

He Must Increase: Ministry Lessons from John the Baptist¹

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ABSTRACT

John, son of Zechariah, commonly called ‘John the Baptist’ is a significant figure on the pages of the New Testament, not only in the Gospels, but also in Acts. Rather than focusing upon questions concerning John’s relationship to first Century Judaism or to Jesus, or on his theological function within the Gospel narratives, this article explores the relevance of John’s words for ministry in the twenty-first century. John’s words play a vital role in the Gospels in establishing Jesus’ identity and mission and also serve as a model for Christian ministers in how they think about themselves and speak about the Lord Jesus. In a context of high-profile leadership failings and a culture emphasising the ‘self’, John provides vital lessons for ministry.

KEY WORDS

John the Baptist, Christian leadership, burn out, servanthood, Christ-centered proclamation.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is John, son of Zechariah and relative of the Lord Jesus, generally known to us as ‘John the Baptist’. When Christians think of John, they tend to be distracted by his unusual appearance and lifestyle – camel-hair clothes and a diet of locusts and honey – or to skim over him in their eagerness to read about Jesus. Yet John is a significant figure on the pages of the New Testament, not only in the Gospels, but also in Acts because of his enduring legacy.

Theological studies about John tend to explore his relationship to the various Jewish groups active in the region of Judea at his time,³ or to compare his actions, baptism or theology with those of Jesus and his disciples,⁴ or to examine his

¹ The ministry lessons discussed in this article are more fully developed along with wider lessons for Christian living in Dr. Coulter’s book, *Clarion Call: Finding Joy in Christ With John the Baptist* (PESIOD, 2021).

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³ See, for example, Hopkins (2021), Kelhoffer (2004), Lupieri (2001)

⁴ See, for example, Marcus (2018), Shafer (2006), Ferda (2020)

function within the theological intent of the Gospel writers.⁵ John has also been presented as an instructive example for contemporary mission.⁶ The purpose of this article is not to contribute to any of these discussions, still less to re-examine the historical setting and significance of John the Baptist.⁷ Rather, it aims to explore the relevance of John's words for ministry in the twenty-first century.

John's words are significant, playing a vital role in the Gospels in establishing the identity of Jesus and preparing the way for his mission. They also serve as a model for Christian ministers in how they think about themselves and speak about the Lord Jesus. These lessons are vital for contemporary ministry in light of numerous high-profile abuses of power and moral failures by people in positions of leadership. They also speak more widely into a culture excessively concerned with the 'self, to which Christian ministers are not immune.

This article focuses not on John's message to the crowds, but on his words about himself. One of the most famous of John's statements inspires the title of this article: "He must increase, but I must decrease".⁸ John's aim was to make much of Jesus and little of himself. The significance of this saying can be explored by considering three other statements of John. It is not possible to reconstruct a reliable chronological order for John's statements from the four Gospels, so the sayings considered here will be arranged in an order chosen by the author to build a picture of the implications of John's words for the minister's self-understanding, beginning with John's understanding of who he was not, then considering his understanding of Jesus' superiority and his own servanthood, and finally his appreciation of his responsibility to God within the limits set upon him.

I am Not the Christ (John 1:19-23)

John's Gospel introduces the response of John the Baptist to the enquiries of delegates from Jerusalem about his identity as follows: "this is the testimony of John ..."⁹ The reader may be excused for expecting a grand declaration of John's manifesto for change or a bold declaration about his place in God's purposes. John did speak of such things, but not in response to this question. His "testimony" was a refutation of a potential misunderstanding. The Gospel writer

⁵ See, for example, Burnett (2013), Evans (2010), Martinez (2012), Vande Vrede (2014)

⁶ See, for example, MacLeod (2003), King (2009), Van der Merwe (1999)

⁷ One of the best sources for a detailed study of John remains Wink (1968)

⁸ John 3:30

⁹ John 1:19

states it in no uncertain terms: “He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”¹⁰

John’s testimony was a negative comment, a statement of who he is not. There was a real risk that people would reach a wrong conclusion about John the Baptist on the question of whether John was the Messiah, even at the time when John’s Gospel was written, perhaps 60 years after his death. Many people in Jerusalem regarded John as a prophet. In the week leading up to Jesus’ death – at least one year after John’s execution – Jesus used this widespread belief to avoid traps set by the chief priests and elders, who could not denounce John without provoking an angry reaction from the crowd.¹¹ Another twenty or more years later, the apostle Paul met a dozen disciples of John in Ephesus,¹² while Apollos of Alexandria was also a disciple of John until Priscilla and Aquila led him to understand the significance of Jesus.¹³ It seems likely that John the Gospel writer, who tradition places in Ephesus in his later years, was deliberately countering wrong ideas about John in that city in the way he recorded John’s words.

