

“HE MUST INCREASE, I MUST DECREASE”

John 3:22-30

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INTRODUCTION

God gave His beloved Son, not to condemn the world but to save the world. However, most refused to receive Him—they did not believe on Him as the unique Son and Savior and did not turn from their sins. Thereby they condemned themselves under the hand of a righteous and holy Judge. Shunning the divine Light of the world, they held to and loved their darkness, clinging to their evil works.

However, some did come to the light! Those who “practice the truth” by believing on the Son come to the light in order to manifest that God had worked their good deeds—they gave all of the glory to God. Moreover, there were already some believers who had a natural sympathy for the messages preached God’s messengers.

And people continued to come to the Lord. But there were two ministries that were reaching the lost and attracting those that were already saved—that of the predecessor—John the Baptist—that of the one predicted—the Messiah, Jesus.

Anytime there are two good and “successful” ministries, there is always the danger of competition and conflict. This potential for conflict multiplies greatly when ministries multiply. Humans by nature are selfish and self-centered; unfortunately **even spiritual leaders** partake of weak and frail human nature.

Jealously and insecurity are common problems among ministers and ministries. Competition and conflict often result.

In this portion of Scripture, John the Baptist manifests a godly example for all ministers of the gospel and for all church members and ministry participants. **John the Baptist thought little of himself and much of Christ.** WE MUST DO THE SAME. Let us take the same approach as John, using his own words:

HE MUST INCREASE, BUT I MUST DECREASE.

I. SUCCESS IN MINISTRY (22-24)

A. The Quiet Ministry of Christ (22)

Possibility of a time gap of about 8 months between the Jerusalem ministry and the beginning of Jesus’ Galilean ministry in the Spring of AD 28. Jesus is quietly building His followers and training them while waiting for the ministry of John the Baptist to climax and come to an end. **Notice that Jesus does not PUSH John out of the way, nor does He put him down in any way. But, he does carry out His work in a different location.**

1. He gained disciples—likely the same ones mentioned earlier in chapter 1.

Notice, that He was “spending time with them.” Jesus did not **rush through** His ministry. His disciples were important to Him.

2. He worked in Judea—likely near Jericho at the Jordan—but somewhat distant from John—He was not competing!
3. He was reaching people with His message of salvation—maybe even the new birth! They were **baptizing**—likely after a message of repentance. [Likely a similar baptism to that of John—couldn’t yet be Christian baptism in the true sense—since Jesus had not yet died.]

B. The Continuing Ministry of the Baptist (23-24)

He had no reason to quit until the Lord told him to do so, or until He forced Him to quit. Jesus had not yet manifested Himself as Messiah [except in a symbolical way in the cleansing of the temple], and Jesus was not exactly carrying out His ministry the way John might have expected.

1. Location: In Aenon near Salim (On west side of the Jordan)
Aenon means “springs”—apparently there were several springs in this location—7 many say. Also, the location seems to have been strategic for people coming from the various regions of Israel—Galilee, Samaria, Perea, and Judea. Salim means “peace.”
2. Purpose—“There was much water there”—for baptism by immersion!
3. Success—“They kept on coming to him and kept on being baptized.”
4. Reason—“John had not yet been thrown into prison.”

This is an important statement for two reasons: a) It helps us to understand the timing of John chapters 1-3. The other gospels present Jesus as beginning His Galilean ministry after He had returned from His temptation in the wilderness (cf. Mk. 1:13 & 14). John shows us that much happened in that interval.

- b) It shows us the reason that Jesus waited for the open ministry he would have in Galilee. He wanted to wait until the Baptist was no longer serving.

Both of these “men” were having success. Would they end up competing and becoming jealous of each other? Conflict did arise—but not from the preachers themselves!

II. CONFLICT IN MINISTRY (25-29)

Notice the word “then”—I suggest that this word is not so much a time indicator as it is of consequence; this question arose “because” of the two simultaneous ministries.

A. The Controversial Discussion (25)

The word here refers to a “dispute, debate, or controversial discussion.”

1. The controversy originated with John’s disciples (“from” them)
2. The controversy was with a Jew (some mss. have “Jews”)

This is not a reference to the antagonistic Jewish leaders mentioned earlier

in this book. In fact, it seems that possible that a follower of Jesus is intended. Possibly he thought highly of Jesus' ministry and approach and was uncertain of the continued importance of John the Baptist. *Naturally the followers of John would feel insult and would want to come to promote their "master."*

3. The controversy concerned "purifying."

This is likely a reference to the "cleansing" symbolism of baptism.

