

The One Who Comes After Me is Before Me

By Dr. Dave Neale

Behind the Text

We continue our consideration of the Gospel of John. In the weeks to come I'll pick some evocative passages and stories and we will unpack them together.

This morning we look at the role of John the Baptist in the appearing of **God the Only Son**. So, let's talk about The Baptist, and baptism and the religious milieu in which (you may not be aware of this) many John the Baptist communities flourished in the first century.

So, I hope this will be both interesting and edifying too.

You might, if you were an observant reader, note that in this first chapter, this vast cosmic panorama where the writer lays out the ontology of the Jesus of Galilee from the foundation of creation... you might note, that almost *half* of the verses of the first chapter are given over to the ministry of John the Baptist. There is a tremendous amount of material about The Baptist in John's gospel.

Well, I'm no E.P. Sanders, but that makes me pause to ask why the story of John the Baptist is so important to this cosmic scenario of the Christ.

I'm going give you a couple of reasons I think account for this prominence of The Baptist in John's Gospel, and then I'm going to talk about the Baptism of the Holy Spirit in verse 23-34.

But we need to understand that this is the latest gospel written, and most scholars believe it reached its final form in the 10th decade of the first century, i.e. the 90s. Theology had been percolating for decades and maturing like fine wine.

First... The first reason for this emphasis on The Baptist is actually pretty clear, because in a half dozen places¹ the gospel the writer is at pains to indicate that John bore witness that *he himself* was not the Messiah, but *Jesus* was.

During the early days The Baptist was gathering *more* disciples than Jesus (5:1), until Jesus surpassed him. The Gospel of Mark says about The Baptist: ***And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the Jordan river, confessing their sins.*** (Mark 1:5)

But there was a hand off of the prophetic baton that meant John was to decrease as Jesus increased. ***After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me... ...I have been sent ahead of him... He must increase, but I must decrease...*** (John 1:30; 3:28, 30)

Jesus and John were very similar figures at the time.

There were two churches in the first century. The Christians and the Church of John.

- Both were Jewish Judean prophets;
- both had a large following in their lifetime;
- both were martyred by Herod;

- both preached a water baptism for the repentance of sins (John 4:2 – Not Jesus himself, but his disciples did the baptizing);
- both were historical figures.

When Paul is travelling into Ephesus in the 50s (in Turkey), he encounters people who only know about “the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25 and 19:3). They tell Paul, ‘We have never heard about someone named Jesus.’

Can you see how long it takes to do good? Even the truth of the Messiah seeps, seeps into the world slowly, incrementally. This reminds us that we ought not grow tired in the doing good. Give your life to it. You probably won’t ever know what it meant to the world. Just keep on.

So, communities devoted to the idea that John was a prophet or the Messiah were wide-spread throughout the first century. They obviously persisted very late into the first century (90s) because that is when John’s gospel reached final form, and they are still making the case that God’s son is Jesus, not John.

In our gospel, John the Baptist says, *I am not the Messiah.* (1:20) ***Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*** (1:29)

Josephus, the Jewish Roman historian of the late first century devotes a long chapter to John the Baptist in Antiquities Book 18 (Book 5, vv 1-2; 118). Which tells us, that by the time he writes Antiquities in 94 CE, John the Baptist communities were still a feature of religious life in the Roman Empire.

Second... The *second reason* is the heart of my message today really. And it has to do with baptism, because The Baptist said regarding Jesus:

I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ (John 1:32-33)

Nicene Creed says, “We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

It says nothing about practice, but simply that we acknowledge, or “confess” that: “There is only one baptism because there is one holy catholic church throughout the world based on the faith taught by the apostles.

The Apostle Paul makes the fundamental connection when he speaks of “One Lord, one faith, one baptism.”ⁱⁱⁱ (Eph 4:5)

Now, water baptism for the forgiveness of sins, or for “repentance” is one thing. It was rather a common thing.

Interestingly, Pharisees were a proselytizing sect as well at the time. Jesus criticized the Pharisees in Matthew 23:15, ***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert...*** but you don’t live out what you preach.

Gentile converts to Judaism had to do three things:

- Be circumcised (if male);

- fully immersed in baptism;
- and undertake to follow the law.

Do you see how this explains the mindset of the Apostle Paul, a Pharisee to become Christian, and who likewise crosses sea and land to make converts.ⁱⁱⁱ

When the first *gentiles* were converted to Christ in Acts 10, Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10:48)

Peter said in his inaugural sermon, ***Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*** (Acts 2:38)

Baptism with water is an outward sign of an inward cleansing. It is symbolic of your commitment to follow Jesus. Baptism is a “sacrament” in our Nazarene tradition, meaning it is a sacred act.^{iv} But baptism does not save us.^v

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit does save us!

‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’

What is this baptism in the Holy Spirit? What is the sign of it? The church has answered that in different ways down through time.

I find that after 50 years as a Christian pilgrim myself, that I continue to explore the meaning of the presence of the Spirit in my life each and every day. I don’t know exactly how to describe it, but I recognize in others.

When we seek a way to describe the evidence of the Holy Spirit, I think the best thing to do is to stick to the two most prominent metaphors that Jesus used in John’s gospel, and Acts.

Do you happen to recall what happens next in John, in chapter 2? The wedding in Canaan where Jesus attends. Which I think is so charming, isn’t it.

The passage is well known for the fact that when the wine runs out, six large stone jars, containing 20-30 gallons each of water stand nearby. These are there for ritual purification of course. Stone cannot convey ritual impurity in rabbinic teaching. People need to wash hands and feet before they eat.

...the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’

I said last week that there are seven miracles in John and each one has a profound symbolic meaning.

You don’t have to like wine to see the truth embedded in this metaphor. But Jesus turns the ritual purification water into... wine.

It is like the difference between water, and the wine of the Holy Spirit entering your soul.

Don’t you want the wine of the Spirit in your soul? That is what you receive when you come to Christ.

On the day of Pentecost those who observed the descent of the Spirit on the church thought they had got into the wine a bit early that day! Peter said, ***We aren't drunk, it's only 9 o'clock in the morning!*** (Acts 2:15)

... the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit comes to all who are Christians. This is something you want to have. Because it is the wine of life. This new wine (Luke 5:38) has to be put into new wineskins! Repentance -> Baptism in the Holy Spirit.

[Worship Team Come]

The second metaphor is one I will speak on at greater length on the 28th when we do the Nicodemus passage. But just to say here, that the Spirit is said to be like the wind. Spirit and wind are the same word in Greek.

You don't know where it comes from and you don't know where it is going, but you can sure see the trees rustle.

I have found this to be such an apt way to describe the presence of the Spirit in my life. While we work away at the challenge of keeping a moral centre in place, while we strive to live in a way that glorifies God and shows His love, the Spirit ebbs and flows, sometimes seen and felt, often neither.

But always, the wind of God present in my soul.

Wine and Wind, Wine and Wind!

Thanks be to God,

Amen

ⁱ John 1:6-42, 3:23-27, 4:1, 5:33-36

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Ephesians 4:5. *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction*, by Phillip Carey, p. 200.

ⁱⁱⁱ The cleansing for ritual purity was so common that, as recent archaeology shows, some homes in Jerusalem had ritual baths for purification to enter the temple.

^{iv} Baptism, says the Nazarene Manual, is sacrament, a sacred ritual "signifying participation by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and incorporation into the His Body, the Church. It is a means of grace proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour." (p. 264)

^v Baptism is an initiation event, a symbol of death, burial and resurrection with Jesus, a symbol of inner transformation and empowerment. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 73