

CHAPTER II

THE PREPARATORY MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST

John 1:19-51

IN the realm of human presentation, of inauguration, of launching a great ship, there is usually preparatory celebration that paves the way for the actual revelation, a fanfare that announces the arrival of royalty, the musical overture that sets the stage for the main movement. So at this preparatory point in the Gospel of John we are faced with an initial heralding of “the Word made flesh” in a very historic sense that follows the more eternal, theological proclamation. We have moved from the realm of the Word existing in eternity past, the planning stage of redemption in “the bosom of the Father,” to that period and launch when his glory began to be tangibly manifest in Jerusalem and Judea.

A. THE TESTIMONY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST TO JESUS, 1:19-34

John the Baptist is the first of three great witnesses to Jesus Christ in the New Testament, along with Jesus himself and the Apostle Paul. Josephus describes him as “a good man . . . [who] commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; . . . [many] . . . came to crowd about him , for they were greatly moved [pleased] by hearing his words.”¹

1. The ministry of John the Baptist concerning himself, vs. 19-28.

It should be noticed that John’s emphatic clarification concerning himself is prompted by the party of enquirers who seek him out from Jerusalem; he is not self-absorbed. Doubtless his messianic emphasis has been understood to a degree, yet confusion remains; hence the seeking of clarification concerning himself.

a. He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, vs. 19-23.

The dominant characteristic is a self-effacing perception of himself, irregardless of his upbringing as a cousin of Jesus and probable awareness that he fulfilled Malachi 3:1-3; 4:5-6. At the same time he is representative of the herald of and spokesman for Christ that God is pleased to use.

(1) Negative responses, vs. 19-21.

These are representative of the Apostle’s style of writing whereby the truth is hedged in, 3:17, 36; 6:38; 8:12; 14:27; 15:16; 16:13.

¹ Josephus, *Works*, XVIII, V, 2.

(a) He is sought from Jerusalem, v. 19.

“And this is the witness of John,” connects the Prologue to the following historic narrative. In other words, the testimony that follows concerning the glorious appearing of “the Lamb of God” and John’s confessed unworthiness, vs. 27, 29, 32, 34, suggests that the Baptist also comprehended and proclaimed Jesus Christ as described in vs. 1-18.

The “Jews” in Jerusalem are troubled and threatened by the popularity and puritan charisma of John (Matt. 3:4-5). Some of the Pharisees and Sadducees have already visited the Baptist’s Jordan ministry, and upon conforming to baptism have been rebuked, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:7-8). The people revere John as if he were a reincarnation of Elijah . So a delegation must approach him, “in Bethany beyond the Jordan,” v. 28, to make further enquiry; they dare not command him to meet with the Sanhedrin.

There question is forcefully put by the Jerusalem delegation, “Who are you?” But why? Pink explains: “To them the Baptist was an interloper. He was outside the religious systems of that day. He had not been trained in the schools of the Rabbins, he had held no position of honor in the temple ministrations, and he was not identified with either the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or the Herodians.”²

(b) He is not the Christ, v. 20.

The denial is emphatic and probably in the midst of a large number of disciples to whom messianic speculation was common conversation. “I most certainly am not the [longed for] Messiah.” In spite of rumors (Luke 3:15), for John the thought is preposterous, unthinkable; this is especially so since Jesus has just come to John from Galilee for the inauguration of his ministry; recently he was baptized by the Forerunner and tempted by Satan (Matt. 3:13-4:11). In the midst of a barrage of irrelevant questions, John is anxious to have his investigators meet Jesus, and this will happen the next day

(c) He is not Elijah, v. 21a.

The Jews could not be blamed for considering whether John was in fact Elisha according to the promise of Malachi 4:5-6. There may have been a similarity of austere appearance (Matt. 3:4; cf. II Kings 1:8). Even the Lord Jesus made the association (Matt. 11:14; 17:12). Yet John makes a categorical denial so that Luke 1:17 provides a resolution of the seeming problem. John “will go as a forerunner before Him [God] in the spirit and power of Elijah.” But even if the Jews recognized this truth, it would still be a small wonder compared with the glory of Christ, as the voice of God declared to Peter, James, and John, also

² Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, p. 51.

Moses and Elijah, at the mount of the transfiguration: “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!” (Matt. 17:5).

(d) He is not the Prophet, v. 21b.

According to Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19, God would raise up “a prophet like me [Moses] from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.” The Jews had various expectations in this regard, some identifying him as the Christ, or a lesser figure, 6:14; 7:40. Peter reveals that this Prophet is the Messiah (Acts 3:20-23), though it is significant that this Gospel will shortly reveal Christ’s other two major offices, namely that of Priest, v. 29, and King, v. 49.

(2) Positive response, v. 22-3.

Probably perplexed, the interrogators ask John to positively identify himself. As such a powerful and enigmatic figure, he did not fit in with the expectations of the religious establishment in Jerusalem. If only they had recalled the prophetic words of Zacharias, his father, they would have better understood: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; to give His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:76-79).