This enduring legacy of John’s ministry is testimony to his charisma of personality and preaching style. In contemporary churches and parachurch movements, these qualities are often sought in leaders. We expect leaders to have strong personalities – full of confidence and certainty – and to be dynamic communicators. Yet, these are not the qualities presented as requirements of Christian leaders in the New Testament. There, the emphasis is on self-control and ability to teach people patiently through both words and example.¹⁴ It seems ironic that we should prize the quality we call ‘charisma’¹⁵ when it could almost be defined as the antithesis of the self-control that is the pinnacle of the fruit of the Spirit.¹⁶ Godly leaders learn to rein in their personalities for the sake of others and faithful teachers will be most effective by modelling faithfulness rather than by performing in the pulpit.

John’s testimony started with an emphatic denial that he was the Christ. He did not even want to be identified with Elijah, even though the Lord Jesus would

¹⁰ John 1:20

¹¹ Matthew 21:23-27

¹² Acts 19:1ff.

¹³ Acts 18:26

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 4:11-16; Titus 1:5-9

¹⁵ The modern English meaning of the word is a corruption of its apparently original usage by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 to describe a grace gift to the Church.

¹⁶ Galatians 5:23

make that connection, presumably indicating that John did not have complete self-awareness of his part in God's plan.¹⁷ Contemporary Western culture is obsessed with identity and seeks authenticity. Hypocrisy is seen as the great sin, closely followed by lack of self-awareness. Self-knowledge is precious, but John's example warns us that our pursuit of self-awareness will be futile until we learn first who we are not. We are not the Christ.

Many Christian ministers have Messiah complexes. They take on burdens they cannot bear both in the home and in the church. They think they can love their spouses perfectly and mislead them into having those false expectations. They believe they can right the wrongs of the world or the Church through ingenious strategies or hard work. When leaders take a saviour stance, they end up instead becoming everyone's judge. A sense of superiority develops. They slip into language such as saying they will build or extend God's kingdom, but Scripture never uses such verbs to describe our relationship to the kingdom. It is God who builds and grows the kingdom – our part is to seek it, receive it, welcome it, demonstrate it and testify to it. We are not the giver but the recipients.

Until Christian ministers realise they cannot save the world, change people, or build God's kingdom, they will suffer endless misery and disappointment. When Christian leaders burn out, it is common to find that they allowed themselves to be driven by unrealistic expectations about what they could do. They mistakenly think that they can transgress the limits of their created nature by working longer hours and never saying no. They do not practice Sabbath rest and do not set boundaries. They have forgotten who they are not. Indeed, even Christ in his ministry on earth modelled rest and bounded living. If the incarnate Son of God was not infinite in his availability, we must not think we can be.

God has entrusted many resources and gifts to his servants in ministry, which can bring great blessing to others, but the only thing we have of ultimate value to give anyone is Jesus. He alone can save them from themselves, present them to God, and carry them through death into his inheritance. This is why our churches must keep mercy ministries (acts of compassion to people in need) closely integrated with evangelism. Unless we give people Jesus, we leave them in their sins and without hope. If we show them love without explaining that he is its source, we distract their focus from him and keep their gaze on ourselves. John knew who he was not, and so must we.

Mightier than I (Matthew 3:11-12)

¹⁷ Matthew 11:13-14

In the ranking of servant tasks in first century Judea, carrying a person's sandals was close to washing their feet. Given the unsanitary conditions of the time, this was most unpleasant, and reserved for the lowest of servants. That is the position John takes for himself in this passage. Two other Gospels record a slightly different but related saying of John in which he says he is unworthy to loosen the straps of Jesus' sandals.¹⁸ John is clearly saying that Jesus is so much greater than him that John deserves no association with him whatsoever. Jesus is infinitely mightier because unlike John's baptism, which washed the body in symbolism of repentance, Jesus could transform the soul by baptising in the Spirit who is God Himself or bring final judgement through baptism in fire.¹⁹

This servant stance is the only honest starting point for ministry. Indeed, we would do well to remember that 'ministry' means 'service' and 'minister' means 'servant'. When we start from the understanding of our own inadequacy to achieve spiritual change, any service for Jesus is revealed as what it is – a gift of pure grace. Christian ministers must never allow a sense of entitlement to develop. Yet we easily slip I not thinking we have a right to serve in certain ways because we are gifted, or have proven ourselves faithful, or have won the right through sacrifice. Such thoughts are deceptions of the evil one. We have no right to serve in even the most menial ways. It is all joy!

