

John 1:29-34

Introduction

In the prologue of John's Gospel (1:1-18), we hear about the "Word," and the "life," and the "light," and the "only God" who is at the Father's side. We hear that the light shines in the darkness and that it was coming into the world. We hear also that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We hear that the only God—the only Son of the Father—has made God known. But who is this Word, and life, and light? Who is this "only God" and "Son of the Father" who has made God known? Who is He and where is He that we might believe *in HIM*? We read in verse fifteen:

- John 1:15 — John [the Baptist] bore witness about *him*, and cried out, "*This was he* of whom I said, '*He* who comes after me is before me, because *he* was first with respect to me.'"

Which still begs the question: "Who is He?" John assumes that his readers do already know the answer because he says in verse 17:

- John 1:17 — The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

It's almost as though, for a moment, John has "let the cat out of the bag," if I can use that expression. Can you see how John is jumping way ahead here and assuming a great deal? It was only after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus that the *title* "Christ" (the "Messiah"; the "anointed one") came to function more as a proper name of Jesus and yet that's exactly how John uses "Christ" here ("Jesus Christ"). In fact, with just one exception (17:3), this is the only place in all of John's Gospel where "Christ" is used as a proper "name"; everywhere else, it's used as a title. Of course, we know John was writing after the resurrection, but the point is that John has momentarily jumped ahead and assumed what his Gospel has not yet demonstrated.

Who is the Word become flesh? Who is the life that is the light of men? Who is the light that was coming into the world? Who is the "only God" and "only Son of the Father" who has made God known? Who is He and where is He that we might believe *in HIM*? Apart from verse 17, the name, "Jesus," is never mentioned anywhere else in the prologue. And even after the prologue is over we still hear John the Baptist saying in verses 26-27:

- John 1:26-27 — Among you stands *one* you do not know, even *he* who comes after me, the strap of *whose* sandal I am not worthy to untie.

Which still begs the question, "*Who* is He?"

"Officially," it's only when we finally come to verse 29 that the identity of the Word and the life and the light and the "only Son of the Father" is finally revealed. "Officially," it's only when we finally come to verse 29 that the personal identity of "the Christ" (the Messiah; the anointed one) is finally revealed. So we read in verse 29:

I. John 1:29–30 — The next day he [John the Baptist] saw *Jesus* coming toward him, and said [we might imagine him pointing or with his hand extended], “**Behold**, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! **This is he** of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who is before me, because he was first with respect to me.’”

It’s in this man, Jesus, now walking toward John, that we finally have identified for us who the Word, and the life, and the light, and the only Son of the Father is. It’s in this man, *Jesus*, that we finally have identified for us who the Christ—the Messiah—is. When he saw *Jesus* walking toward him John said, “Behold... this is He...”

But no sooner has John said this than he goes on to say in verse 31:

II. John 1:31 — “I myself did not know him...”

We know from Luke’s Gospel that John and Jesus were in some way related to one another by blood because Mary, the mother of Jesus and Elizabeth the mother of John were relatives (cf. Lk. 1:36). This explains why Mary would go to visit Elizabeth when they were both with child and live with her for three months (cf. Lk. 1:39-40, 56). When John the Baptist says, “I myself did not know Him,” he’s not saying that he didn’t know *about* Jesus or that Jesus existed. Matthew tells us that when “Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him... John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (Mat. 3:13-14) So even before the baptism of Jesus, John had come to His own personal convictions about who Jesus was. It seems safe to assume that John would have heard from his own mother of the virgin birth of Jesus (cf. Lk. 1:45). When Mary came to visit Elizabeth, Elizabeth said to her:

➤ Luke 1:45 — Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

And it was also John’s mother, Elizabeth, who was filled with the Holy Spirit and said to Mary:

➤ Luke 1:42–43 — “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

I think we can assume that as the child, John, “grew and became strong in spirit” (Lk. 1:80), he must have also grown in his convictions concerning who Jesus was. So whenever it was that John had said: “After me comes a man who is before me, because He was first with respect to me” (we know he said this *before* Jesus’ baptism), we can assume that John already knew with certainty in his own heart that the one he spoke of was Jesus. But John wasn’t free to proclaim this publicly because his witness was to be based not on any personal insight that he had, but rather on direct, authoritative revelation from God. And so even as John preached in the wilderness and announced the coming of the Messiah (cf. Mat. 3:1-12)—being already personally convinced of *who* that Messiah was—the Messiah still remained “nameless,” and John could say in sincerity and truth, “*I myself* did not *know* Him.”

