



John 1:19-34

19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The Boston Marathon is probably best known for the terrorist attack in 2013. But prior to that, one of the most memorable races ever happened in 1980. Rose Ruiz, an unknown runner in the women's field emerged to win the race that April day. Her winning time was only 30 seconds slower than the world record and a full three minutes faster than any woman had ever run the Boston Marathon. Her winning time created quite a stir until it was discovered that she had started the race, took a subway to within a half-mile from the finish, emerged from the crowd and ran to the finish line. Thirty five years later Ruiz still claims she did not cheat—this despite the fact that she has been arrested twice for embezzling money and for buying cocaine.

Some people will always elevate themselves above their place in life. Some people want to be seen and heard and recognized for some achievement, whether real or imagined. Then there are rare people like John the Baptist who lower themselves in humility. John was baptizing many people in the Jordan River. He was a preacher of righteousness and he was developing quite a

following. He was no mere flash in the pan or religious nut job. He was the real deal. But at the very moment that he was elevated the highest by men, he lowered himself in humility.

He had such a following that he also garnered the attention of the religious elite. They sent Levites and priests from headquarters in Jerusalem to investigate. These were more than priests—they were investigative reporters, they were theological detectives on a mission from their superiors. I can almost hear their bosses sending them off. “Find out who this guy is. We want answers, not excuses, now go!”

The funny thing here is that they sent Levites and priests to talk to a Levitical priest. While we have no evidence that John ever served in the temple as a priest, his father was a priest and his mother was a direct descendant of Aaron, so he was probably more qualified than the lackeys that were questioning him.

When they found John, like any good reporter or detective, they began with a string of questions. “Who are you?” *He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”* It’s pretty clear that their first question was not just “Who are you”, but “Are you the Messiah?” because that is the way he answered them. You might remember that the word Christ means anointed one and is the New Testament equivalent of HaMashiach—the Messiah. This question alone is all you need to know about John’s reputation. The work he was doing was Messiah-like ministry. It was something that the Messiah might do and his growing followers meant that this possibility had occurred to them. In my 52 years, no one has ever confused me for a former NBA all-star but John could have been mistaken for the Messiah. But of course he vigorously denied it.

“What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” Their second question was a question based on Malachi chapter 4.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” (Malachi 4.5-6)

So the Jewish leaders knew these prophecies well but they were also looking for their fulfillment. John was not the Messiah so maybe he was Elijah. Once again, he denied the association. This question is interesting because John really was Elijah.

Jesus recognized John as the Elijah messenger. Jesus said this about John: *if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come* (Matthew 11:14). John was not Elijah reincarnated but he was a prophet who operated in the power of spirit of Elijah. John was not aware of this connection so he answered honestly and accurately from his limited perspective. But Jesus knew who he was.

“Are you the Prophet?”

This question arises from Deut. 18:15. The Lord said to Moses—*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.* Once again, John said no and this time, he was right. He wasn’t the prophet.

But the delegation of Levites and priests were not satisfied so they kept after him. *So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"* This is a little glimpse into the pressure put upon the investigation team. They did not want to return to their superiors empty handed. They had to have an answer. But this just further speaks to John's reputation. His reputation was such that they considered the top three possibilities from the entire Old Testament. Their top choice had been the Messiah but they also considered Elijah and the prophet. John had quite the following to have even elicited these questions from the top Jewish brass. But they had to have an answer. Notice this time instead of asking specific questions, they asked an open ended question, simply, "Who are you?"

This was the question John could answer. *He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."* John quoted from Isaiah 40:3 and applied it to himself. He did not realize that he was the Elijah who was to come but he did understand that he was that voice crying in the wilderness for the preparation of the Messiah.

What John demonstrates here is a humble certainty. Those two words are exceedingly difficult to pull off at the same time. It's easy to be certain about a particular subject. When someone holds a certain belief and is absolutely unmovable in their opinion, we often call them stubborn or hard-headed.

By the way, last week I stumbled upon a perfect way to win an argument with your spouse. Want to hear it? Here's all you need to do. If you are having a disagreement and you seem to be losing ground, here's what you do. You turn to your spouse and say, "Why are you always so stubborn?" Or you could also substitute it with "Why are you always so defensive?" Do you see, you've already won the argument because you have backed them into a corner. What are they going to say back to you? If they say, "I am not stubborn" or "I am not defensive," even if they say it in a calm voice, the very fact that they deny being stubborn shows their stubbornness. If they were not stubborn or defensive, then they would have agreed with you. But if they do agree with you and admit their stubbornness, then you can say, "See, I knew it. This is why we argue so much cuz you're so stubborn." It's foolproof, isn't it? I'm not saying that it will improve your marriage but I am telling you that you will have the satisfaction of winning every argument! ;-)

In all seriousness, I tell you this, not so you can win an argument, but to remind us that if you are having an argument, there are probably 2 stubborn people in that argument. Stubbornness is generally not a good trait to possess. But when it comes to our precious faith in Christ, we should be stubborn, unmovable and hard-headed. There should be no way that anyone in all the world throughout our entire lives should be able to talk us out of our core beliefs. But to have that same level of certainty and still be humble about it? That's hard.

Another Christmas is behind us which means I don't have to see anymore facebook posts from people who want to force retailers to wish them a Merry Christmas. They claim that's the way to put Christ back into Christmas. Uh, no. That just makes you look like an intolerant oddball. Those kinds of things may arise out of certainty but not a humble certainty. But humble certainty describes John the Baptist. He was baptizing people and boldly preparing the way for the Messiah but not for a second did he try to promote himself. The last thing on his mind was

gaining attention for the sake of attention. His purpose was not self-promotion, but Christ-promotion. And that is exactly what he did the next day.