So, like father, like son, John the Baptist responds with a similar resume of his vocation. He is the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3, as the other Gospels confirm (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). The allusion here is to the wilderness between Babylon and Jerusalem. Now that the captivity has concluded (Isa. 40:1-2), “a voice [herald] calls in the wilderness” announcing the need for holy preparation to be made for the Lord who will mercifully lead the return of His people back to Jerusalem. As a result, “the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together” (Isa. 40:5). Here we are transported to the coming of the Lord in a far glorious, incarnate manner, and it is this which John declares, and he is the announcer.

(a) The *character* of the messenger, “a voice.”

John readily accepts his second divinely appointed name, the first meaning “Jehovah’s gift or favor (Luke 1:62-3), that comes through Isaiah’s inspired revelation; he has no aspiration for a “Rabbi” or “Rev. Doctor.” He is simply “a voice” that is “crying out,” βοάω, boāō, meaning “shouting,” or “powerfully preaching/proclaiming” (Luke 7:24-27). He is a medium of clay (Luke 7:19); what counts is the Word which he declares; the voice will rise and fall, but the Word is to attain eternal prominence (3:30). As Paul explains, true gospel messengers “have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves” (II Cor. 4:7).

(b) The *arena* of the messenger, “the wilderness.”

The region of “Bethany beyond Jordan,” v. 28, was surely arid and unfriendly, a desert location, now unknown, being representative of the spiritual state of Israel, that is the lifeless condition of the people of God. Perhaps John’s location, for all of its desolate character, yet was a better meeting place for the consecration of serious souls to Messiah’s imminent coming than the utter corruption of Jerusalem. Yet God, according to His covenant faithfulness, has not given up on such fruitless territory, for a remnant will respond to John and “make straight the way of the Lord.”

(c) The *message* of messenger, “repent, the Lord is coming.”

All three Synoptic accounts add the requirement of “repentance.” μετανοέω, metanoēō, Greek, being a call for a change of mind about what is on the horizon. Together they declare: “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand! . . . The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, make his pathways strait! Every valley shall be filled up, and every mountain and hill be brought low, and crooked paths shall be made straight, and the rough shall be made smooth; and all men will see the Salvation of God.’”³ In other words, turn from the soul chilling and petrifying religion of the times; the holy Messiah, the King of the Kingdom of God is about to make his entrance. Therefore lay before him a carpet of repentance appropriate to the righteousness of his person and mission; strew his way with tokens of contrition, “fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8).

b. He is the water baptizer, vs. 24-28.

Water baptism was not a new rite introduced into Judaism by John the Baptist. Rather it was a common practice for ritual cleansing, but especially for the reception of Gentiles as Jewish proselytes.⁴ However the distinction here is that Jews were being called on to participate in a ceremony that could be associated with Gentile conversion; further there was the implication of uncleanness that Jerusalem was not able to purify. Moreover some Jews traditionally believed that baptism would accompany the introduction of the Messianic period (Ezek. 36:25; Zech. 13:1).⁵ Thus John’s baptism is distinctive and not strictly Christian (Acts

³ Johnston M. Cheney, *The Life Of Christ In Stereo*, p. 16.

⁴ Murray Adamthwaite has written concerning more recent archaeological discovery of the baptismal (miqveh) pools that Rabbis required should be a minimum of 47” in depth: “[I]n connection with the Temple Mount during excavations over the 1970’s and 1980’s: no less that *forty-eight* (!) have so far been found, plus others in the Jerusalem area and elsewhere connected with well-to-do private (Pharisee?) homes of the New Testament era. Indeed, such pools were regularly connected with synagogues and private homes: for they were part of life. . . . Thus John [the Baptist] would appear to have taken this familiar Jewish rite and invested it with a new but related meaning appropriate for this new age.” “Baptism is Immersion!” *Reformation Today*, May – June, 1989, pp. 32, 38.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 140; also Bruce, *John*, p. 50; contra Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, p. 285.

19:-5), which identifies with Christ retrospectively; yet it prospectively anticipates identification with him.

(1) The enquiry about baptism, vs. 24-25.

While the inquisitive delegation is comprised of “priests and Levites from Jerusalem,” v. 19, we are now advised that Pharisees are also participants, either in person or by representation. They are concerned about the Baptist’s influential authority to baptize since he has just confessed to not having the authority of the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet; also John presented a novel, competitive challenge to the power that the Sanhedrin and priesthood administration jealously guarded. There had developed a division between the people and the religious aristocracy over John (Luke 7:24-30). Even today there are some who are quick to judge and repudiate alien baptism! Also true spiritual awakenings are usually spurned by the prevailing religious establishment.

(2) The explanation about baptism, vs. 26-27.

“John answered them and was saying, I myself baptize in water; in your midst [geographic region] stands one who you do not know.” The intimation is that Jesus’ earlier arrival and baptism has already been witnessed, though without any substantial recognition of his real identity to begin with, that is until the descent of the Holy Spirit, vs. 31, 33. For John water baptism is significant, however the substantial Spirit baptism of Jesus Christ is incomparably greater (Matt. 4:11-12), v. 26.

In terms of human ratings, this Jesus of Nazareth has lesser rank than John since the Baptist is older by six months. However in terms of heavenly ratings, this Christ is transcendently greater, especially since he was existing in eternity before John, vs. 15, 30. Morris points out that at that time slaves performed many tasks for their unpaid teachers as compensation. However, only a slave was expected to release the strap of a thong.⁶ But such is John’s sense of unworthiness that he disclaims any qualification to untie Jesus’ thongs! Why is this so? Because John is all too aware of the essential human problem called sin!