“I myself” is emphatic in the Greek. “**I** had no authoritative, infallible knowledge of who the Messiah was. And even now, the witness that I bear is not based on any insight of my own.” “**I myself** did not know Him,” and John might also have added: “And whatever lesser knowledge I may have had is wholly irrelevant and beside the point.” John could not publicly identify *Jesus* as the Messiah until *Jesus* was by divine revelation identified to John. So *how* will God identify for John the Messiah?

III. John 1:31 — “I myself did not know him,” [John says,] but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, in order that *he*[—*Jesus*—]might be revealed to Israel.”

The Word and the life and the light are not just spiritual ideas or eternal realities. We don’t put our faith simply in the Word or the life or the light, but rather in the Word, the life, and the light as this has come to historical, visible expression in Jesus. That’s *why* (“for this purpose”) John came baptizing with water, in order that *He*—*Jesus*—might be revealed to Israel as the Messiah and the one who is *Himself* the eternal Word and life and light and the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. The historical person of Jesus, then, is the focal point of all God’s revelation to man and the object of all true saving faith. Jesus Himself will say in John chapter 14:

➤ John 14:6 — ***I am*** the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through *me*.

But what does John’s baptizing with water have to do with revealing *Jesus* to Israel? Notice how John specifically mentions baptizing “*with water*.” On the one hand, this implies a comparison or contrast with another kind of baptism – a baptism not with water, but with something else. On the other hand, this also draws our attention specifically to the meaning and the symbolism of the “water.” Both Mark and Luke tell us that John proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3; Acts 13:24; 19:4). The water in John’s baptism was a symbol of inward spiritual cleansing *and* renewal – it was a symbol not just of the cleansing and washing away of the defilement of sin, but a symbol ultimately of a new creation, a wholly renewed and transformed heart. Can you see the miraculous work that this must be? The water of John’s baptism didn’t actually give or impart these spiritual realities, but it did point to the absolute necessity of these realities in order to enter the Messiah’s kingdom and escape from the coming wrath (cf. Mat. 3:1-12).

Already, in the Old Testament, water was used as a symbol for both the cleansing *and* the renewing, life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

- Isaiah 44:3 (cf. 32:14-15) — **I will pour water** on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; **I will pour my Spirit** upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.
- Ezekiel 36:25-27 — **I will sprinkle clean water on you**, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And **I will give you a new heart**, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And **I will put my Spirit within you**, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

This explains how Jesus can say in John chapter 3:

- John 3:5 (cf. Heb. 10:22) — Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit [unless one is born of the cleansing, renewing, life-giving *Spirit*], he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

So what the outward and physical rite of baptism with water naturally points to is that inward and spiritual reality of baptism with the Holy Spirit and the cleansing from sin and the renewal of the heart that this “true” baptism effectually accomplishes.

From the verses we’ve looked at so far we can already see that baptism with the Holy Spirit was to be the chief distinguishing mark and characteristic of the age of the Messiah and His kingdom. We read in other places:

- Ezekiel 36:27 — I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.
- Ezekiel 39:29 — I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD.
- Isaiah 32:14–15 — The palace is forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, a joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks; until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.
- Joel 2:28–29 — It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

When, therefore, John comes baptizing with water and telling the people to repent and believe in the one who was coming after him (cf. Acts 19:4), this was a sign that the Messianic age of the Spirit was now at hand. Did you notice the intimate connection between the Messiah and the Spirit? John’s baptism with water was intended to prepare the people to receive that “true” and greater baptism with the Holy Spirit – which was the chief characteristic and mark of the Messiah’s rule and kingdom. But still we might ask: How is it that John’s “baptizing with water” specifically reveals *Jesus* to Israel as the one who *is* Israel’s Messiah? *Why* does God choose *this way* to reveal Jesus to Israel?

