

Guest Editorial

Jesus Movement in the Making: The Witness of John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, and Nicodemus

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The Gospel of John reports how the Jewish leaders sent some priests and Levites to John the Baptist, to inquire if he was the Messiah. John confessed he was not the Messiah but that he had been sent to prepare the way for the Lord (John 1:19-23). John had started a movement that was gaining in popularity, so the leaders sent a delegation to investigate. John's testimony was to point to Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Now a new teacher was on the scene, and soon he was proving more popular than John. The Gospel of Luke reports that one day when Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law "had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem to see him" (Luke 5:17). Jesus just happened to heal the sick when they were around. The crowds were continually amazed by Jesus's teaching, because he taught them like one who had authority, not like their experts in the law (Matthew 7:28-29). Throughout the Gospels, there are confrontations between Jesus and these religious leaders—attested masters of the law of Moses, leaders who had control over the synagogues.

John's Gospel also records the well-known encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus: "There was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him'" (John 3:1-2). Clearly, Nicodemus respects Jesus and affirms him. As a teacher, Jesus appears to be in the same league as the old Jewish movement of Pharisees committed to restoring the law of Moses in Israel—perhaps like Ezra, who was committed "to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). Jesus is more than that, however, and he tries to tell Nicodemus, "I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3). Jesus is announcing a new kingdom, but Nicodemus does not understand the wind of the spirit. "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8). Nicodemus is confused and asks, "How can this be?" (John 3:9). Jesus chastises him, telling him that as a teacher of the law he should know better. Jesus then points to his own death, explaining how all who look to him lifted on the Cross will be born of the Spirit into new and eternal life (John 3:10ff.).

As I reflect on Pentecostal and Spirit-Empowered mission, the theme of this issue, I see several relevant layers in the conversation coming from the first three chapters of John's Gospel—along with the Synoptic Gospels as well.

The first layer concerns John the Baptist. He has been successfully leading a brand-new movement *within* Judaism, with apparent success. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John, confessed their sins, begged for guidance on how to conduct their business affairs in a colonized state (Mark 1:5). John counseled and rebuked them with his no-holds-barred preaching, then baptized in the Jordan River those who repented. Teachers of the law

began to wonder if John was the promised Messiah, the Christ. John the Baptist is a clearly charismatic leader, so gifted that even King Herod is afraid of him (Mark 6:20). But soon John retreats. He foregrounds Christ, not himself, nor the remarkable achievement of smiting the consciences of notorious tax collectors and soldiers. John knows he is a messenger, a role he interprets out of Isaiah 40, where Isaiah predicts the return of the people of Israel from Exile. We take it for granted that Jesus is barely known at this point, but the Jesus movement is only in the making, with John the Baptist as a witness and a facilitator of it. John the Evangelist demonstrates that nobody yet knew of this Jesus. He has Nathanael rhetorically mocking about Jesus, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). According to the Gospel accounts, if John the Baptist had not prepared the way for Jesus, John’s movement very well might have eclipsed Jesus.

What John the Baptist’s humble witness conveys about today’s conversations about Spirit-empowered movements is the need for a robust Christology. We who are Jesus’s followers are first and foremost witnesses on behalf of Christ. Our charisma, gifts, skills, and popularity have one and only one agenda: to point people to Christ. John the Baptist could very well have continued leading his large movement in the manner of the Old Testament prophets. He was remarkably successful, so much so that he transforms the Old Testament symbolic crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 13:1-31), as well as of the Jordan, into in a new Exodus by the ritual of Baptism. The old Exodus event was a literal experience of liberation from slavery in Egypt. The crossing of the Jordan was equally a literal symbol of entrance into the Promised land. The Baptist reenacts both symbols through the ritual of baptism after the people have confessed and repented. Yet when Jesus shows up, John has done his job. He even surrenders the symbolic ritual to the disciples of Jesus (John 4:2). John will go on to diminish to the point of martyrdom, thus completing his identification with Isaiah the prophet. Tradition says that Isaiah was killed, sawn into two as a martyr under the orders of the wicked king Manasseh (2 Chronicles 33:1-20). John the Baptist meets an almost identical fate in having his head cut off by King Herod—and for a similar reason as Isaiah, namely that he proclaimed truth. The Baptist’s testimony has a Christological focus from the moment Jesus appears, and he makes the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom in his last breath.

