

8. These are three that testify: a Bible study on 1 John 5:7

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When I received the letter from Dr Arkkila with a request to have one of the Bible studies at this conference, at first I hesitated a bit. But after some time of reflection and prayer, I was convinced that God had prepared and coordinated something which was not in accordance with my original plan. At that very time I had namely worked with passages related to *the Baptism of Jesus*, during a period in our Swedish Church Calendar with special reference to this very theme.

Having received the topic of this Bible study I could see on the basis of my preparations for a specific teaching, that the message of the apostle John and the message related to John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus had a common content and address. That is the reason why I finally responded positively and continued to prepare this Bible Study.

My aim is therefore to connect the short and significant message of the apostle John – about the three testimonies - *the Spirit, the water and the blood, who are in agreement, with the ministry performed by John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus*. I will however not claim that this study covers the full interpretation of the given topic or theme for this conference.

The ministry of John the Baptist - One of the most thorough investigations of the ministry of John the Baptist is available in the Gospel according to Luke. He is the historian who has made investigations of the context in an extraordinary way. In chapter 3 he relates how the political and religious situation was, a region with lots of minor states and regimes: Tiberius Caesar, Pontus Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanias are mentioned as important rulers – all of them under supervision of the Roman Empire. Furthermore the religious leadership is reported to be under the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

People lived under oppression, a society characterized by fear and corruption – longing for freedom (1:15): ... *people were waiting expectantly and wondering in their hearts ...*, Luke says. People had a rich religious tradition, standing and living in the God-given orders of worship and sacrifices.

Considering this situation among the people you might wonder: – Were they not eagerly waiting and ready to receive the promised Messiah? Humanly speaking, you might have had expected such an outlook and attitude. But the real assessment is the opposite one: they were not ready at all to welcome the promised Christ. A thorough, fundamental and radical preparation was needed.

God had already foreseen this and promised it through the message of the prophets. Luke quotes the prophet Isaiah (Luke 3:4-6):

A voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.

All of a sudden this prophecy is about to be fulfilled (Luke 3:2): ... *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert*. Luke summarizes his ministry as follows (Luke 3:3): *He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. Luke furthermore narrates how radical the proclamation of John the Baptist was, dealing with specific manifestations in life of the individual: (1) Pharisaism, hypocrisy and social injustice: 3:7-11; (2) Corruption: 3:12-13; (3) Oppression: 3:14; (4) Sexual misconduct, 3:19-20. Luke 3:18 also gives a summary of the ministry of John the Baptist: *And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them*. There is also a clear distinction between the ministry of the John the Baptist and the coming Christ (Luke 3:16-17):

I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

What is the common denominator, the real focus in the proclamation and counsel of John the Baptist? – Be serious in life, mind, heart, thoughts, words and deeds as far as your relationship to God and man is concerned! You somehow hear and feel the tune from the prophet Amos:

Prepare to meet your God, O Israel. (4:12) Seek the Lord and live... (5:6)
Seek God, not evil, that you may live ... Hate evil, love good; Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph. (5:14-15)

The Baptist proclaims: Soon, very soon, the Christ will come and convey a message of salvation and judgement. ... *baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire*. This means a period of mercy and grace, with a blessed result for those who repent and believe in the promised and fulfilled salvation. ... *gathering the wheat into his barn*. This means a final judgement with terrible consequences for those who do not repent and believe in Christ; *he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire*.

When Jesus Christ starts his official ministry he proclaims a similar message (Matthew 4:17): *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.* Luke narrates the same focus of the message in Acts when Peter on the Day of Pentecost proclaims (Acts 2:38): *Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

Back to John the Baptist. He was certainly no preacher of popularity or entertainment. He had had a meeting with God and reflected his holiness and love in life and deed. For our reflection and self-examination there are two points I would like to stress, trying to apply the message on our, yours and mine, God-given ministry:

1) To what extent has the example of John the Baptist been moulded into our lives and ministries? He had received a call and a message from God, which had to be delivered. He was not allowed to add something of his own or reduce it in one way or another. He stands in a long line of the prophets: Thus says the Lord. Are you and myself in the very same line? There might be need for bishops, pastors, evangelists to ask such a question! Furthermore one testimony of the Baptist, which over and over again has been important for me, is useful to reflect upon. John says (John 3:30): *He (Christ) must become greater; I must become less.*

2) The proclamation of John the Baptist was focusing on an overall important approach – to make people have an encounter with God. This is what our ministry is all about, a proclamation of Law and Gospel.

So far we have seen how exact, accurate and careful the Baptist was to proclaim whom God is; the essence of his holiness. God is holy and demands holiness, perfection! Think about the straightforwardness of the Baptist as he deals with pharisaism, hypocrisy, social injustice, corruption, oppression and sexual misconduct. Are we, you and I, following this example of straightforwardness in our preaching of the Law, exploring the corruption of man openly and secretly seen in the daily life? My own experience is that you easily become very general in preaching the Law, as long as you have not made up your own mind, heart and life with the Lord.

We will later come back to the testimony and preaching of John the Baptist. His proclamation of the Gospel is fully seen and revealed after he had fulfilled the task of baptizing Jesus.