What an extreme perception of self, declares the modern world; how lacking in proper self-esteem! No! How blessed is John in being enabled to perceive reality, to know his disease, and then comprehend the remedy of v. 29. John’s unworthiness is not only that with regard to sin, but also with regard to grace! He is overwhelmed with the prospects!

(3) The location of the baptisms, v. 28.

The allusions to this location in vs. 19, 23, now lead to specific reference concerning the launching pad of Messiah’s official ministry, though

⁶ Morris, *John*, p. 141. Also Carson, *John*, p. 146.

“Bethany [Bethabara?], beyond [east of] Jordan” is difficult to locate.⁷ Both Jesus Christ’s prior baptism and temptations were preparatory and qualifying (Matt. 3:13-4:11). Perhaps John ministered in the wilderness because it had been revealed to him that the Divine plan was for this to be the inaugural location of Jesus Christ’s atoning ministry, even according to Isaiah 4:3.

2. The ministry of John the Baptist concerning Jesus, vs. 29-34.

“The next day,” in the light of vs. 35, 39, 43; 2:1, suggests a sequence that is difficult to unravel and yet heads toward the first miraculous sign at the wedding at Cana. Here is the formal presentation of Christ, the fulfillment of John’s ministry, the commencement of v. 11. This is not a chance meeting, but rather the Son of God “coming to him [John],” probably following his temptation, according to “the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4) for the purpose of a momentous declaration.

a. The Lamb of God, v. 29-30.

This profound announcement has astonished scholars on account of its doctrinal, almost Pauline maturity, so much so that unbelief has concluded that John did not actually say all of this. Perhaps John the Apostle added, “who takes away the sin of the world” or even more! After all, Matthew 11:2-15 appears to indicate that John later on had doubts about Jesus as the Messiah.⁸ More likely his acquaintance over the years with Mary, Joseph and their other children, his probably deceased parents, Zacharius and Elizabeth, and cousin Jesus himself, along with the recent baptismal revelation of the descending Holy Spirit and the voice, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:16-17), all account for this remarkable proclamation.

(1) As the sin-bearer, v. 29.

This is a proleptic statement, declared in the present because it will shortly be accomplished, 13:31; 17:11.

(a) The sacrificial *offering*, God’s Lamb.

“Behold, the Lamb of God.” This is an imperative invitation given to the throng from Jerusalem, even as the word is used in vs. 35-6 more privately; yet also the “world” is implicitly invited to “Behold.” Here careful investigation is recommended. However this is a Hebrew crowd,

⁷ Carson gives more recent evidence for Batanea or ancient Bashan, being a northern Transjordan region. *John*, pp. 146-7.

⁸ Modern conservative scholars, such as Carson and Hendriksen, mostly agree that John did experience doubt while incarcerated in the Castle of Machaerus east of the Dead Sea. However Broadus, who is of the same opinion, yet comments: “[M]any have thought it wholly inconsistent with John’s position and previous testimony to suppose that he now felt personally the slightest doubt; and so they hold that he sent simply for the satisfaction of his disciples. So Chrys, (and his followers), with Cyril, Aug., and Jerome, followed by Luther, Calvin, and Beza, by Bengel, Maldonatus, and many others.” *Commentary on Matthew*, p. 236.

so that they would easily interpret the expression “Lamb of God.” John need say no more. But what exactly did John have in mind here?

Morris gives nine possibilities, and while this author’s preference is for the daily sacrifice of a lamb without blemish, morning and evening according to Exodus 29:38-46,⁹ probably the intended indefiniteness suggests a composite representation that simply describes the lamb as a sin offering.¹⁰ Of course if the Passover is near, 2:12-13, John may have alluded to special flocks of lambs being driven to Jerusalem. Hence, the *introduction* of Messiah’s ministry concerns its *conclusion*, even as does the first miracle, 2:4. Further, this sacrifice indicates substitution, “the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God” (I Pet. 3:18). Thus Messiah’s ministry, quite unexpectedly and shockingly, is to focus on the shedding of his “precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (I Pet. 1:19). But why should this be necessary?

(b) The sacrificial *act*, God’s atonement.

“The [Lamb] lifting up and bearing away [αἴρω, αἰρῶ, Greek] sin.” Here God’s Lamb transports away a heavy load, that is “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (I Pet. 2:24). The fundamental issue here is “sin” as a pervasive principle, which is more than “sins.” Further it is a universal burden; the root problem of humanity is moral rather than relational, it is unrighteousness. But God is a very merciful physician who does not wait for patients; He confronts the plague; He seeks out the lepers; He relieves those who are heavily burdened; and He even goes to the extremities of the infection, “the world”!

(c) The sacrificial *design*, God’s people universally.

“The sin of the world” surely describes *extremity*, “every tribe and tongue and people and nation,” Jew and Gentile, I John 2:2; 4:14; Rev. 4:9; 7:9; 14:6, rather than *totality* that suggests universalism. Here is generosity in its largest conceivable form. If John Wesley declared that, “the world is my parish,” then he could only have obtained this vision from Jesus Christ, who in effect designates that “the world is my pastorate.”

