



It Never Changes

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*"BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU,
WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY;
THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS,
'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD,
MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'"*

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. — Mark 1:1-4

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." — Matthew 28:18-20

The Gospel of Mark reveals something remarkable about *"the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"* in that it did not begin with the introduction of Jesus' earthly ministry, but with John the Baptist. The ministry of John the Baptist was not something separate and self-contained which began and ended with John himself, but in fact was fully integrated with the ministry of Christ. John *"came preaching...saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand',* (Mt. 3:1-2) and Jesus took up the exact refrain, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Mt. 4:17) when He formally began to minister. John preached *"a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"*, and so likewise did Jesus preach the same. Building upon what began with John, Jesus' final instructions were to *"make disciples...baptizing them...teaching them to observe all I commanded you"*. From the very outset of Christ's ministry, beginning with John the Baptist until ultimately passed on to the Church through His disciples, the message and purpose of the Gospel never changed.

It would appear that the reason there is so much talk about what a church should do, or how a church should look to the world, or even what defines Christianity, is that it must

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be some kind of diversion from Christ's simply stated purpose and directive. Jesus explained that the Gospel was *always* the original plan even from within the Old Testament Scriptures and that they confirm the priority of this streamlined set of guidelines.

Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. — Luke 24:44-47

It's not just that John's ministry was actually Christ's ministry, or that the Apostles' ministry was actually Christ's ministry, but extends to each of us personally: *our* ministry is *His* ministry, and it first and foremost revolves around "*preaching a baptism for the forgiveness of sins*". It then takes further shape by making disciples (not merely converts) and teaching whole Word of Christ.

It always perplexes me when a Christian organization or church goes through the secular corporate exercise of defining themselves by creating a "mission statement". This seems like the first step taken toward becoming some kind of specialty or niche ministry which ultimately results in the wrong belief that it should not be directly involved in what is considered to belong exclusively to evangelists. Their mission statement is often an indication that they have chosen to become narrowly focused on something which has the *appearance* of being religious yet somehow relieves them of the duty of preaching the Gospel as biblically directed. We especially see this with those who proclaim themselves to be a "music ministry", "discernment ministry", "prophetic ministry" and so forth. I'm not saying everyone claiming such distinctions are this way, but far too many pursue their specialties separate from any preaching of the Gospel or conformity with the Great Commission.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. — Acts 6:8

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. — Acts 8:5

It's quite interesting that both of these men were among the seven appointed by the church in Jerusalem in Acts 6:5 to oversee the distribution of food to the widows so that

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the Apostles would not “neglect the word of God in order to serve tables”. (Acts 6:2) This is often cited as the first instance of deacons being raised up to carry out necessary internal administrative duties so that the primary task of preaching the Gospel can continue unhindered. And yet we find these two men afterward publicly active in the very work of preaching the Gospel. Their “specialty” did not relieve them of their obligation to the Great Commission—they were committed to *both*. Every position within the Body of Christ is working simultaneously toward the same two things: building believers into the image of Christ the Head of the Body, and “preaching a baptism of the forgiveness of sins” to non-believers. The “internal” requirements do not negate the “external”.

“Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.” — Acts 1:21-22

That John the Baptist’s ministry was the actual beginning of, and integrated with, Christ’s ministry is confirmed when it came time for the Apostles to replace Judas. They defined “all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us” as “beginning with the baptism of John”. John’s ministry was Christ’s ministry and it would be mirrored in the continuation of their ministry.

“From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. — Acts 13:23-24

In the course of his first missionary journey, although acknowledged as an Apostle primarily sent to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, Paul still incorporates the message and ministry of John the Baptist. What began with John continued in Christ and was passed along not just to the inner circle of Apostles, but to all who took up the work of the Gospel; it never changed in its purpose or direction.

In fact, in the course of Christ’s First Coming there was an interesting distinction made between those who accepted versus rejected Him.

When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God’s justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected

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God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John. — Luke 7:29-30

Those who rejected the message and ministry of John the Baptist in reality rejected the message and ministry of Jesus—they are one and the same message and ministry. The Pharisees and lawyers had all the appearance of religiosity, but only those who repented of sin and made the public commitment of baptism to permanently change their behavior going forward were in possession of true Christianity. People can go to church, espouse Christian values and self-identify as being spiritual, but it all falls short without permanently dealing with the issue of sin.

A “music ministry” may be able to produce the most beautiful song, a “discernment ministry” may be able to articulate the truth about what is and isn’t godly or biblical, a “food program” may be a help to a community in need, but what is the final outcome when such are not accompanied with the Gospel? *His* ministry is *our* ministry, and like Stephen and Philip, our gifting and responsibilities cannot redefine our ministry to exclude “*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*”.

But even more so, once we’ve come in from the world and into the Body of Christ, what has become of discipleship? What has become of “*teaching them all that I have commanded you*”? We seem to be experiencing an attack on two fronts simultaneously: first on the preaching of the true Gospel to expand the ranks of the Church, and then to mitigate true spiritual growth for its existing members by diluting or doing away completely with a commitment to the Word.

We live at a time when we could spend the rest of our lives reading so-called Christian books which never actually address the first step of repentance of sin followed by a life exclusively obedient to God’s Word.

We could spend the rest of our lives surfing from one so-called Christian website to another which never actually address the first step of repentance of sin followed by a life exclusively obedient to God’s Word.

We could spend every weekend attending yet another seeker-friendly church or fellowship which does not want to make anyone uncomfortable by addressing the first step of repentance of sin followed by a life exclusively obedient to God’s Word.

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Like many well-intentioned Christians before us, we could lose sight of what is most important and cease preaching the true message of salvation and sanctification, and instead substitute something else in its place. But none of these books, websites, or approaches to “doing church” can alter the true Gospel which began with John, was affirmed by Christ, and continued by the Early Church. No mission statement can redefine the primary goal and purpose of our ministry. No specialization in one gift or doctrine can relieve us from the duty of carrying out what has not changed from the beginning: *“preaching a baptism of forgiveness for the repentance of sins”*.

The Gospel never changes.

In Him,

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