

***“He Must Increase...” - The True Heart of Life and Ministry in Jesus***

John 3:22-30

I came to faith in Jesus as a young man – not yet 21 – while in the Air Force stationed on Okinawa. It was a church that ministered to American military families. The church, at times, brought in guest speakers that were either from the States or were missionaries serving in Japan. All of us young men, many new believers who sensed a “call” to ministry, made a habit of asking the speakers who impressed us to sign the inside of our Bibles. Most of the men who spoke wrote their names and the reference to their favorite passage. I have forgotten the names of all of the speakers except one – Fred Brown. I don’t remember his name because of the sermon he preached or because of his stature. I remember because when I asked him to sign the inside page of my Bible he attached John 3:30 to his signature as his life verse. By that time I had read the New Testament through at least twice – yet I read that verse as though I was reading it for the first time – “He *must* increase, but I *must* decrease” (KJV, NAS, ESV); “He *must* become greater; but I *must* become less” (NIV); literally, “***It is necessary*** that He increase and I diminish.” *Over the years I have come to understand (however poorly I have applied that understanding) that in this simple statement John declared a “divine necessity” for the life and ministry of every Church, every pastor and every individual Christian. It is absolutely “necessary” if we are to flourish in our life in this world and our ministry to this world, that Jesus increase and we decrease – that He “ascend” not only in our life and message but that He ascend as our life and message.*

The recorded exchange in this passage between John and his disciples, which is the occasion for John declaration of the “divine necessity”, is incredibly relevant to the church of our culture and age.

***The context of the dispute which led to John’s teaching/declarations – 3:22-24***

- Jesus and the disciples went out to the Judean countryside and remained there baptizing those who came to them.

1. No doubt the people who came for baptism were responding to the message and call to repentance – a message much like John’s. It seems that at this time Jesus was actually overseeing the baptisms being performed by His disciples (cf. 4:1-2).

2. It is very possibly, according to some, that those coming to Jesus were those who had first come to John to be baptized.

- John was also baptizing in the deep waters of the Aenon - likely in relatively close proximity to Jesus. He too was with those who had become his disciples.

- In this context a “dispute” arose between the disciples of John and a “certain” Jew regarding “cleansing” or perhaps ceremonial washing – perhaps in this case baptism following repentance.

**Note:** Nothing is said about the real substance of the dispute – simply that it was about cleansing (3:25). The puzzling thing is that 3:25 begins with “therefore,” which seems to imply that the dispute was caused by the baptism of Jesus being set against the baptism of John. In my opinion, the “dispute” was likely caused by the fact that Jesus and His disciples were baptizing at the same time and in relative proximity to John baptizing in the Aenon. The Jewish man who made the inquiry was possibly at the place where Jesus’ disciples were baptizing and perhaps he went to see John and wondered why more were going to Jesus than John – was there a difference in the baptism/cleansing?

- The dispute doesn’t appear to have been brought to John by his disciples. Rather, John’s disciples apparently disregard the dispute and take up the cause of their master’s honor which the dispute may have called into question – John may have been diminished by the “Jew” in the dispute - (3:26). The way in which John’s disciples worded their “statement” gives an indication of the offense they may have taken on behalf of their Rabbi - “teacher/master.”

**Transition:** John’s response sets a perspective or frame of mind/heart in ministry for every pastor and individual Christian – as well as the life and declared mission of every church – a perspective that serves as a critical “reset” for all who belong to Jesus.

***John’s response to the announcement of His disciples reveals the heart of John and of the one who is a true witness to Jesus – cf. 3:26-30***

- Notice what appears to be the impersonal, almost dismissive, tone of John’s disciples in referring to Jesus, when they approach him with their concerns – cf. 3:26 -

1. These disciples of John make reference to Jesus in a very dismissive, even marginalizing tone (John 3:26) This seems to be John the gospel writer’s reference to the accounts he recorded in 1:19-42.

2. In contrast consider some John’s proclamations about Jesus – the content of the witness John the Baptist gave of Jesus while across the Jordan – 1:19-27. John declares that he *is not* the Christ. Rather he is Isaiah’s promised herald of the Messiah (cf. 19-23); when asked why he then baptizes (cf. 24-27) he declares that his baptism is with water, while the One who comes after him, of Whom John is not worthy, He will baptize with the Holy Spirit; (cf. 1:29-34) John presents Jesus to his disciples as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – Who is the Eternal One and the One whom John was sent by God to reveal to Israel (Savior – cf. 29-31); (cf. 32-36) John declared that, by the witness of the Father, Jesus is truly the Son of God (cf. 32-34). ***He then, rightly and happily, directs or hands over two of his disciples to Jesus*** – one of whom is Andrew (cf. 35-40).