The Baptism of Jesus - In the Gospel of John, the Baptist has a testimony of the relationship between his ministry and the forthcoming ministry of Jesus. He

says (1:31): ... *the reason I came baptizing with water was that he (Jesus) might be revealed to Israel.* To my understanding this means that unless the Baptist had come to prepare the way for Christ, no one would have been able to receive the precious gift of salvation. Furthermore it was probably not fully revealed for the Baptist whom Jesus was until he, as a servant of the Lord, had baptized Jesus (1:33):

I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.

By then the Baptist had come to know more exactly whom Jesus was, and what his ministry was all about: a ministry of reconciliation.

The narrative of the Baptism of Jesus is quite short and straightforward: When people were baptized, Jesus approached John in order to be baptized as well. John tried to refuse; he felt a need to be served by Jesus, and not the opposite way. But Jesus convinced him saying (Matthew 3:15): *Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.* Then John consented. After the Baptism comes the confirmation, heaven was opened – the triune God testifies and confirms this performance: Jesus coming out of the water, the Spirit of God descending like a dove and the voice from the Father in heaven. (Matthew 3:16)

Why did John want to refuse the Baptism of Jesus? Well, this baptism was preceded by a confession of sins. Most probably John had longer or shorter counselling sessions with the people. But when Jesus is approaching him – why is that someone who has no sin to confess, demands and is willing to undergo an act of repentance? Jesus, true God and true man, fulfils the act of repentance and is baptized by the Baptist.

Many self-evident secrets from the OT – at least theoretically known and practised – must all of a sudden have been revealed to John in a brand new way. The one who had no sins, Jesus, confessed sins and this act is confirmed as an established truth by the triune God. I am, for example, thinking of passages like Isaiah 53, about the suffering servant of the Lord (53:4-5):

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

And imagine! This was the will of God: *it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness*, Matthew says. Compare this with 53:10: *Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer ...*

Through baptism Jesus is introduced into his ministry as the suffering servant of the Lord. He shows his solidarity with poor sinners – although he himself has no sin. Nevertheless he confesses sin – not his own, but the sin of the world. In his baptism Jesus as true God and true man stands before God as a representative of mankind, taking upon himself the responsibility and consequences of man's oppressions towards God. You might even dare to say that his baptism is an anticipation of his crucifixion and death. Jesus says, *I have a Baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed.* (Luke 12:50) *Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?* (Mark 10:38)

Allow me one more example from the OT, which must have been in the mind of John the Baptist. In Leviticus 16 we read about the Day of Atonement. There are numerous details on how to enter and approach the sanctuary. Lots of rituals and sacrifices must take place in order to be able to meet with God, to bring about atonement. Aaron, the high priest, acts as a representative of man before God and at the same time he is also God's representative, he is a mediator. Listen to the following passage (16:20-22):

When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.

The Baptist must have seen and understood that this OT ritual – and prophecy – was about to be fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus. There are similarities and differences. Jesus is the high priest making atonement for the sin of the world. But he is not only the high priest; he is also the goat – the lamb – who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus, figuratively speaking, puts his clean hands on his own head, and confesses the sin of mankind, your sins and my sins, as his own. In this way the sin of the world is transferred from us and put upon his body, an act which is finally completed and revealed on the cross. Jesus is the high priest and the lamb at the very same time!

A passage in Psalm 69:4b-5 confirms this fact and truth – you hear the voice of Jesus: *I am forced to restore what I did not steal. You know my folly,*

O God; my guilt is not hidden from you. And what a prayer Jesus has for poor sinners (69:6): May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord, the Lord Almighty; may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me, O God of Israel.

The first stage of the ministry of Jesus is not, humanly speaking, a very glorious one. But it was according to the plan of the triune God – and even a pleasure! The Baptist is surprised and most thankful. We see it in the Gospel of John where there are numerous testimonies – a proclamation of a wonderful Gospel. He cries out saying (1:15): *This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'* Later on there are two strong testimonies about Jesus, with reference to his baptism:

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (1:29)

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, 'Look, the Lamb of God!' (1:35-36)

The Baptist had met with Jesus, the High Priest and the Lamb! And immediately we learn there was a result of that proclamation (1:37), *When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Faith comes through hearing the Word of God*, Paul says! (Rom 10:17)

Parts of the interpretation of our given passage: ... *there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement* (1 John 5:7) can be referred to what we now have studied about the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus.

Finally, I have one more point for reflection and self-examination – in the light of John the Baptist's proclamation of the Gospel: To what extent has his example been moulded into our lives and ministries as far as preaching the Gospel is concerned? We remember how Jesus uses extraordinary words when he gives his testimony of John the Baptist as a true servant of the Lord. Is Jesus as the Lamb of God the focus of our preaching? Paul stresses this in 1 Corinthians 2:2, *I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*, and in Galatians 6:14 he says: *May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Woe to us if we do not preach the Gospel*, Paul says! (1 Cor 9:16)

Eternity consists of praise, thanks and glory to the Lamb of God, the Lamb who was slain for the sake of our salvation. (Rev. 5:6 ff, 7:9 ff and 17:14) May God grant us all to be present in this glorious, eternal event. And meanwhile, may he also grant us wisdom in proclamation of the Law and the Gospel – for

the sake of salvation of men. And remember: a generosity in pointing towards the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is delightful to the Lord and brings salvation to man.