

## John the Baptist and the Prophetic Spirit of Pentecost

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But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. "For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is *only* the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,' God says, 'THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT And they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:14-18)

What "Pentecostal" minister has not heard, read or preached from the above passage countless times? And yet what does it mean to the average believer in our churches except that we speak in tongues and believe that the gifts of the Spirit are for today? Look closely at Peter's words and you can detect a special emphasis. The words in capital letters are those from Joel 2:28-29, but the quote does not include the final words of Acts 2:18, "And they shall prophesy." Those words are added by Peter, repeating the words "shall prophesy" from v. 17 for emphasis.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, Pentecost marks the beginning of the Spirit-filled New Testament church, but there is something else we should understand. On the Day of Pentecost, God constituted the Church as an end-time community of prophets. Pentecostal scholar, Roger Stronstad puts it this way. "Because Jesus transferred the Spirit from himself to his disciples on the day of Pentecost, the Pentecost narrative is programmatic for their ongoing ministry in the Spirit. In other words, from the day of Pentecost onwards they are the eschatological community of Spirit-baptized, Spirit-empowered and Spirit-filled prophets."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This well-known literary device of bracketing a passage by repeating the same word, phrase or clause is called *inclusio* and is used to emphasize a thought or topic that the author wants to underscore.

<sup>2</sup>Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 15.

If I understand his point correctly, Stronstad is saying that the church collectively is the *prophetic* people of God. That being the case, Peter's words do not just mean that all individuals in the church have access to the gift of prophecy, something Paul would later make clear in 1 Corinthians 14. Peter *does* mean that the New Testament church is uniquely constituted as a prophetic people by the Spirit.

But what significance does that hold for us today? How does the prophetic spirit translate into action when lived out in the world? In answering these questions, my attention was drawn to a most intriguing figure in the New Testament – John the Baptist. The choice of focus might seem odd given that John was technically an Old Testament prophet: “For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John” (Mt. 11:13). Nevertheless, the focus is justified by some remarkable statements made about him by Jesus. For example, of those born of women, Jesus said, “there is no one greater than John” (Lk 7:28).<sup>3</sup> Part of his greatness stems from the fact that his prophetic ministry was in a real sense unique. By Jesus' own words he was “more than a prophet.” He was chosen as God's herald, a forerunner to the Messiah who would prepare for his coming (Lk. 7:26). In view of this appraisal what can we learn about the prophetic Spirit from *thee* consummate Old Testament prophet - John the Baptist? In chapter 3 of Luke's Gospel we are given a fascinating portrait which depicts three aspects of his prophetic ministry: 1) scope; 2) the content and 3) the courage of prophetic preaching.

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<sup>3</sup>True, the verse goes on to say, “yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” However, these words should be understood not as assessment of intrinsic worth or value, but of privilege within the history of salvation. As great a prophet as John was, his ministry still belonged to the era of promise and he did not live to see the total fulfillment of what was promised in the Old Testament nor receive the revelation given to the New Testament church.

## *The Scope of Prophetic Preaching*

In this chapter we are quickly introduced to a series of groups who heard John's prophetic preaching. We are told that the word of God came to John during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiphas (v.3).<sup>4</sup> If they did not personally hear John's preaching, they most certainly heard it second-hand from the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were at the Jordan River while John was baptizing (Mt. 3:7). Thus, we can be sure that the Jewish religious establishment heard John's preaching. In verse seven John issues a scathing rebuke to the crowds who had gathered to hear him.<sup>5</sup> These represent the undifferentiated masses of society at large. What follows are encounters with groups within the multitude. For example, in verse twelve we find John addressing the tax gatherers (Gk. - *teleonai*), – locals hired by Roman officials to collect regional taxes. They were often rich enough to pay the tax quota in advance from their own personal wealth. They then proceeded to collect well above that amount.<sup>6</sup> Seen as treasonous collaborators with Rome, these economic king pins kept the wheels of Roman prosperity amply greased. Next John addresses soldiers (v. 14), the most visible component of Roman military occupation sent to forcibly keep the *pax Romana* in that part of the empire. Finally, we find John confronting Herod Antipas with a prophetic word of rebuke. Herod, son of Herod the Great, was tetrarch of Galilee. Although a political puppet of Rome, Herod exercised nearly unlimited political power and authority, answerable to no one except the emperor.

When we survey the total picture, we discover a remarkable fact. John the Baptist left no segment of society untouched by the proclamation of God's word. He prophesied to all classes

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<sup>4</sup>Caiaphas was the ruling high priest (cf Jn 18:13) who occupied the office from AD 18-36. However, Annas, his father, is mentioned along with him, probably because of his considerable influence over and through his son.

