

"1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; 3 THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" 4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. 6 John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. 7 And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. 8 "I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Mark 1:1-9, NAS95.

If we look closely at this text we see that John preached on two great themes: the greatness of Christ and the work of Christ.

Concerning the greatness of Christ, John pointed to the glories of the person of the coming King.

One way or another this should be the primary purpose in every declaration of the truth of Scripture. Jesus Christ then and now must have the priority. Not Jesus as a mode of God expressing Himself. Not Jesus existing apart from the rest of the Godhead. But Jesus Christ, God the Son, unique as the Son yet equal with the Father and the Spirit.

In the New Covenant era even John is pointing men not just to God as they knew in Old covenant terms but to the eternal Lord who is the God-man, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The priority as to who God is and how He is known in the New Covenant era is as Jesus the God-man.

Our preaching must be Christ centered. It must point the way to Christ. Even the historical narratives of the history of Israel should naturally point to Christ with proper teaching that the purpose of Israel was to bring forth the Christ through the kingly line of David.

All of Scripture glorifies God and its priority is Jesus Christ.

"After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie" (v.7).

John is illustrating for us that the lowest servant had this task of taking off the sandals of new guests and washing the filth of the streets, all the animal dung or any other

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source of filth off their feet. It was the most degrading of tasks that one human being could perform to another. It was an act so low that a man's personal slave was not expected to perform this duty for his master. In other words, it was an act beneath the dignity of a slave.

John was confessing, "I am not worthy to be less than the slave of this man."

John was a very great person by every human standard. At that time, John in one sense was the greatest man in the world. He was the last of the prophets and the precursor of a whole new age in redemptive history.

Yet there was this emphasis that Jesus Christ is of a different order of greatness, a different kind of person from John. They were not brothers. They were not on the same standing at all. There was a chasm between them. Jesus wasn't simply bigger, wiser, stronger and greater. The Christ was different, belonging to a different order. Here was the presence of the God-man; the addition of a new dimension to human history that was not mere mythology perpetuated by Greeks or Romans. This was no Hercules.

Here was a different order of being. It would be like trying to put Jesus into a book of the 100 great men of history (which is where some would like him to be-only a man who was great) but he doesn't fit in with all the rest, because when he speaks the winds obey, he claims to be one with God, he raises people from the dead. He doesn't fit into any categories of reality we can think of. Put any human being alongside him and that person cannot compare in anyway. He is a different species, a different genus, a different order of reality, whether it is Abraham, Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, Mozart, or Shakespeare - the Lord Jesus stands alone.

You go back to the opening verses of this gospel, what some call the simple gospel of Mark, because it is not a 'theological gospel' like the Gospel John wrote, but merely a gospel of the Jesus of history. Yet what do we find in this gospel? Mark says that John the Baptist was sent as a messenger telling people to prepare the way for . . . whom? For Jesus? Of course that is true, but that is not what Mark tells us. He takes a great Old Testament passage from the prophet Isaiah where the prophet is talking about the

For the Old Covenant members of ethnic Israel, Lord would not have connected to Jesus. Some may have connected to the Messiah, and John makes it clear that the Messiah is Jesus. John is the voice of preparation and Jesus is the one whose way has to be prepared, and surely that is the whole of this message. As John points to this Mighty One he is telling us that his greatness is so different because he is Jehovah himself: he is the Lord. Not only the 'lord' in Greek and Roman thinking, but also the Lord in biblical thinking. And that is the end of the so-called 'Jehovah's Witness' cult; because Mark is bearing witness that Jehovah is Jesus. In other words, Jesus is the God of the burning bush. He is the God of the glories of Sinai. He is the God Isaiah saw in the temple - as the apostle John tells us: "Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him" (Jn. 12:41). Another nail in the coffin of the so-called Jehovah's Witnesses.

Let me take this a little further. How does this gospel commence? "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Surely there again is greatness, the unique one, the Son of God, of whom we are told that God spared not his own Son, but sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. His own Son!

Baby fish are 100% fish, and baby birds are 100% birds, and baby animals are 100% animals. My children are 100% human beings. So God's Son is not 90% divine but 100% divine and 100% man, and immediately Mark's gospel is addressing the greatest question in the whole world, "Who is he? Whose son is he? Who is Jesus of Nazareth?" and before we have gone 60 words into this gospel Mark tells us that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he is the Lord.

That is the key to all that follows in every mighty act he performs and all the ways he fulfils his office as a teacher sent from God. Where does He get this power to give sight to a man born blind, and calm the seas, and exorcise the demons, and speak as if he knew God face to face? It is all rendered intelligible and understood in Mark's initial concerns to make plain that Jesus is the Son of God and the Lord. That is the fundamental challenge at the doorstep of Mark, and you can fall over it so that it becomes a stumbling block and

a rock of offence, or you can enter into a life of walking with him and serving him as your God. I say that all the rest of Mark's gospel - the miracles and the claims - are absurd unless this is true. The primary demand Mark makes on my mind is the message of the deity of Jesus of Nazareth. Do you believe it? That Mary's boy-child is also God the Son? The Work of Christ. John the Baptist assures them that the coming King "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (v.8).

This is the promise John makes, repeated by Jesus himself (Acts 1:5). The Spirit is not the opportunity, nor the responsibility, nor the privilege. He is the promise. He comes as a gift not a challenge. He comes with all the blessed meaning of a gift that takes our breath away when we appreciate its grace and magnificence, moving us to delight, utterly without price, cost or conditions - a gift graciously bestowed by Jesus, not a pledge obtained by negotiation. The Spirit is never achieved nor 'obtained'. He is always a gift.