So John Newton comments here: “That there is an election of grace, we are plainly taught; yet it is not said, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save the elect, but that he came to save sinners, and to seek and to save them that are lost (I Tim. 1:15; Luke 19:10). Upon this ground, I conceive that ministers have a warrant to preach the gospel to every creature, and to address the conscience of every man in the sight

⁹ This repeated offering was constantly before the people of Israel and well represents the truth of Christ’s continual intercession (Heb. 7:24-25).

¹⁰ Morris, *John*, pp. 144-8.

of God; and that every person that hears this gospel has thereby a warrant, an encouragement, yea a command, to apply to Jesus Christ for salvation.”¹¹

But also notice that when we have concluded studying this verse, and rejoiced in this gospel message, yet there is more that Jesus does, as v. 33 makes plain. For this gospel involves not only being right with God through sin being taken away, but also it incorporates being made alive unto God through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit.

(2) As the Pre-existent Word, v. 30.

John has made prior announcements concerning the advent of Messiah, especially concerning his superiority or “higher rank” due to his pre-existence, even as the prologue made mention, v. 15. But now this Eternal Word is identified as the “Lamb of God; now the prophetic hope has given way to realization; here is where John spans the Old Testament and the New Testament

b. The baptizer in the Holy Spirit, vs. 31-33.

The identification of Jesus from Nazareth continues to be expanded upon; not only is he the “Lamb of God,” and the “Eternal Word,” vs. 29-30, but also the “Spirit baptized,” that is the “Christ” or “anointed” of God. John has been baptizing the flesh in water for some time according to instruction from God, v. 33, not personal initiative. Such ministry has been merely preparatory and symbolic with regard to the transcendently greater ministry of the Spirit of God toward the very soul and being of Jesus. Further, in this Holy Spirit baptism or identification, we are introduced not only to *who he is*, but also *what he does*, namely vivify and regenerate those dead souls to whom he has come as a justifying Lamb!

(1) The inaugural witness by John the water baptizer, v. 31.

“And I myself did not know [identify] him,” presumably refers to Jesus’ recent arrival in the region of Bethany beyond Jordan, as v. 33 repeats. He probably identified Jesus as his holy cousin since just prior to the Spirit’s descent upon him John declared, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” (Matt. 3:14). This son of his Aunt Mary had distinguished himself for many years by his godly demeanor; in the same way Elizabeth felt unworthy of a visit from the mother of her Lord (Luke 1:43).

So John declares his method of proclaiming the coming of this Holy One of Israel (Isa. 41:14) to Israel; it was by the limited medium of water baptism that merely drew together a sober, welcoming band; but it lacked specificity since heaven alone could actually provide an authentic coronation.

¹¹ John Newton, *Newton’s Works*, p. 701.

(2) The inaugural witness to Christ's baptism by the Holy Spirit, v. 32.

Here is the unique anointing of Jesus that distinguishes him as the "Christ," in parallel with the "cloven tongues of fire" Pentecost identification of the twelve apostles, the foundation stones of the Christian church (Acts 1:26-2:4; Eph. 2:19-22). John testifies, "I have [attentively] seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained on Him." This "coming down" was "dove-like," visibly, gently, gracefully fluttering and then firmly landing on Jesus.¹² All of the Synoptics include the attesting voice of the Father, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17; cf. Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22); here Jesus actually witnesses his anointing. So, according to Peter in Acts 10:38, "God anointed Him [Jesus of Nazareth] with the Holy Spirit and with power," even as Isaiah prophesied, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:2; cf. 42:1; 6:1). To this Jesus Christ, in continuity with his earthly forbear, King David being permanently endowed with the Spirit, and in contrast with King Saul who is vacated by the Spirit (I Sam. 16:13-14; II Sam. 7:15) has been given "the Spirit without measure" (John 3:34).

We would not agree with the expression of Morris that here we have, "the beginning of the Spirit's permanent dwelling in Jesus,"¹³ even though a mystery is evident concerning Christ's full deity and this anointing. While Jesus could not be diminished in deity up to this point, more likely this anointing was the Father's formal appointment to the office of Messiah, the earthly coronation of King Jesus. However Godet suggests that such an understanding is "superficial" since more than an office was endowed; hence "to be under the operation of the Spirit [presumably before this baptism] is not to possess the Spirit, 14:17."¹⁴ In reply it would seem that Jesus' demeanour at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41-52) and the ensuing eighteen years were much more than being "under the operation of the Spirit."

(3) The inaugural witness to Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit, v. 33.

As Jesus Christ "takes away the sin of the *world*," v. 29, so this new universal atonement ministry will be in parallel with the universal regeneration ministry of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. Here John's description of Jesus' superiority reaches a climax; though implicit, he does not specifically mention his baptizing of Jesus as the Synoptics do, most likely since water baptism is so inferior in importance when compared with Spirit baptism. The major issue concerns this Anointed One's anointing ministry, "who baptizes in [with] the Holy Spirit," and that universally. That is, Jesus Christ "immerses/drenches/overwhelms" justified sinners with the Holy Spirit.

¹² J. C. Ryle is probably correct when he comments: "I am unable to see that the Holy Ghost took upon Him the actual form of a dove." *John I*, p. 65.

¹³ Morris, *John*, p. 152n.

