

John the Baptist wasn't some rogue preacher starting his own ministry. He also wasn't a company man towing the party line. He wasn't accountable to his own religious whims nor to any human court. He was accountable to the Lord. Jesus was already standing among the people. The Lord Christ had already arrived. This is why John refused the title of prophet. He was no longer a seer foretelling the coming of the Lord. Instead, he is now simply a voice calling in the wilderness, "Make his way straight." That is to say, repent of your sin and be prepared right now. Because the Lord is near. He is at hand. He is in the midst of you.

This is at the heart of the ministry of Christ. It's why every minister should know for sure that he isn't just preaching on his own. Every Christian should be sure that he is not left to his own strength and tactics to confess the name of his Savior. Every congregation should be certain that she is receiving the Lord with all his treasures and blessing. It is because the Lord is in our midst. He is among us. He promised his apostles that as they were teaching and baptizing all nations, he would be with them to the end of the age. This is therefore how the church confesses her Lord even to this day. The Lord is near. He is in our midst.

Of course, the Lord is coming. He promises to appear on the last day. Yet, all the while, he remains with us. He is near. St. Paul says that as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup in the Lord's Supper you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. In other words, as you wait for him to come on the last day, you confess him with the confidence that he is with you. He is present in his body and blood. He is active in his Word. He is among us.

The Jews in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask John who he was. These were important men of high stations. They couldn't ignore John. His baptizing and preaching were drawing people from all over the country. John must therefore also be an important man with a high station. But he simply calls himself a voice crying in the wilderness. Of course, John's office was important. Jesus would later confirm this to be true. He was the prophet foretold by the prophets. He was the second Elijah sent to call fathers and children, young and old, to repentance and faith in the coming Lord. All the signs of John's great office were evident. That's why these priests and Levites came to interview him.

The priests and Levites also had important offices. God established the priesthood with the tribe of Levi. No one was allowed to serve as a priest unless he could prove his lineage from this tribe. They were anointed by God to serve in the temple, make the sacrifices, and teach the people. Anyone who presumed to carry out this office without the connection to the temple was only a phony, self-promoting charlatan. They therefore had good reason to make sure that someone preaching or sacrificing was doing so according to God's design first given through Moses.

It wasn't wrong for the priests and Levites to keep track of all of this. In the same way, it's not wrong for us to keep track of who serves in the ministry. After all, St. Paul tells the ministers of the church to take heed of themselves (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 4:16). Don't lay hands on someone too quickly (1 Tim 5:22). There are specific requirements for those who wish to serve in this office (1 Tim 3:1 ff.; Tit 1). No one should preach, teach, or administer the sacraments in the church without a rightly ordered call.

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There should be agreement in the church that this or that man is called by God to preach. All things should be done decently and in good order. If a young man feels that God is calling him to be a pastor, he can't rely on his feelings. Instead, he should talk to his church, his pastor, go and study theology, and seek to be trained, ordained, and called through the church. The church doesn't need enthusiasts high on their own religious fervor. They only end up leading people astray from the truth. Instead, the church needs faithful men like John the Baptist who teach people to repent and trust in Christ the Lord.

The problem with the religious leaders who sent people to talk to John the Baptist was not that they wanted to make sure that John was called by God. If that's all they cared about, then they could have learned what Luke learned before he recorded it in his Gospel. They could have asked around and found out that the Angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple when he was serving as a priest. Gabriel was sent by God to tell Zechariah that his wife would give birth to a son named John who would be a prophet of God to prepare the way of Christ. John was indeed called by God before he was even born. In fact, it was made known in the temple. Zechariah spoke and sang about it in front a many witnesses. These priests and Levites could have verified that. But they didn't. Instead, they cared more about their own credentials than about the Word of God itself. They didn't want to listen to the preaching of God's Word unless it was coming from them first. Unless they first approved it and gave it their stamp, then they would not hear it or take it to heart.

We don't want any Tom, Dick, or Harry running around starting ministries on their own either. But this is because we don't want God's Word to be taken captive and held hostage by fanatics who only want to hear themselves talk. In the same way, we don't want God's Word to be a prisoner of some special council in the church, which won't accept its pure preaching until it has their own brand engraved on it. God has not given his ministry to this or that burning heart, however fired up it might be. God also has not given his ministry to this or that committee or court of religious leaders, however important they appear to be. No, God has given his ministry to the church, both preachers and hearers, to the lambs who hear and follow the voice of their good Shepherd. He won't allow his precious gospel to be stolen and abused just because someone claims to feel the burning in his bosom or hold the approval of important people.

This is why John calls himself the voice crying in the wilderness, just as God said through his prophet Isaiah. It is God's voice. The sheep of Christ hear his voice, and they take hold of it. But they don't take hold of God's Word with their own reason and strength. They don't hold onto God's Word with their own policies and agendas. They don't listen to the Word of God because some synod resolution told them to. No, the sheep lay hold of their Shepherd's voice only by faith.

This is why John the Baptist was baptizing and preaching. He was sent by God to proclaim that the Lord has come. And he was doing so in the wilderness. In other words, God's Word is not bound. Instead, it has free course. It is preached to the edifying of God's holy people. It shines into every dark place, every sin-infested heart,

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every broken home, every deserted town, and every lost soul wandering in the wilderness of this dying world.

The priests and Levites who questioned John needed to go back and give an answer to the ones who sent them. They are concerned simply with what they will tell those who sent them or hired them. But John speaks as one who is accountable to a much greater authority. He speaks for the Lord, whose shoes he isn't worthy even to untie. This Lord is not far off, hiding in some bureau or office somewhere. No, the Lord has made his dwelling among men. He has come in the flesh, and he is in our midst. He is near. He is at hand.

When you confess your faith in your daily life or listen to the preaching of God's Word with your fellow saints, you are not doing this to satisfy some human judge or authority, whether this is a group of influential and important people, your parents, spouse, family, friends, or even your own religious feelings. No, you stand on God's Word and confess it because you know it is God's Word. He has given it to you to believe, teach, and confess in whatever station he has placed you. You don't need to satisfy him. He has already been satisfied by the blood of his Son. He already washes you clean, not counting any of your sins against you. And he remains with you, in your midst.

So listen to the voice your Lord from the Scriptures. Repent of your sins. Plead guilty before the Lord, knowing that he is right here in your midst to forgive you and strengthen you. As surely as he has come down from heaven and assumed our human nature in the Virgin's womb, he has also returned to that same heavenly throne where he causes his Word to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. He is therefore with us in the wilderness of this life through his gospel and sacraments. Let us pray:

Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, unto Thy Church Thy Holy Spirit and the wisdom which cometh down from above, that Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve Thee and in the confession of Thy name abide unto the end; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.