In the Old Testament, it was also expected that the Messiah Himself would be one who possessed the Spirit in fullest measure (cf. Jn. 3:34). No, the Messiah would not need to be baptized with the Holy Spirit, but He would fulfill His work of saving and ruling over His people in the power of the Holy Spirit and by the Spirit’s anointing. So we read in Isaiah:

- Isaiah 11:1–2 — There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

- Isaiah 61:1–2 (cf. Lk. 4:16-21) — The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

John’s baptism with water was intended to point the people to the absolute necessity of baptism with the Holy Spirit. And so John’s baptism with water should have also prepared the people to recognize the Messiah when He Himself came in the power and anointing of this same Holy Spirit. Jesus said to the Pharisees:

- Matthew 12:28 — If it is by the **Spirit of God** that I cast out demons, then the **kingdom of God** has come upon you.

When Peter was proclaiming the good news to Cornelius, he said:

- Acts 10:38 — **God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit** and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

Are you beginning, now, to see the connection between these truths? What does the Messiah, *who possesses the Spirit in fullest measure*, have to do with the people’s need to be *baptized with that same Holy Spirit* if they would enter into life in the Messiah’s kingdom? We read now in verses 32-33:

IV. John 1:32–33 — And John bore witness [*martyreo*]: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and he remained¹ on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water, that one said to me, ‘**He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.**’”

What we had already begun to see from the teaching of the Old Testament is now clearly made known to us: It’s the Messiah Himself, clothed in the Spirit, possessing the Spirit in fullest measure, who Himself baptizes with the Holy Spirit. John was sent to baptize with water, and that very one who sent Him to baptize with water is the one who said to him: “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” And now we hear John bear witness to *Jesus*: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and He remained on *Him*.” This is **how** God chooses to reveal to John (and to us) the identity of the Messiah. He could have done this in any number of other ways. So what is this telling us about the true nature of the Messiah and His kingdom?

There are many different suggestions as to the imagery of descending “like a dove.” What we know is that John saw a physical form representing the special presence and power of the Holy

¹ The subject of this 3ps verb is the neuter “Spirit” (*pneuma*), not the feminine “dove” (*peristera*). Because the Spirit is a “person” (relates personally with the Father and with the Son and with the individual believer), however, it is better to refer to the grammatically neuter “Spirit” with the masculine pronoun, “He” (versus “it”; cf. NASB; HCSB; NKJV; contra KJV, ESV, NET, NRSV).

Spirit, but there's no evidence in the text that he actually saw the physical form or likeness of a dove. John says, "I saw the Spirit *descending* from heaven *like* a dove." Or we could translate, "I saw the Spirit *coming down* [in some bodily form; Lk. 3:22] *like* [or *as*] a dove comes down out of the sky." Nowhere in the Old Testament is the dove ever a "symbol" of the Holy Spirit, and I don't believe that's the point here either. The point isn't that there's some quality of the dove (innocence, purity, gentleness, harmlessness, love) that makes it a fitting symbol for the Holy Spirit. John never says that he saw a dove, or even that the Holy Spirit was like a dove, but rather that His *downward descent* was similar to the descent of a dove from out of the sky – which, if you've ever watched a dove descending, you know that not only can they take off almost straight up into the air but they can also land very gradually with almost a vertical, hovering sort of approach. So the point here may be no more than to help us picture what John saw (cf. Mat. 3:16; Mk. 1:10; Lk. 3:22).

