviour who would provide forgiveness of sins. In his prophecy given after John’s birth, Zacharias rejoices in the fact that God “hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of His

servant David" (Lk. 1:69), referring, of course, to Jesus, conceived of the Holy Spirit and at that time growing in the womb of his mother Mary. Zacharias speaks of the work to be carried out by his recently born son as follows: "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins" (vv. 76,77).

There is nothing in the preaching of John, as recorded in Matthew and Luke, that directly points to Jesus' great work of providing salvation from sin, but John 1 records that the Baptist twice pointed to Jesus as the one who would provide this. When John was investigated by the Jewish leaders he told them of the one already present in the nation who would be superior to him, and the very next day Jesus appeared. John knew that Jesus was the promised one who would provide salvation from sin, and so he declared before the people: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (Jno. 1:29). It is evident that Jesus remained there for several days, for the following day, when Jesus walked by, John said again, "Behold the Lamb of God", this time addressing two of his disciples who were standing with him (vv. 35,36).

It would appear that Jesus had not previously been present at John's preaching. John refers in verses 32 and 33 to the visible coming of the Spirit on Jesus, which Matthew and Luke tell us occurred immediately following his baptism. The coming of Jesus to John, his baptism, and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on him, marked the beginning of the ministry of Jesus.

But did John preach Jesus before he pointed to Jesus as "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world"? The question is answered for

us by the Apostle Paul. When he came to Ephesus he found some there who had been baptized by John. He said to them: "John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus". Evidently these people recognised that they had not understood that aspect of John's preaching and so, of their own accord it would seem, were baptized into Jesus: "When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:4,5). So John did preach about the coming saviour; but it would seem that some whom he baptized believed this when they were baptized, others did not.

Conclusion

Careful examination of the preaching of John shows that there were three vital elements to it:

- 1 The need to recognise the greatness of God, and humbly accept the need to repent of sin and begin again.
- 2 The need to forsake reliance on the Law and physical descent from Abraham, and to become like him spiritually by believing in God's promises.
- 3 The need to recognise that sins could only be forgiven through him who was the Lamb of God.

Since John's ministry was to the Jews, other aspects of what we preach did not need to be preached to them, for they would have known such things as the promises of the Old Testament, the prophecies of a Son of David who would rule them and the hope of eternal life by resurrection. What they had failed to understand were the principles of how sinful men and women could approach the righteous God, and this was the emphasis of John's preaching.

It is beautifully fitting that in the closing prayer of Jesus before he suffered [John 17], he should petition first for himself in view of the now accomplished work; then for the apostles with whom so much of the ministry had been spent, and for whose instruction he had so laboured; and lastly for that larger number who would believe through their being "sent into the world". "Neither pray I for these alone", said Jesus, "but for them also which shall believe on me through their word" (verse 20).

We must not limit the apostolic ministry to the labours of their lifetime. A phase of their work more permanent than the oral preaching has been the writing under the Spirit's guidance the books which form the New Testament. The needs of the church of Christ during the first century led to the writing of the gospels and the epistles either by the apostles or their associates, and by these books the ministry of reconciliation has gone on. The writers, while dead, yet speak, "We therefore beseech you in Christ's stead, Be ye reconciled to God".

John Carter, *The Gospel of John*, p. 195