Servanthood is not a common image in our contemporary culture. We are unlikely to call people servants, even if we employ them to perform tasks like cleaning, which we prefer not to spend our own time on. We have rightly understood the biblical principle of the equal worth and rights of every person (even if we do not act consistently in line with it). In emphasising this truth, however, we have lost the equally important biblical principle that joy is found in submitting to others and serving people without consideration for self.

We can hardly consider what John the Baptist said about servanthood and feet without thinking of the Lord Jesus in the upper room washing the feet of his disciples.²⁰ This episode is the most succinct expression in the Gospels of a principle that marked Jesus' ministry throughout. He described himself as being "among you as the one who serves".²¹ In these words as in his action with the basin and towel, he turned the expectations of their culture, and ours, on their

¹⁸ Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16

¹⁹ I have taken the view here that the baptism with fire refers to judgement rather than being a synonym for Spirit baptism, although I recognise that biblical scholars take varied views on this question.

²⁰ John 13:1-20

²¹ Luke 22:27

head. The greatest person, he said, is the one who serves and it is this to which the one who leads must aspire.²² Here, leaders acknowledge the one Lord and show an example of service for him. They must stand over people, taking responsibility for watching over their souls, and their shepherding function of protecting the sheep will include discipline and decision-making, but they do this *among* people in the way Jesus was.

This pattern of ministry among people continued with the apostle Paul and his associates as he describes their work with the church in Thessalonica. He tells those believers, “You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake”,²³ and says “we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children”.²⁴ This gentle, motherly care was the context in which they could also bring fatherly challenge with encouragement and exhortation.²⁵ It is the pattern he expects from those who continue as leaders in the church and in response to which proper submission from the other believers is appropriate. As Paul writes, “respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you”.²⁶ We must not dare to stand *over* people, responsible for their purity and growth, unless we also labour *among* them, committed to their wellbeing. We must be among our people as ones who serve.

When we encounter Jesus and understand how much mightier he is than us, we begin to relate to him not on the basis of demands for our rights, but of delight at the very idea that he might beckon us to come close and grant us the privilege of serving Him. When we see him as the One who served in washing his disciple’s feet, we are inspired to do likewise. We learn from him what true service means. In my ministry supporting leaders, I often find that they are overworking and have poorly defined boundaries, but in working with them to establish healthier rhythms of life and work, I am always eager not to undermine their understanding that they are servants of others for Christ’s sake,²⁷ and this will entail sacrifice.

Unless it is Given (John 3:22-27)

One of the hardest questions to answer about Christian ministry is why some people seem to be given much bigger platforms than others. How do some speakers and writers, seemingly no more gifted than others, rise to prominence?

²² Luke 22:26

²³ 1 Thessalonians 1:5

²⁴ 1 Thessalonians 2:7

²⁵ 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12

²⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:12

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:5

In my experience listening to Christian ministers, wrestling with this fact is a common experience, even if it is seldom voiced. I should add, that whilst there is clearly a temptation to unhealthy comparisons and pride in this thought, it is also challenging for humble leaders whose concern is with the unrealistic expectations of the ministry in their home churches that celebrity speakers and large gatherings can create in believers. Awareness of failures by some high-profile speakers and less dramatic character flaws in others compounds this concern further.

In contemporary culture, we are inclined to think success and recognition result from one of two sources: either the person's qualities and efforts or their upbringing and connections. These alternative explanations reflect the classic right-left political spectrum and they both seem plausible in this fallen world. From a Christian perspective, however, they are inadequate. They rest on a measurement of success in terms of visible results in this age that is counter to the gospel and they neglect the sovereignty of God altogether.

John the Baptist calls us to think differently. John was a sensation. He drew crowds – proof of his gifting. He upset the authorities – a sure sign of genius. By all human measures, he was successful in his chosen field. Today we would call him an 'influencer'. Until, that is, a rival preacher appeared on the scene. Jesus 'stole' John's modus operandi, getting his disciples to baptise people, and his best lines, speaking of the kingdom of God. Jesus did not immediately catch people's attention like the wild-haired, camel-clad John but, what he lacked in appearance, he made up for in other ways, teaching with authority that made John's seem a mere shadow and performing miracles that John did not.

When faced with a rival who seems greater than them, most people try to justify their jealousy and excuse their envy. They highlight the rival's flaws, question his motives, and work, often manipulatively, to keep him off platforms they can control. Sadly, this can even happen among Christian ministers. John presents a radically different attitude. This preacher of repentance, set apart from before his birth, knew the deceptiveness of the human heart. John did not seek the limelight by pursuing followers, promoting himself or flattering potential patrons. The outward 'success' he had was not grasped by him but given to him. He simply did what God called him to do and left the results to God. And he knew the truth that we seldom like to acknowledge, that any influence is only for a time and for a purpose.