And yet, on the other hand, there was apparently in the time of Jesus a rabbinic tradition which said that in Genesis chapter one "the **Spirit** of God was brooding on [cf. "hovering over"] the face of the waters **like a dove** which broods over her young"² (b. *Hagigah* 15a; quoted in Carson). So maybe it was also this traditional imagery of the Spirit brooding like a dove at the first creation (cf. Ps. 33:6; 104:30) that suggested the use of the same image here at the beginning of the new creation. If the Holy Spirit was the agent of God and of His Word in the first creation, we're reminded here that He will be the agent of God and of His Messiah in the far greater miracle of this new creation. All of which is to say that the new creation is now at hand.

The *Messiah* who baptizes *with the Holy Spirit* is here – and *this Jesus*—the man that John sees walking toward him right now in Bethany across the Jordan—*this Jesus* is He. He is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. He is the one who ushers in the new creation. And how does John know this? How has God identified the Messiah to John and to us?

John bore witness [*martyreo*]: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and he **remained** on him. *I myself did not know him*, but he who sent me to baptize with water, *that one* said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and **remain**, **this is he** who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'"

And so John continues in verse 34 with this most solemn and joyful testimony:

V. John 1:34 — "And I have *seen* and [I] have *borne witness* that this is the chosen one³ of God."

² Once again, the dove is not, here, a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Rather, the dove's brooding "illustrates" or "pictures" the idea of the brooding of the Holy Spirit.

³ NET translation note: What did John the Baptist declare about Jesus on this occasion? Did he say, "This is the Son of God" (οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, *houtos estin ho huios tou theou*), or "This is the Chosen One of God" (οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἐκλεκτός τοῦ θεοῦ, *outos estin ho eklektos tou theou*)? The majority of the witnesses, impressive because of their diversity in age and locales, read "This is the Son of God" (so {P⁶⁶, 75 A B C L Θ Ψ 0233^{vid} f¹, 13 33 1241 aur c f l g bo as well as the majority of Byzantine minuscules and many others}). Most scholars take this to be sufficient evidence to regard the issue as settled without much of a need to reflect on internal evidence. On the other hand, one of the earliest MSS for this verse, {P⁵} (3rd century), evidently read οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἐκλεκτός τοῦ θεοῦ. (There is a gap in the ms at the point of the disputed words; it is too large for υἱός especially if written, as it surely would have been, as a *nomen sacrum* [Υ Σ]. The term ἐκλεκτός was not a *nomen sacrum* and would have therefore

Many translations have “And I have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God” rather than “the chosen one of God.” The decision between these two readings is difficult, but I tend to agree here with the NIV (cf. NET; NLT). Either reading amounts to saying the same thing here in this context – “this one—this Jesus—is God’s Messiah. But only “the chosen one” brings us back to Isaiah chapter 42 where God says through the prophet Isaiah:

➤ Isaiah 42:1 (cf. Mat. 12:15-21) — **Behold** my servant, whom I uphold, **my chosen [one]**, in whom my soul delights; **I have put my Spirit upon him**.

After the first twenty-eight verses of asking, “Who is this Word, and life, and light? Who is this ‘only son of the Father’ and this “only God” who has made God known? Who is He and where is He?”—now see the beautiful, wonderful demonstrative pronouns in these verses. In verse 30: “**This is he** of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who is before me, because He was first with respect to me.’” In verse 33: “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, **this is he** who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” In verses 32 and 34: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and He remained on Him... And I have seen and have borne witness that **this is** the chosen one of God”—**this is** the one to whom God has given His Spirit in fullest measure (cf. Isa. 42:1; Jn. 3:34). In verses 29 and 31, “John saw **Jesus** coming toward him, and said, ‘**Behold**, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ... I myself did not *know him*, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, in order that **He [Jesus]** might be revealed to Israel” – and now to us.