<sup>5</sup>What is interesting is that Matthew (3:7) has this rebuke directed primarily at the Pharisees and Sadducees.

<sup>6</sup>See Everett.Ferguson. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.,1987), 87-88.

and groups: rich and poor, despised and esteemed, powerful and lowly. He held up the standard of God's righteousness regardless of whom he was facing. Jesus asked rhetorically about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see, a reed shaken by the wind?" No, for John the rules did not change depending on who was in the audience. Whoever went out into the wilderness to hear John could count on one thing – hearing the prophetic word of God spoken without compromise and applied to the relevant issues of their lives.

### *The Content of Prophetic Preaching*

The question to be asked is, "What did John preach?" From the Isaiah quote in verses 4-6 we can respond that John preached the good news of God's salvation. But the parallel accounts in the other gospels<sup>7</sup> indicate that John's prophetic preaching was foundational and preparatory. By preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v.3), John laid down the necessary groundwork for Jesus' preaching of the Gospel and the approaching<sup>8</sup> kingdom of God. Repentance raises the fundamental issue of sin and the need of forgiveness as an indispensable requirement for entrance into the kingdom of God. Later Luke records Jesus' warning to self-righteous Judean Jews: "I tell you, . . . unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (13:3). It seems clear that for John, like the Messiah whose coming he heralded, repentance from sin and the Gospel were inseparable.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>See Mt 3:3ff; Mk 1:2ff; Cf. Jn 1:19-23.

<sup>8</sup>Jesus preached that "the kingdom of God is near" (lit. 'has come near'). The verb *h;ggiken* is an intensive perfect which stresses the present result of an action or condition. The idea is that the kingdom of God has approached or come near to humanity in the preaching and ministry of Jesus. As a result the kingdom *is* near at hand. This could be described as the "imminent" kingdom. Luke's gospel also presents the kingdom as present (Lk 11:20) and future (22:18).

<sup>9</sup>This is underscored clearly in Mark's gospel, who equates preaching the gospel with the message of the Kingdom. As with Luke, Mark mentions that John appeared in the wilderness preaching "a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4). Mark records the first words of Jesus as, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent* and believe in the gospel" (1:14). Then when the Twelve are commissioned and sent out in pairs to preach the Gospel throughout Galilee, Mark summarizes with, "And they went out and preached that men should *repent*" (6:12). [*Emphasis mine*] In view of the above, it seems obvious that modern preachers who avoid raising the

The second topic of John's preaching concerns social responsibility toward the poor. When some among the "multitudes" ask John, "what then shall we do?" John instructs them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise" (v. 11). Note that the question posed to John was an open-ended one. John could have chosen any one of a hundred items of moral or ethical concern, but he calls the multitudes to take care of the poor and needy among them.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, they would display the same benevolent and merciful compassion that God showed them in redemption.<sup>11</sup> Those who seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Mt 6:33) must not neglect their duty to reflect the character of His redemptive grace. Paul understood this. When encouraging the Corinthians to complete the collection for the Jerusalem poor he wrote, "For you know the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." (2 Cor. 8:9- *emphasis mine*)<sup>12</sup>

Next, John takes on a sensitive and politically volatile situation - injustice through economic oppression. With tax collectors undoubtedly in the audience, John addresses the oppressive and corrupt taxation of Rome and her Jewish collaborators. As alluded to earlier, tax collectors were given quotas, but were not limited by Rome in what they collected. They determined the policy and rates of taxation. In effect, it was a license to steal. Furthermore,

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issue of sin and repentance, in an attempt to gain a hearing for the gospel by the unchurched, are tampering with the integrity of the Gospel itself. Without mentioning repentance from sin there is no gospel!

<sup>10</sup>In this John is not unlike any number of his OT prophetic predecessors who warned Israel against oppressing the poor and called her to show God's compassion by remembering the poor. See Lv 19:15; Dt 24:14-18; Isa 3:13-15; Jer 2:34; 5:4, 28; Ez 16:49; 18:12-17; Dn 4:27; Amos 4:1; 5:11-12; Zech 7:9-10; Cf. Prv 17:5; 19:7, 17; 22:2, 9, 16, 22; 28:3, 6, 8, 11, 27; Ps 72:12-13 et al.