¹⁴ F. Godet, *Commentary on St. John's Gospel*, I, pp. 319-20. Some early Gnostic groups introduced the heresy that at the Spirit baptism of Jesus the divine commenced to dwell with the human.

The *promise* of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, John 1:33; Acts 1:4-5.

The *necessity* of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, John 3:3-8.

The *ground* of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, John 7:37-39.

The *source* of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, John 14:16-17.

The *anticipation* of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8.

The *inauguration* of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, Acts 2:1-4.

The *scope* of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, Acts 2:14-17.

What then is the distinction between this outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's ministry in the Old Testament economy? Surely the Spirit indwelt every justified believer, even from Adam to Christ, not merely prophets, priests and kings. So B. B. Warfield explains: "[w]e live in the dispensation of the Spirit, a dispensation in which the Spirit of God is poured out upon all flesh with the end of extending the bounds of God's Kingdom until it covers the earth; and that He is poured out in the hearts of His people so that He reigns in their hearts and powerfully determines them to do holiness and righteousness all the days of their lives. Because we live under this dispensation, we are free from the outward pressure of the law and have love shed abroad in our hearts, and, being led by the Spirit of God, are His Sons, yielding a willing obedience and by instinct doing what is conformable to His will."¹⁵

Thus this baptism is not for some Christians, but all who have authentic saving faith in Christ (Gal. 3:2-3, 5, 14; 4:6; 5:5, 24-25; 6:8). So every believer is baptized in the Spirit (Rom. 5:5; 8:9), is placed into the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:13), and is intimately united with Christ (Gal. 3:27; Col. 3:27).

c. The Son of God, v. 34.

In declaring that "I have seen and I have witnessed," by means of the perfect tenses John gives a declaration of finality, a seal of approval, a verbal signature of authenticity, concerning Jesus of Nazareth being "the Son of God," the divine Messiah (cf. I John 1:1-30).¹⁶ Here we must avoid any association of this title with that of "children of God" as in 1:12; I John 3:1-2, or by Paul in Romans 8:14-16; Galatians 4:5-6. The Jews used this term as a sign of deity, 5:18, 23; 10:33; 19:7; there was also Messianic association derived from Psalm 2:7 (cf. Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5). For the Apostle here it describes the unique filial relationship of the Eternal Word to His Father in heaven, cf. 3:16-18; 5:25; 9:35; 10:36; 11:4; 19:7; 20:31.

B. THE TESTIMONY OF THE FIRST DISCIPLES TO JESUS, 1:35-51

Whereas vs. 29-34 seem to address the followers of John the Baptist in general, here there is particular concern for two special disciples, Andrew and probably the author of this Gospel. John has reached a decisive point in his ministry that reflects the true greatness of his

¹⁵ B. B. Warfield, *Faith & Life*, pp. 144-5.

¹⁶ Some manuscripts read "the elect/chosen Son" of God.

person, that is his willingness to direct esteemed followers away from himself toward an infinitely greater teacher, as parents yield a daughter to a husband in an adult union.

1. Andrew and John – the first called of the twelve disciples, vs. 35-42.

The primacy for Jesus, from the outset of his public ministry, concerning the early training of the foundation stones of the Christian church, is a substantial reason for the character of his earthly ministry. Early recruitment was vital since it takes time to fashion a man of God from a crude lump of human clay. The preparatory schooling of John gives way to graduate school under the eclectic, discriminating tutelage of this announced Son of God. However, from 3:23; 4:1; Luke 5:33; 11:1 we learn that John continued to baptize and nurture followers, so that the following instance may reflect a situation where certain disciples were ready for graduation.

a. Confrontation with the Lamb of God, vs. 35-7.

The sequence of days here may suggest that whereas v. 39 describes John's initial declaration of Jesus as "the Lamb of God," following the heavenly authentication at his baptism, here, the following day, the Baptist is more expectant of Jesus passing by, and thus is prepared for this eventuality with the company of two of his most choice disciples; they must be introduced! Such is the nature of this whole section. However the Synoptics picture a more definitive call in the region of Galilee, as a result of this introduction, (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11, 27-28).¹⁷

(1) The identification of the "two," v. 35.

There are "two disciples [followers/learners];" one is Andrew, v. 40, while the other is traditionally, and with good reason, John, the author of this Gospel. Although rough fishermen, they have been drawn to a ministry that has answered the deeper yearnings of their souls, even as it will also appeal to the void in the life of sophisticated Nicodemus, 3:1-2. Andrew's brother, Peter, is in the vicinity, though John's brother, James, is probably back in Galilee, caring for the fishing business.

(2) The recommendation to the "two," v. 36.

Again the same message of yesterday is proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God;" this was John's one and only gospel message. In accord with 3:25-30, as "the friend of the bridegroom," John delighted in introducing the bride to her Husband, that is when she has made suitable preparation by manifesting "fruits in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8). Here this transitional ministry takes place, which, as Arthur Pink points out, is "what may be expected to attend the labors of a servant of God, who is used of his master."¹⁸

¹⁷ Carson comments: "[T]hese fledgling disciples are still at the 'Come and you will see,' v. 39, stage, the 'You shall see greater things than that,' v. 50, stage." *John*, p. 154.

¹⁸ Pink, *John*, p. 66.

(3) The response of the “two,” v. 37.