When God lifts us up, it is at the right time, for the right purpose and for the right duration. Sadly, many Christian ministers do not grasp this. They too readily

take praise without directing it back to the giver of their gifts. They too seldom hand over ministry opportunities to others, failing to plan well for succession or to invest in training others for ministry. They do not know how to let go of authority in areas that others could readily lead in and so constrict the gifts of others. They pay lip service to the idea of plural leadership, but they know how to manipulate the outcome they want by forming inner circles or by force of personality. These behaviours reflect a lack of faith in the sovereignty of God over our ministries and an idolatrous view of one's own indispensability.

We get this insight into John's attitude in his response to the kind of thing that happens on social media every day: the 'debate' that is not a debate. People talking past each other, not acknowledging the real motivations for their mutual hostility. John's disciples were in such an exchange about purification with an unnamed Jew. As often happens in such situations, the two sides found common ground in suspicion of a third party who was not in the discussion. So, they laid their dispute aside and John's disciples came to express their concern to him that Jesus was gathering a crowd greater than his.

Ironically, they acknowledge that John had borne witness to Jesus. Despite knowing this, it seems they had not expected the mass turning of disciples from John to Jesus. Surely John's demise was not what John had expected or what God intended? John's response is, I suggest, one of the most profound statements in all of Scripture: "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven".²⁸ John's status was simply a gift from heaven for a time. God gave it and God could take it away. John knew it had never truly been his. John's response reflects a deeper theological conviction that everything we have is a gift from God, including our abilities, our upbringing, our social connections and the opportunities to use them to effect.

John's response should not cause us to take a deterministic view of ministry progression. We cannot say to someone whose gift is not being used as fully as it might, "You must just accept this is what God has given you". Human factors *can* and *do* limit the opportunities people are given. Injustices happen in ministry appointments and advancement as in every sphere of life. Indeed, it seems that they may be even more common in ministry given the tendency to promote those who promote themselves. It is vital that we recognise this and seek to change unhealthy cultures where we find them. What John's words do tell us, however,

²⁸ John 3:27

is that we must receive everything we have as a gift from God and be sure to use it as God intends.

We may be on the wrong side of unfair decisions about who is invited into certain ministry opportunities or given a particular appointment, but we must not be perpetrators of such injustice when we are the ones making the decision. Furthermore, we must remember that we will answer to the Lord not for what we had no opportunity to do but for what we did with what we were given. When we compare our own ministry ‘success’ (or lack of it) with that of others, we are distracted from our responsibility to serve faithfully in what we have, making the most of every opportunity given to us.²⁹ We can acknowledge God’s sovereignty and generosity even as we weep at human sins of unfairness.

Above all, we must remember that all that has been given to every person will one day be returned to its true owner – Christ himself. Then he will sit in judgement on the deeds done in the body,³⁰ and we will see the beauty of what was built on his foundation, whether we noticed it in this life or not, while all that was unworthy will be burnt.³¹ His assessment on that day is the only evaluation of our ministry that will ultimately matter. That should not cause us to be resistant to ministry reviews and scrutiny – quite the opposite, we should seek true accountability because we know we will give account to him – but it should reassure us that the world’s metrics of success are not those of the kingdom of Christ.

Conclusion: Ministry in the Way of the Forerunner

John the Baptist has much to teach us about the shape of Christian ministry. He expressed a clear understanding of his role as forerunner to Jesus. It was this understanding that enabled him to confess his own limitations (“I am not the Christ”), to point to Jesus (“He is mightier than I”) and to deny any desire to cling to recognition and fame (“He must increase, I must decrease”). In this, John is an example for we who come after Jesus with the ministry of testifying to him as Saviour and Lord. We must know our own limitations, both so that we remain dependent on the power of Christ and so that we do not burn out. We must guard our hearts against entitlement and maintain a stance of sacrificial service. We must remember that all we have is a gift from God for a time and that it will all be returned to Jesus in the right time.

²⁹ Ephesians 5:16

³⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:10

³¹ 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

With these principles underpinning ministry, we can learn to maintain joy in Christ and so serve him through a lifetime. Perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn from John is to speak much of Jesus. Christ was the constant theme of his words. I find that Christians generally, and even ministers, speak many words about many things with barely the slightest connection to Jesus. Even in accountability meetings, the expectation is often to talk about our own struggles and temptations more than we do about the Lord in his glory. What we most need to be held accountable in is that “we proclaim [...] not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as [others’] servants for Jesus' sake”.³² We have nothing to offer a weary world of suffering sinners other than him. No one else to inspire sacrificial service from weak people like us. So, in our ministries, as in John’s, may we become less and Jesus become more.

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