<sup>11</sup>This has to do with what I call the "incarnational purpose" of the Church. As Israel was to be "light unto the Gentiles" (Is 42:6; 49:6; cf. Lk 2:32), the Church of Jesus Christ is to make visible the redemptive character of God seen in His salvation. Note that in Lev. 19 God defines the command to covenantal holiness in ethical terms, broadly speaking it is the command to love one's neighbor (vv. 18, 34). Among the various commands the compassionate concern for the poor features prominently (vv. 9-10, 15, 34).

<sup>12</sup>What is interesting is that Paul begins chapter eight by commending the Macedonians for making known the "grace of God" by sacrificially giving to this offering despite their own "deep poverty" (2 Cor 8:1-2).

behind them lay the punitive power of Rome to enforce their taxation. John the Baptist was not afraid to tackle the “systemic” evil that oppresses by design through corrupt and oppressive policy.

However, the Baptist was not about to let the “arch oppressors” off the hook. To the query of Roman soldiers John responds, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse *anyone* falsely, and be content with your wages." (v.14). His words paint a vivid picture of the brutal and coercive treatment Roman soldiers sent to keep the *pax Romana* in what amounted to a police state. While Rome prided itself on being an empire ruled by “law,” in reality there was little to curb the extortion and violence of individual Roman soldiers in a conquered and occupied land.

Just when the reader is certain John has offended just about everyone there is to offend, the narrative takes a “fatal” turn.<sup>13</sup> He now turns to condemn the most scandalous example of moral corruption in his day. The marriage of Herod Antipas to Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip was not only adulterous but incestuous (Lev 18:16) as well. It seems that on more than one occasion,<sup>14</sup> John had drawn attention to this vulgar violation of the Law. Luke tells us that Herod earned a prophetic rebuke for this sin, “and all the wicked things” that he had done (v. 19).

### ***The Courage of Prophetic Preaching***

It is difficult to imagine the weight of consequences that pressed for John’s silence. In fact, apart from prophetic inspiration there is no explanation for John’s courage and dauntless confrontation of sin. The risks were enormous and the results ominous. By issuing a call of

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<sup>13</sup>The author could not resist the pun given the “fatal” consequences of John’s prophetic denunciation of Herod Antipas.

<sup>14</sup>Note Matthew 14:4 and his use of the imperfect tense, which in context is probably *progressive* (“had been saying”) or *iterative* (kept saying”). John’s denouncement: “It is not lawful for you to have her.”

repentance to Annas and Caiphas was an insult to highest religious office in Judaism and tantamount to religious and political suicide. By confronting the multitudes with their sins and hypocrisy (vv. 7-8) John ran the risk of social rejection and the loss of a popular following (v.3; Cf. Mk 1:5). The exposure of the tax collectors in their fraud and oppressive taxation surely risked retaliation by the economic power-brokers of his day. No less dangerous was to directly confront Roman soldiers with their extortion and violence. Certainly it held the risk of violent retaliation by those who unilaterally possessed the power of the sword.<sup>15</sup> And finally, it was all but suicidal to publicly denounce the sins of an eastern potentate, especially one notorious for his wickedness (v.19).<sup>16</sup>

Did John the Baptist fully understand the risk he took in bringing God's prophetic truth to those who stood condemned? The testimony of his Old Testament predecessors point to an unequivocal "yes" as the answer.<sup>17</sup> He realized the risks, but his fear and love of God overcame his fear of man and the seductive appeal of worldly acclaim. He proclaimed the truth of God to his entire generation in spite of the consequences. Those who are heirs of the prophetic spirit of Pentecost are kin to the prophetic spirit of John the Baptist. Should not the church of Jesus Christ display the same prophetic courage to speak God's truth today? In view of our spiritual inheritance can we remain silent in a world bereft of moral guidance, set adrift in a sea of moral relativism, without an anchor of transcendent truth? In a day when people reject any notion of truth apart from what's expedient or "seems right", who will hold up the standard of God's unchanging truth if not those who have inherited the prophetic mantle of the Baptist?

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<sup>15</sup>Rome as the occupying power did not extend the power of execution to the Sanhedrin (See Jn 18:31). Nevertheless, Herod as a client king of Rome was accorded that power.

<sup>16</sup>Josephus recounts Herod's betrayal of his brother (Philip - not the tetrarch), illegal marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and the divorce of his wife, the daughter of the Nabatean king Aretas. See *Antiq.* 18.5.1. Josephus goes on to relate that Aretas responded to this betrayal by making war and defeating Antipas, a defeat the Jews regarded as divine retribution for killing John the Baptist. *Antiq.* 18.5.2.

<sup>17</sup>In Mt 23:29-35 Jesus gives his own summary of that prophetic testimony and the supreme price paid to deliver it.