Now while there was no apparent result yesterday, today is different. Hence John’s ministry was selectively fruitful. There were those who observed John and yet refused to yield to baptism (Luke 7:29-30). There were those who confessed repentance and were baptized by John and yet did not follow Christ upon being directed to him, as yesterday (Acts 19:1-7). There were those who here, upon being directed to the Bridegroom, “followed Jesus.” John did not seek a decision for Christ; he directed Andrew and John to Christ as the Savior, and left the saving work to the Savior, as v. 38 indicates.

b. Instruction by the Lamb of God, vs. 38-39.

So Andrew and John follow a common route of Jesus that apparently led to his temporary residence. Surely others had been thronging around, yet none are mentioned. Thus being later in the day the two want a more intimate encounter and this attitude is about to be recognized. But perhaps also Jesus distinguished this couple in that they were with John and then, upon recommendation, left their master for another!

(1) The encounter with Jesus, v. 38.

Jesus’ turning reminds us of others who, amongst multitudes, yet were singled out according to particular divine interest; Levi (Matthew), (Luke 5:27); the woman with a hemorrhage, (Luke 8:43-46); Zaccheus, (Luke 19:5); the man born blind, (John 9:1, 35). The question, “What do you seek?” is but a vital element in Jesus’ teaching method by means of extraction from a pupil (Matt. 16:13-17). The response, “Rabbi” is a respectful acknowledgment of greatness as a teacher, even as Nicodemus significantly confessed, 3:1-2. But the question, “Where are you residing [abiding]?” slightly timid, indicated an uncommon quest for the truth that the Son of God would never ignore. Here was certainly no flippant, faithless comment.

(2) The invitation of Jesus, v. 39.

“Come, and you shall see,” was more than an invitation to survey a location; it was Jesus’ summons to participate in a session of instruction. Being 4:00 pm in the afternoon, they may have stayed the night, in which case they were taught from the Old Testament in a manner similar to that of the Emmaus Road disciples (Luke 24:27). The stimulation of Andrew and John, vs. 40-41, would indicate that this was an experience of intense soul arousal. The bride has become very much attracted to the Bridegroom

2. Peter – sought out by Andrew to be a disciple, vs. 40-42.

The presence of Peter in this region indicates a similar soul thirst to that of his brother Andrew. Both, along with James and John, will have prominence in all four listings of the twelve disciples, but Peter is always mentioned first (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19;

Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13). So his initial encounter here with Jesus proves to have special significance.

a. The identification of Andrew, v. 40.

Andrew, meaning “manly,” is more prominent in John, 6:8-9; 12:20-22, than the Synoptics. As a fisherman from Bethsaida, his lack of prominence amongst the twelve in no way diminishes his chief characteristic of initiative.

b. The confession of Andrew to Simon Peter, v. 41.

“The first thing Andrew did [following his departure from Jesus’ residence in the morning as a convinced disciple] was to find his brother Simon.” Here true brotherly love spontaneously erupts, even before any formal apostolic training takes place. Pink adds: “For this no college training is required, and no authority from any church need be sought. Not that we despise either of these, but *all* that is needed to tell a perishing sinner of the Savior is a heart acquaintance with Him yourself. . . . [P]ersonal responsibility *begins* with those nearest to us. Witness should first be borne in our own family circle.”¹⁹

“We have found the Messiah (which is by interpretation [the] Christ [anointed One].” However, according to 15:16 it is ultimately true that Andrew and John found He who had first found them, even as Nathaniel shall learn, v. 48.

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me;
It was not I that I found, O Savior true,
No, I was found of thee.

c. The concern of Jesus for Simon Peter, v. 42.

Andrew does for Peter what John the Baptist had done for Andrew and John. He does not merely point the way (cool, detached witnessing), but he escorts him to where Jesus was residing (warm, personable witnessing). In other words, Andrew does not merely advise Peter to attend a faithful local church where Christ is preached; rather he affectionately leads him to that location.

So “Jesus, having earnestly looked at him, said, ‘You are presently Simon [the Greek for Simeon, the second son of Jacob], the son of John [in Galilee]; you shall be called Cephas [according to Aramaic], which [name in Greek] is interpreted as Peter [πέτρος, petros, meaning ‘a rock].’” Probably this is Peter’s first meeting with Jesus in a personal way since Andrew has just introduced him by name. But Jesus has certainly known Peter in advance. So he “earnestly looked at him,” ἐμβλέπω, emblepō, an intensive form signifying a penetrating gaze, as if “calling his own sheep by name,” 10:3. However, that name is divinely given even as God has frequently done with his generals, cf. Abram becoming Abraham (Gen. 17:5); Jacob becoming Israel (Gen. 32:28); Saul becoming Paul (Acts 13:9), etc. So Cephas Johnson receives a Christian name, one which represents what God will

¹⁹ Pink, *John*, pp. 70-71.

make of him as the primary building block of the Christian church, joined to the Chief Cornerstone, the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph.2:19-22). Peter will only become the “rock man” after years of training and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But he does represent the radical change that all those saved by Christ embody. Such a privileged role will lead to heavenly, but certainly not earthly glory, 21:18-19.