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ 31 I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” 32 And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

Let me ask you an observation question about this passage. When did John baptize Jesus—before or after these events? Verse 32 is the clue. *“I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.* Here John is recounting what happened at Jesus’ baptism, so it is a past event. The other gospels describe Jesus’ baptism but only the gospel of John looks back after it had already occurred.

But the amazing part of John’s testimony is his identification of Jesus. He calls him *the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!* Did the disciples know who Jesus was? They struggled, didn’t they? All through the gospels we see the disciples wrestling with their understanding of Jesus’ true identity. We read things like this.

His disciples did not understand these things at first (John 12:16).

“What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand” (John 13:7).

But right out of the gate John seemed to understand who Jesus was. We are familiar with Peter’s statement of belief when Jesus asked the disciples. *He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matthew 16:15-16). But John called Jesus the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And how exactly does a lamb take away sins? Through its blood, right?

John quoted from Isaiah 40 when speaking of his role to prepare a way for the Lord so he certainly would have been familiar with the 53rd chapter as well.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.

Jesus is that lamb being led to the slaughter. He is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world by his own shed blood. John also called Jesus “the Son of God.” John the Baptist was not the messiah, he was not the prophet but he was sent to prepare the way for the Messiah, the one he baptized with water. This meant that the God-man was going to have to die.

Let me ask you this. Did the Old Testament conceive of God becoming man and dying for the sins of the world? The answer is mostly yes but no one put all of the pieces together. Jesus is all over the pages of the Old Testament. He said so himself on many occasions.

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me (John 5:39).

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

Of course we know that under the Law, Moses instituted the sacrificial system. Animal sacrifice and the necessity of blood to atone for sins. There are dozens of prophecies that tell of the Messiah coming to save his people. A Messiah who would be born in Bethlehem; a messiah that would be sold for 30 pieces of silver; a messiah that would be killed with criminals, a Messiah that would be pierced through and would suffer and die. One of the clearest pictures of the Messiah has to be Jeremiah 23.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’ (Jeremiah 23:5-6)

This is a beautiful passage because it has a human ruler who will execute justice and righteousness but his name is called “Yahweh is our righteousness.” This is a picture of the God-man who would be Jesus.

But if God became man as a rescue mission for us, what does that say about us? If the blood of bulls and goats could never take away the sins of the world, but instead required the lifeblood of the God-man, what does that say about us? Do you see where I am going with this? If you and I absolutely needed the death and resurrection of the God-man to cover our sins, what does that say about us?

This is why I was so disappointed with Matt Johnson’s Christmas editorial in the Broadcaster. The title of his article tells us where he intended to go: “Christmas—the reminder of God’s great gift.” Unfortunately, Matt missed Christmas with his first three words—Mary Baker Eddy. For some strange reason, Matt believed that the leader of a small Christian cult could capture “the reminder of God’s great gift.”

I am not sure how Matt got it so wrong. He started with Eddy’s absolute rejection of the actual Christmas story. Eddy wrote, “Christ was not born of the flesh.” What? In what universe is an outright denial of your major theme an acceptable retelling of the story? Eddy was free to believe this nonsense but I cannot fathom why Matt chose to say the very opposite of this historical and Biblical truth.

The extended quote from Eddy went on to renounce the doctrine of original sin.

“God creates man perfect and eternal in His own image. Hence man is the image, idea, or likeness of perfection – an ideal which cannot fall from its inherent unity with divine Love, from its spotless purity and original perfection.”

Genesis chapter one tells us that part of Eddy’s first sentence is correct. God did create man perfect and in his own image. But a mere two chapters later, Genesis three records the fall from perfection. We are not told how long Adam and Eve lived in a state of sinless perfection—weeks, month or years? But we do know that they eventually shook their fist in the face of their Creator. Everyone who has been born since has inherited their sinful nature and followed step for step in their rebellion.

Finally, Eddy rejected the death and resurrection of the God-man, Jesus Christ. “This homely origin of the babe Jesus falls far short of my sense of the eternal Christ, Truth, never born and never dying.”

As if to seal his misrepresentation of the entire Biblical record, Matt closed his quote by complementing Eddy. “What a thoughtful, enlightening sentiment... Pretty deep, but among Christians, quite universal.”

Sadly, Matt is right in saying that this list of rank heresies are universal beliefs, even among many who call themselves Christians. The core truths of Christmas are rejected by most people because they are so offensive to our pride. We don’t like to think that we are so sinful that it required the death of God to save us from our sins. If there had been any other way for God to take away the sins of the world, he surely would have done it. Why send his Son if the blood of a bull was sufficient? We were so lost that only the death of the eternal Creator of the universe could save us. The Bible is consistently clear about this. “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).

This eternal Creator and second member of the Trinity planned from before the foundation of the world to take on human flesh to redeem us from our hopeless state. The angel’s birth announcement to Joseph is the true reminder of God’s great gift. “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

This is the Jesus whom John the Baptist proclaimed. “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” He proclaimed Jesus with every ounce of certainty but he did it with a true humility. John was not the Messiah. He was not the prophet. He simply pointed to Jesus with humble certainty. Do you know Jesus with this much certainty? Are you willing to point others to Jesus despite the consequences? And can you do it with love and humility?

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