Possibly, John's disciples ascribed superior or even exclusive purifying efficacy to the baptism of John.

a. Likely Jesus was a **rival** to them.

b. Possibly they were not too pleased with John's previous testimony to Jesus.

B. The Troubled Complaint (26)

1. Their respectful address: "Rabbi" (note that they do not even name Jesus: "He that was with you beyond (east side) the Jordan.")

2. Their acknowledgment of John's testimony of Him

"Have borne witness"—its continuing effects (People listened! Why didn't they?)

3. Their big concern

a. "He is baptizing." (See 4:2—actually Jesus' disciples did the baptizing.)
[Shows Jesus' superiority to John!]

b. "All men are coming to Him." (The exaggeration evidences their bitter spirit.)

Note that these men were loyal to John. They loved him. Surely he would appreciate such loyalty and would come to their rescue in the "argument."

C. The Noble Answer (27-29)

1. The source of true success (27) "A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven." [Has been given and remains his.]

This principle is general here and applies to:

John—He must be content with what God has given him—no more no less!

Jesus—He is successful precisely because God has given him his ministry.

No one has the right to claim what God has not given him. But, once God gives him such an honor, it remains his. No one has the right to remove it or complain about it.

"From heaven"—from God out of the heavenly treasury.

2. Contentment with one's divine place and appointment (28)

a. They themselves "bore witness" of John's "witness".

b. John clearly denied being the Christ.

c. John was commissioned (sent) "before" Him—as the *forerunner*—to present Him. Note 1:6—"A man sent from God."

Permanence of his commission. Nothing can change that.
Jesus' success is easy to explain—John was truly sent to prepare for Him!
He uses an emphatic pronoun of Jesus—“that one” (Him)

3. Christ-Centered Focus (29)

a. Promotion of Christ—He is the “Bridegroom.”

(Cf. OT references of Yahweh with Israel as His bride (e.g. Is. 54:5; 62:4-5; Jer. 2:2; etc.)

NT references of the Church as the bride of Christ—e.g. Eph. 5:25-32; II Cor. 11:2; see also Rev. 18:23; 21:2, 9; 22:17; see Mt. 25—parable of bridegroom.)

b. The “Friend” of Christ

He is the “best man” who had great responsibilities to help arrange the wedding and to see that all went well at the wedding, and especially to be sure that the privacy of the bride and bridegroom was protected.

“He stands” [permanent position with lasting results]

“He hears” [continually listens for ways to help]

“He rejoices greatly”—literally “rejoices with joy.” Because of the bridegroom’s voice—that is to hear how happy and pleased the bridegroom is with His bride!

**Nothing makes the friend happier that to know that the groom is happy!
There is no selfishness in a true friend.**

He rejoices in Christ’s success. Christ’s joy is his joy.

****The same is true even if it be found in another of Christ’s servants!**

Also, A PREACHER OR SERVANT WHO WINS BELIEVERS TO HIMSELF INSTEAD OF TO CHRIST, VIOLATES THE MARRIAGE HE IS TO HONOR.

Thus John says, “This my joy therefore is fulfilled.” [With continuing effects]
His joy is filled to the brim.

III. GOAL OF MINISTRY (30)

One of the greatest utterances that ever fell from human lips” (Morris, p. 242)

A. Jesus’ Increase—Becoming more influential with more followers

B. John’s Decrease—Becoming less influential with fewer followers (including imprisonment, suspense, martyrdom)

Notice the divine necessity here—“Must” Also, the sharp contrast—“He”, “I”.

It is not easy to get followers for a serious purpose; to willingly give them up is the sign of a great and godly man.

CONCLUSION

What an attitude for a man of God to have—“**He must increase, but I must decrease.**” If only more leaders of the past and present had such an attitude we would have less contention, less frustration, less competition, and more genuine satisfaction and contentment.

But is this message only for ministers and leaders? Not at all. What do you live for?

Self advancement, praise, attention, glory, recognition, credit, success, etc?

Are you willing to take a backseat so that Christ may be exalted and get the attention?

Are you willing to allow another person to get the credit and recognition instead of you?

Are you willing to rejoice and be happy when someone else gets the promotion, advancement, or pay increase?

Are you willing to let Christ be first in everything you do in life?

Will you work tirelessly for him even if you never reach “your” life goals—as long as you know you are doing what He wants you to do?

OH THAT CHRIST MAY BE SEEN IN ME!