3. Philip – sought out by Christ to be a disciple, vs. 43-45.

While it is possible to translate that “he [Andrew, or Peter?] decided to go into Galilee, and he found Philip,”²⁰ with good reason the NASB and NIV indicate “Jesus” because his public ministry has just commenced. This is a strategic move by the Son of God in separating himself from John the Baptist. During his earthly ministry he will be located more in the north-west region of Palestine (Galilee) than the south (Judea); for the present he will stay in this region until the first cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem during the Passover season, 2:13.

a. The call of Philip to be a disciple, v. 43.

“The next day” follows Peter’s apostolic nomination and initial period of personal instruction. Whereas Andrew and John had “followed” and Peter was “brought,” here Philip, with a Greek name meaning “horse lover,” is “found” by Jesus, probably while occupied with fishing. Perhaps Philip left his nets and went to the home of either Peter or Andrew at Capernaum.

b. The connection of Philip with Andrew and Peter, v. 44.

“Philip was from Bethsaida,” a town on Galilee just east of Capernaum. Perhaps Peter and Andrew were anxious that a beloved co-worker should also meet the newfound Messiah. So he also had an initial learning session from the feet of his new Master, specifically concerning “the things concerning Himself” in “the Law and the Prophets” (Luke 24:27).

c. The confession of Philip to Nathaniel, v. 45.

So the chain-reaction continues through interpersonal evangelism, even as succeeding centuries have born witness. Himself having been found by Christ, Philip is intent on recommending a beloved friend named Nathaniel to Christ. The identifying description is partly a result of Philip’s Hebrew understanding that has now begun to coalesce before his very eyes as he imbibes the heart-enthraling teaching of Jesus. All true evangelism must be based upon who Jesus is according to Scripture. However, Philip’s understanding is limited, as Ryle comments: “The miraculous conception of Christ was hidden from him. . . . this ignorant account of our Lord was very likely the cause of Nathaniel’s doubt and prejudice, exhibited in the next verse.”²¹ Novice disciples of Christ, as here, usually first focus on his humanity.

²⁰ Carson upholds this opinion, *John*, pp. 157-8, but surely Jesus takes the lead here rather than Andrew, Sir Edward Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, p. 181.

²¹ Ryle, *John*, I, p. 83,

4. Nathanael – the man in whom there was no Jacob,²² vs. 46-51.

Nathaniel, meaning “God gives,” is the first non-apostle to encounter Christ. Because he is not mentioned in the Synoptics, is associated with Cana and seven of the apostles, 21:1, some have identified him as Batholomew who is not mentioned in John. Here skepticism, based upon secular rationalism, gives flight when confronted with divine revelation.

a. The skepticism of Nathaniel toward Jesus, v. 46.

Nathaniel protests because the revelation of Philip does not mesh with his religious expectations. He anticipates a more glorious and spectacular arrival of Messiah, whereas Isaiah 53:2 describes his appearing as “a root out of parched ground,” without “stately form or majesty.” Cana, Nathaniel’s birth place, 21:1, was only 4 miles from Nazareth so that he was well acquainted with the insignificance rather than sordid reputation of Jesus’ home town, especially when compared with Bethlehem, the birthplace of David. So Philip’s invitation, “Come and see,” is like that of the Samaritan woman, 4:29. A tasty sample is always more convincing than a recipe description! In witnessing it is often preferable for a person to study the Bible account of Jesus for themselves; self-discovery is very persuasive.

b. The estimate of Nathaniel by Jesus, v. 47.

“Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to Him,” like a doctor who is taught to closely examine a patient as he enters the examination room. Surely this surgeon of souls “knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust” (Ps. 103:14). Then this Jesus of Nazareth gives his diagnosis: “Behold, truly an Israelite in whom there is no guile/deceit [δόλος, *dolos*].”²³ This word “guile” is the same word used in the Septuagint (LXX) that describes Jacob’s craft or deceit in Genesis 27:35 when he gained Isaac’s blessing by means of impersonating Esau. The context of v. 51, cf. Genesis 28:10-12, supports this understanding.

But in what way could it be said that Nathaniel “had no guile/deceit”? Is he saved? No! He is like Cornelius, “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually” (Acts 10:1). Yet Peter later reports at Jerusalem how Cornelius was told by an angel that the Apostle “will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (Acts 11:14). Nathaniel was like the scribe who came to Jesus, and after discussion concerning the foremost commandment, was told, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:28-34).²⁴ Nathaniel was the object of God’s prevenient grace that drew him to be saved through his decisive expression of faith in v. 49.

²² Morris attributes this expression to William Temple, *John*, p. 166.

²³ Carson points out that the NIV “a true Israelite” is incorrect. Rather “true” relates to the degree to which Nathaniel was without guile. *John*, p. 160.

²⁴ We disagree with Ryle’s comment suggesting that on account of “the high character which Jesus gives of Nathaniel, . . . there can be no doubt [that he] was a true child of God,” that is before his expression of faith. *John*, I, p. 81.

c. The intrigue of Nathaniel with Jesus, v. 48.