**John’s disciples appear to resent the fact that their *πάββί* is being replaced by Jesus**

- John's response to his disciples' jealousy was not what they expected (cf. 3:30). John didn't just drop this summary application on his disciples – though it should've been self-evident to all who followed him, from the early days of his ministry. He built up to his declaration of "Divine Necessity" in such a way as to make it easily and universally applicable.

John says three things which lead him, and his disciples with him, to this conviction of what we have called "the Divine Necessity" for life and ministry. First – Necessity of a fundamental "death to self" (the implications of "Too much of the world"); Second is the necessity of the supremacy of Jesus in the life and calling of every true Church, Pastor and Christian – He is the message!!; The third is the profound, soul satisfying joy of the Church, Pastor and Christian, when Jesus is faithfully preached and lovingly embraced by faith. The joy that comes when we preach Jesus, in all of His glory and those who receive our witness look away from us, and our church and look to Jesus with a compelling desire to see Him and know Him in all His glory!

- Death to self is a foundational "necessity" if Jesus is to increase in our lives and ministry (cf. John 3:30; 12:23-26; Acts 20:22-24; Philippians 1:20-21; 2 Timothy 4:6-8; Romans 12:1).

The great threat to the "Divine Necessity" in our lives – consequently the great threat to our gospel ministry – is our love of the world. Quoting William Wordsworth, Gerrit Scott Dawson wrote that the great threat to the church is that "the world is too much with us." We must be against the world in the life of the church if we are to for the world in our ministry.

It is fundamental to our nature to be self-centered – to resist, even resent the call to die. Yet this is the example set by Jesus (cf. John 12:23-26). It is the heart of Paul and the heart of every "missionary" who has or would follow after him and who would love the world enough to die so that the life of Jesus might "ascend" in their witness (cf. Acts 20:22-24).

*The threat to the Christian is not the loss of life for the sake of Jesus (the loss of notoriety, acceptance, the praise of man, comfort, prosperity etc.). No! The great threat to the Christian is the loss of Jesus for the sake of life (notoriety, acceptance, the praise of man, comfort, prosperity etc.).*

1. John embraced the privilege of his calling and mission from God (cf. 3:27-28). Notice how John words his sense of calling. This is the calling of every pastor, teacher, missionary, and Christian. The implication is clear – God has given life in Jesus and the privilege and unspeakably high calling of living in, abiding in His love and lifting Him up in the congregation of believers and announcing Him to broken and dying world. He is our message!!

2. According to 3:24 John had not yet rebuked Herod for adultery with his brother's wife and had not yet been thrown into prison where he would eventually be martyred by Herod. John, the gospel writer, presents 3:30 as the final public declaration of the John the Baptist – perhaps to be seen as a foreshadowing of John's execution which provides meaning/understanding for those

who questioned his death in the plan of God. Hence, John's declaration of the "Divine Necessity" could be understood as fulfilled in John's martyrdom.

- The supremacy of Jesus is the non-negotiable "necessity" in all of life and ministry. Death to self allows for Jesus to rise to supremacy in our lives and then our ministries.

1. Jesus must be supreme in the message and life of the church (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:5). If we, as the church, emphasize the methods of lifting up Jesus as our identity (the skillful preaching/preacher, the skillful teaching/teacher, the music, the people of the church) and message, rather than Jesus, then we are presenting mortal people and temporary experience as humanity's hope rather than Jesus. ***This will lead to intense competition and jealousy among churches and Christians AS WELL AS the unbearable burden of having to be enough for our world!!***

2. If you go to church looking for the best preaching/teaching or the best music, or the nicest people – you may find what you are seeking but you won't find Jesus until the preacher/teacher decreases, the worship team decreases, the fellowship decreases enough to allow Jesus to ascend to His rightful and exalted position in your hearts. ***This will lead to only temporary satisfaction followed by a growing greed for more and better AS WELL AS placing an unbearable burden on the church to always be bigger, more creative and better.***

This perverse "increase" of the temporal will lead to an awful and deadly "decrease" of the One who alone is glorious – our life and hope. To the degree that we believe or imply that the strength of our ministry is preaching/teaching, music, fellowship – and not Jesus rightly exalted in those things – ***Jesus will not ascend in our lives, our ministry and before those whom we seek to reach*** – He is the gospel, our hope and the hope of our world.

- Profound and deeply satisfying joy ("joy unspeakable and full of glory") is ours as we intentionally seek the "increase" of Jesus in life and ministry by seeking to "diminish" by death to self. John provides clarification for the fullness of his joy in the image of marriage – the joy that is central to his calling (cf. 3:29).

1. The mission and hope of the "best man" – the regal glory of the groom as He comes to receive His bride – the church.

2. The "voice" of the bridegroom.

3. The fullness of joy and freeing self-forgetfulness experienced by the "best man" in the celebration of the wedding. That joy is ours when we personally and as a church, embrace the "Divine Necessity."