Conclusion

We don’t put our faith simply in the Word or the life or the light, but rather in the Word, the life, and the light as this has come to historical, visible expression in Jesus. Are you trusting in Jesus? Have you been baptized by Him with the Holy Spirit? The means that God chose to use in revealing the Messiah compels us to ask this question. What we learn from these verses is the absolute necessity of this baptism if anyone would enter into life in the Messiah’s kingdom and

taken up much more space [ΕΚΛΕΚΤΟΣ]. Given these two variants, there is hardly any question as to what P^5 read.) This papyrus has many affinities with N^* , which here also has $\delta\ \acute{\epsilon}\kappa\lambda\epsilon\kappa\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$. In addition to their combined testimony $\text{P}^{106\text{vid}}\ \text{b e ff}^{2*}\ \text{sy}^{\text{s,c}}$ also support this reading. P^{106} is particularly impressive, for it is a second third-century papyrus in support of $\delta\ \acute{\epsilon}\kappa\lambda\epsilon\kappa\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$. A third reading combines these two: “the elect Son” (*electus filius* in ff^{2c} sa and a [with slight variation]). Although the evidence for $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\lambda\epsilon\kappa\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$ is not as impressive as that for $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$, the reading is found in early Alexandrian and Western witnesses. Turning to the internal evidence, “the Chosen One” clearly comes out ahead. “Son of God” is a favorite expression of the author (cf. 1:49; 3:18; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31); further, there are several other references to “his Son,” “the Son,” etc. Scribes would be naturally motivated to change $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\lambda\epsilon\kappa\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$ to $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ since the latter is both a Johannine expression and is, on the surface, richer theologically in 1:34. On the other hand, there is not a sufficient reason for scribes to change $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ to $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\lambda\epsilon\kappa\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$. The term never occurs in John; even its verbal cognate ($\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omega$, *eklegō*) is never affirmed of Jesus in this Gospel. $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\lambda\epsilon\kappa\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$ clearly best explains the rise of $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$. Further, the third reading (“Chosen Son of God”) is patently a conflation of the other two. It has all the earmarks of adding $\upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$ to $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\lambda\epsilon\kappa\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$. Thus, $\delta\ \upsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ is almost certainly a motivated reading. As R. E. Brown notes (*John* [AB], 1:57), “On the basis of theological tendency ... it is difficult to imagine that Christian scribes would change ‘the Son of God’ to ‘God’s chosen one,’ while a change in the opposite direction would be quite plausible. Harmonization with the Synoptic accounts of the baptism (‘You are [This is] my beloved *Son*’) would also explain the introduction of ‘the Son of God’ into John; the same phenomenon occurs in 6:69. Despite the weaker textual evidence, therefore, it seems best—with Lagrange, Barrett, Boismard, and others—to accept ‘God’s chosen one’ as original.”

be saved from the wrath to come. What we also learn from these verses is that it is to Jesus alone that we must all look for this baptism with the Holy Spirit. J.C. Ryle writes (with some slight paraphrasing):

Let it be a settled principle in our religion that the baptism of which John the Baptist speaks here, is the baptism which is absolutely necessary to salvation... The baptism of water is a most blessed and profitable ordinance, and cannot be neglected without great sin. But the baptism of the Holy Spirit is of far greater importance. The man who dies... not baptized by Christ can never be saved. Let us ask ourselves, as we leave this passage, whether we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, and whether we have any real interest in [Jesus,] the Lamb of God? ... Let us take heed that we ourselves [are new creations], and believe to the saving of our souls. (Ryle)

If we've been baptized by Jesus with the Holy Spirit, then we've already entered into life in the Messiah's kingdom. And so now we need to remember every day that the chief distinguishing mark and characteristic of life lived in the Messiah's kingdom is life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul writes:

- Romans 14:17 — The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of *righteousness* and *peace* and *joy in the Holy Spirit*.

Righteousness is living rightly according to God's commands—commands which are no longer burdensome for us who live by faith (cf. 1 Jn. 5:3; Mat. 11:28-30). **Peace** is the certainty of being reconciled with God and the assurance of His loving favor. **Joy** is the fruit of this righteousness and peace and the hope that we have as an anchor for our souls (cf. Heb. 6:18-19).

Have you been baptized by Jesus with the Holy Spirit? Have you entered into life in the kingdom? And now are you living life in the Messiah's kingdom daily in the power of the Holy Spirit?