By implication, Nathaniel's question, "From where have you known anything about me?" suggests his conviction of no previous social encounter. But Jesus is more specific: "Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree." This triggers astonishment in Nathaniel, and Ryle, avoiding much speculation,²⁵ probably gets to the heart of the matter when he comments: "[W]hen Nathaniel thought he was alone and no eye upon him, the Lord Jesus, by His divine power of seeing and knowing all things, was perfectly acquainted with all that Nathaniel said, thought, and did,"²⁶ even as with the Samaritan woman at the well, 4:17-19, 29. But further, it is possible that a particular fig tree session was in mind when his mind had specifically focused on the deceit of Jacob and the blessing of God that the patriarch nevertheless retained.

d. The confession of Nathaniel about Jesus, v. 49.

The fact that Nathaniel was "not far from the kingdom," that his soul was not cluttered with deviousness or calloused with hard-heartedness meant that he was primed by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 16:16-17) to proclaim vigorously saving faith. Thus it erupts: "Rabbi [teacher, as I have up till now understood you to be], You [and no other] are the Son of God, You [and no other] are the King of Israel!"

(1) The Nazarene is the Son of God.

Following John the Baptist, v. 34, this is the second of several such affirmations in this Gospel, cf. 3:18; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31. Here Jesus as the Son of God is unique as the very image of God, as. Here more than origin is described as the earthly image suggests; it is Jesus' divine essence, as reflected in 1:1-3, 18, which the Jews perceive to be a blasphemous claim, 5:16-18; 19:7.²⁷

(2) The Nazarene is the King of Israel.

For Nathaniel, as a Hebrew, "Messiahship" also meant a hoped for triumphant dominion, even as was paralleled in the anointing of David by the Spirit that at the same time designated him to be the new king of Israel (I Sam. 16:1, 13-14; II Sam. 3:1; 5:1-5. This royal designation Jesus appears readily to accept, 12:13-15; 18:33-37, other than when men would attempt to determine the time of his coronation, 6:15. Thus Ryle anticipates a time when, "Christ shall yet be King in Zion, and reign over the gathered and restored tribes of Israel at His second coming. And then the words of Nathaniel shall be seen completely fulfilled."²⁸

²⁵ The "fig tree" has been thought to suggest "home," Carson, Morris, Plummer, "a place of meditation," Hendriksen, Westcott, "a place for studying the Law as the Rabbis did," Barrett, Gill.

²⁶ Ryle, *John*, I, p. 84.

²⁷ Carson, *John*, pp. 161-2.

²⁸ Ryle, *John*, I, p. 85.

e. The confession of Jesus about Nathaniel, v. 50.

Even as Peter's confession of faith pleased Christ and was rewarded with the promise of transcendent apostolic blessing (Matt. 16:16-19), so Nathaniel's similar revelation of faith also delights Jesus so that here he likewise promises surpassing revelation, according to the principle of Matthew 13:12; 25:29. In Jesus saying, "do you believe [this relatively meager wonder]?" or "you believe [this minor sign]," there is the intimation of small faith, yet it pleases the Son of God since it is nevertheless unalloyed with human merit. This babe in Christ's eyes have just been opened; he has only begun to taste and see the goodness and glory of God (Ps. 34:8; Mark 8:22-25; I Cor. 2:9; 13:12). "You will see greater things than these," even as the following biblical collage indicates.

f. The confession of Jesus as the Mediator, v. 51.

Suppose that Nathaniel had been pondering, under the fig tree, the experience of Jacob at Bethel in Genesis 28:10-22, then the following promise would surely have set his soul ablaze. "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God going up [ascending] and coming down [descending] on the Son of Man. While "Ἀμήν, Amēn" is used only by Jesus in the Gospels, the double expression, "Ἀμήν, ἀμήν, Amēn, amēn," is used only in John. It always introduces important declarations, and for this reason the address is to "you [pl.]" rather than Nathaniel alone.

In Genesis 28:12 we read that Jacob, "had a dream, and behold a ladder [a flight of stone steps,²⁹ or stairway, NIV] was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." It is possible to translate "on him [Jacob]" here and this would illumine the parallel that is about to be made.³⁰ Now Jesus exerts his divine authority by modifying our focus on this verse. In that "the heaven opened," new revelation is given whereby Jesus of Nazareth is identified as "the Son of Man" of Daniel 7:13-14, which title John consistently identifies with the divine Son of God, 3:13-14, cf. v. 16; 5:26-27, cf. v. 25; 6:27, 53, 62, cf. v. 40; 8:28; 12:23, 34; 13:31, who will be glorified through atonement. Whereas the steps span earth and heaven, or indeed Jacob according to covenantal promise, now the Son of Man is substituted for Jacob as a bridge for man on earth to reach heaven; in Jacob was the promise of mediation while in Jesus Christ is fulfillment.

Thus Nathaniel's recent prophetic moment is a paltry matter compared to the future display of the person and work of the Lord Jesus. So when indeed shall this new convert "see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man"? For Nathaniel, prospectively he shall see heaven opened for sinners who tread the way that Jesus has prepared. For us we see the same vision retrospectively, for "we have confidence to enter the holy place by the

²⁹ Harry M. Orlinsky, ed., *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah*, p. 107.

³⁰ Bruce, *Romans*, p. 67; Carson, *Romans*, pp. 163-4.

blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is His flesh” (Heb. 10:19-20).³¹

³¹ Ryle identifies this scene as the Second Coming according to Matthew 26:64, *John*, I, pp. 86-87; cf. Barrett, *John*, 156.