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit:" it is an amazing phrase and justly famous. Though the words "Holy Spirit baptism" occur nowhere in the Bible this phrase 'to baptize with the Holy Spirit' occurs here and in the parallel passages in the other gospels, and also in the appropriate chapters in the book of Acts. They also occur as a concept in Paul's letter to the congregation in Corinth where the apostle writes, "we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (I Cor. 12:12). It is a familiar phrase, and also a hijacked phrase. But this description of the work of Christ as pouring out his Spirit is found in other places in different words. The clearest teaching is found in Paul's letter to Titus where he tells him,

"5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior," Titus 3:5, 6, NAS95.

Titus, stuck on a Gentile island in the Mediterranean knows there the baptizing work of the Lord of all. Here we are, thousands of miles from the Jordan and centuries later, and he is pouring out his Spirit wherever He has someone He is calling to himself and making them His own. That is what is being prophesied here in our text as John says: "I baptize

All men and women have two problems, their guilt, and secondly their hostility toward God. The guilt is dealt with through Christ's death as the Lamb of God, while the hostility is dealt with by the pouring out of the Spirit on us by the exalted Lord. That's why Jesus came, to redeem us and also to give us a new nature. For sin he is the double cure.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure;
Save from wrath and make me pure.

But John the Baptist now is emphasizing this fact that the Lord came so that the Holy Spirit might be secured for his people. Christ came that the blessing promised to Abraham might come to the Gentiles, and that they might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Christ poured out his blood for us that he might pour out his Spirit upon us. The land of Israel at the time of John was not a saved nation spiritually. It had been delivered by God numerous times in history, but as a nation was near saved people in the spiritual sense. There was a remnant waiting for the redemption of Israel. The people know little of the power and comfort of the word of God until John appears and begins to preach. "Christ," he said, "will come and these hearts of stone will be changed. The Spirit will come in abundance on Jerusalem and the land of Israel. The coming one is more powerful than I to do this."

What happened at Pentecost? Upon every Christian in the world at that moment the Spirit of God came, sent to them personally and individually, without exception and without qualification. They all rose that morning without him, and that night each of them went to bed with him. They were all different types of personality and all at different stages of understanding, but the Holy Spirit overlooked none of them. It was an abundant

outpouring by the exalted Lord Jesus, and that established the new pattern. It defined a principle that from that moment onwards, one could not become a Christian without the Holy Spirit sent by the Lord, without being baptized by Christ with the Spirit. It was not John who did this, nor was it the apostles who were able to baptize with the Spirit. It was not angels nor even God the Father who poured him forth, it was Jesus Christ who did it. This is his ceaseless and delightful work. He gives the Spirit as the life-giver to those who are dead. He is the New Covenant person and the New Covenant is the Spirit Covenant of life not the Old Covenant that was a ministry of death. He gives Him as the advocate who bears witness to Christ's glory. He gives Him as the sanctifier who makes holy and cleans the people of God. He gives him as the illumination that enables us to understand the Bible. He gives Him as the unifier so that Jews and Greeks become brothers. So Paul considers the worldwide activity of the Spirit of God in rebirth and renewal - he is poured out on us abundantly, he says. Not a Christian exists anywhere in the world today lacking the person of the Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit, and the fruit of the Spirit.

In some places and at certain favored times the Spirit comes like a waterfall in super-abundance. So it was at the Reformation and during the 18th century. At other periods there is more of a steady stream, but always the Spirit comes, because always Jesus pours him forth, but more and more of his life-giving and refreshing work we should long to know.

So, if were to ask you if Christ has poured out his Spirit on you then I am asking you whether you are a real Christian - a true Christian. I am not asking you whether you have more than some knowledge of the teaching of Christianity, or of how to live a Christian life, or whether you go to church, but this: have you seen your defilement of sin so that you need to be forgiven and cleansed? Have you seen that only through Jesus Christ is this attainable? Have you heard what John said, that King Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to sinners, to rid your soul of the domination of sin

It's the work of the Spirit as the agent of Christ to transform His people into what we should be. To be a believer is to have the power of the Spirit working in us and this means

that we have a changed life

"9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness." Romans 8:9, 10, NAS95.

The same Holy Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is working in the believer and the changed life that results from that work of the Spirit is the evidence that the believer will also receive a resurrected body:

"11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." Romans 8:11, NAS95.

The believer is described as someone who is exhibiting a way of life that is honoring to Jesus Christ. This lifestyle is evidence that someone is a believer and therefore they will spend eternity in heaven. Galatians 5:19-26, 1 John 4:19-5:5

"19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. 26 Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another." Galatians 5:19-26, NAS95.

Believers are convinced that God is their father and that He is no longer angry with them. This awareness cannot take place if you are not convinced that Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay for your sins. The Holy Spirit supernaturally convinces the believer that he is in God's family and this is called assurance. And with this assurance we are enabled to persevere until the end.

"15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him." Romans 8:15-17, NAS95.

These are some of the results of the work of Christ who has come to baptize His people. We are separated for Him, we have assurance that we are His, we can bear fruit in our lives that proves we are His because we have been changed in our very nature and are able to exhibit Christ-like qualities, we have the guarantee and assurance of being resurrected to life and not eternal condemnation. We have been changed within-regenerated by the Holy Spirit and we have been brought understanding of the Word of God by that same Spirit.

All of these are benefits of the work of Christ that are brought to us because John said, "but He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

"39 Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him, and He eluded their grasp. 40 And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing, and He was staying there. 41 Many came to Him and were saying, "While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true." 42 Many believed in Him there."
John 10:39-42, NAS95.

John never performed a miraculous sign. He never did anything to verify that he was the promised forerunner of the Messiah. He was placed in the position according to the purpose of God. He was true to his calling and, all that John preached about Jesus was true. That is the proof that he was the Elijah who was come. The proof of the prophet were the words that he spoke and he did so, relentlessly, unto the glory of God.