Today’s Pentecostal, Spirit-empowered mission—just as with any other Christian movement—needs to follow the Christ-centered approach of John the Baptist. To be sure, no subsequent witness can replicate the unique role in redemptive history that Jesus’s older cousin John played as the immediate forerunner of the incarnate Son of God. At the same time, all Christian movements are to bear witness to Jesus Christ as the centerpiece of God’s world-saving love and grace. John could have drawn further attention to himself and his following—as can any Christian movement. Instead, his pointing to the Lamb of God exemplifies humble Christ-centered witness.

The second layer in the conversation comes from what John the Evangelist (not the Baptist) is doing to ignite a solid understanding of who Jesus is, and of what his movement is. The Evangelist goes to great lengths to link both John the Baptist and Jesus to the Old Testament story, employing concrete images that are impossible for his Jewish background readers to miss. Even with an economy of words, the Evangelist places Jesus in a recognizable corpus of Jewish ideas, symbols, and images, in which he builds up the case for his readers that Jesus is the long-promised Messiah. John refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God (1:35), Messiah (the Christ; 1:41), Son of Man (1:51), Rabbi (3:2), the King of Israel (1:49), the New Temple (2:13-21). Throughout the rest of his dense Gospel, John condenses a great deal of material to represent Jesus in this old, old, story. We who read John’s Gospel today take the backdrop of that story for granted, but John’s contemporary

Jewish readers who are newly discovering the Jesus story don't know that. John imbues Jesus with the authority of the entire Old Testament canon. The question behooves us, are our movements rooted and grounded in an organic grasp of the whole story of God's dealings with humanity through Israel and God's involvement in history through the Church through the ages? Or are we making autonomous claims for ourselves, our regions, or for the benefit of our sending organizations, without a solid grasp of the biblical metanarrative of which we are part?

The third layer involves correlating the Baptist's ceding prominence to Jesus, and the Evangelist's grounding Jesus in the Old Testament story, with Nicodemus's investigative curiosity. Nicodemus is a Pharisee genuinely wondering what to make of Jesus. As an educated teacher of the law in Israel, he has all the logical arguments well lined up. His rational questions translate into serious doubts. In similar fashion, many today who are not directly involved with Pentecostal or Spirit-empowered mission movements have well founded doubts about some of the claims or biblical interpretations in some of this issue's articles. Those *Global Missiology* readers who have trouble working through certain articles in this issue have Nicodemus as a predecessor for asking honest, unresolved questions. Nicodemus wants to believe—yet he is bewildered. There is so much about Jesus that is not known. How can his word be trusted after he has engaged in a huge confrontation with the religious leaders—by clearing the temple courts, no less?

It is John the Evangelist who helps his readers by the way he spells out the rest of the story. The Evangelist does not resolve Nicodemus's dilemma for us—certainly not in Chapter 3 of his Gospel account. That passage ends with Nicodemus still a seeker. We do find out that he came to be a follower of Jesus. He defended Jesus. He also buried Jesus. But in Chapter 3, I think John the Evangelist wants to buy time for the full story to pan out in fuller detail. In a similar fashion, seekers, the movements of which they are part, and those who analyze those movements need time and often need to be protected from hostile forces around them.

To circle back to the Gospel of John's account of Nicodemus and his encounter with Jesus, essentially Jesus remains unknown as he is still establishing his credentials. What he does—the Jesus who in Nicodemus's and other contemporaries' eyes is just like that fresh missionary in the field—is to point out the privilege of Nicodemus's cultural faith. To be born as a Jew (at the time) is to have privileged access to the Kingdom of God, as far as the Jews were concerned. Jesus is upending what it means to belong to the Kingdom. Natural birth as a Jew will not save Nicodemus. He is close, but his cultural faith (as a Jew) must be transformed, by repenting.

Hence when we tell the story of Jesus—and we must—then the humility of the Baptist and the skill of the Evangelist in framing the whole story, through a series of case studies, constitute our model. John the Baptist's humble pointing to Jesus is exemplary witness. Also, I cannot help but appreciate John the Evangelist's acumen in telling the stories of the intertwined movements in his Gospel account. Case studies of people, faces, and places are not given as sensational or pragmatic narratives. Rather, those case studies are Christocentric, they are canon-centric, and they look to the new life that we can expect in the rest of the Gospel of John the Evangelist.

Pentecostal, Spirit-empowered mission has become a worldwide and ever-growing part of the Christian movement. The case studies and analyses in this issue cover a wide range of accounts. Various regions of Africa, Russia, Asia, and elsewhere are the contexts. Different aspects of Spirit-empowered movements are examined, both positively and critically. As you the reader work through these articles, I hope you will give prominence to Jesus, see continuity with God's overall

redemptive story, and trust God to guide you through whatever questions, doubts, and new insights that will arise.