

John 3:16 In Context (Part Two)

John's Humility and Christ's Primacy

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 04-Jul-26; Sermon #1883

A Christian like you and me must be aware of many things to avoid error. In a world of temptations and sins, the Christian is regrettably among just a very few people who are swimming against the tide of immorality and impiety and falsehood which we see so much in the world. We try our best to do what is right and good, and that is commendable. We should be doing that and growing in our ability to resist those things.

But the Bible teaches us that we should expect this. It teaches us that many false prophets are in the world. It says exactly that. It tells us that Satan the Devil himself and all his false ministers who can appear as angels of light are actively deceiving us. They are out there trying to get us to go another way. And we are not alone. I mean, in the sense of it is not just these false ministers being manipulated by spiritual forces. Humanity has deliberately manufactured a lot of wacky ideas to keep from acknowledging and obeying God. And we have to, as we navigate the world, avoid all these pitfalls.

Then there are human failings. I mean failings that everybody has just because of our flesh, our limitations. We all suffer from them. Very few of us, if any, have the ability to avoid these human failings. In fact, we are failure machines. That is something we do best. We can do a great job of avoiding false ministers, and Satan's temptations, and loony godless ideas, and we can still fail on a regular basis due to our innate weaknesses, our inadequacy of body and mind, our sinfulness that keeps coming out because of our human nature that has absorbed so much of it in this world. And our basic carelessness. We go through life, you know, sometimes thinking that everything is going well and we do not see the big pit that is coming right at our feet.

In this way, looking at life, it seems like the deck is stacked against us. And we can thank God that He understands that we are but flesh. We are not gods yet. We have a lot of weaknesses that we still have to overcome. And because of that knowledge on His part, He extends mercy.

Now among these human failings that I have mentioned is our psychology, our mental state, the way we are between our ears. Humans are wont to be mentally lazy. Not everybody, but a lot of us tend to be mentally lazy and sometimes we get tired and the laziness just kind of flows right in. We tend to like truth, even God's truth, in soundbites and pithy statements. We like snappy, terse sentences, like an advertising slogan, so we can hold on to them and do not have to think about them much beyond that. We prefer easy solutions to our problems.

We are satisfied with tradition, the way people thought and behaved way back, and we can just follow it. Or we prefer the status quo. We do not want anybody to rock the boat. Let us just keep on cruising down the stream here just as we are. Tradition and the status quo are really easy to deal with. We do not have to actually put a whole lot of thought into it. We can just go with the flow.

And we cannot forget that most of us, especially these days, are so distracted by so many other things that are coming at us, that we accept just a surface understanding of things, of ideas, of concepts that we should think about more deeply. Because it is easier. You know, we like to be spoon-fed a lot of these things rather than to get out our shovel and start digging for the truth. Because that is hard work. "Why don't you just give it to me in something easy to remember and I'll just hang on that." And having not done the work, it usually does not stick, even the easiest stuff.

Thus we come to our object of scorn today and that is the proof text. A dictionary definition will say that a proof text is, "a passage of Scripture used as evidence for a theological doctrine or argument." Well and good. That is correct as far as it goes. A passage of Scripture used as evidence for a theological doctrine or argument. We cannot fault that. We all do it. Every preacher I have ever known has used proof text now and again, and hopefully the proof texts have been correct and rightly applied.

However, the proof text has a dark side. It is prone to misuse in support of an argument. The verb form—I do not know if you knew that a proof text could be a verb, but people proof text in sermons—the verb form is often used in an accusative manner.

Listen to this definition of the verb proof text, "to use isolated quotations to support an argument or position often out of context." Two points there. To use *isolated* quotations and then to use them out of context. Like I said, it is not wrong to use a proof text if it is not pulled from its context and applied properly. I mean, there are certain verses. Jarod used the one about faith today.

That is a definition verse, I call it, and it is very good just as it is, as a definition of faith (Hebrews 11:1). Of course, it is not totally complete, it cannot be, but it is not going to put you astray and I do not know how you can use that wrongly. Maybe you could. I will not try. But like I said, preachers use proof texts all the time in their sermons and their articles.

However, proof texts that are isolated from their context and made to so-call "prove" false teachings are a real problem. It is a real problem in Christianity because you have these Christian churches and denominations that do this all the time. Just open up your Bible to Romans and pull up a commentary by any Protestant author and you will see them by the dozens. Herbert Armstrong used to cite Matthew 24:17 to illustrate proof texting very humorously. I at least I thought so when I was a kid when I heard him.

But Matthew 24:17 says in the King James Version, "Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house." Well, the story is that a man sometime pretty early in the century, I presume, did not care for the women's top-knot hairstyle. So he found a scripture to ban it. "Top knot come down." Evidently, this was a real thing. Mr. Armstrong heard the guy say it. But it is a wacky way that commentators, preachers, and such will take something from the Bible, isolate it, and misapply it.

Let us look at a more serious one though. This is one also that Mr. Armstrong used in his autobiography, in one of the disputes he had with someone who was heckling him at one of his appearances.

Mark 16:9 Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons.

Well, what happened in the appearance by Mr. Armstrong where this man was heckling him, the heckler said, this proves that Jesus rose on Sunday, the first day of the week. And Mr. Armstrong took him up on it. He said, Would you please read the first half of that verse again and read it correctly this time. So the man said, Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene.

He said, No, you are not getting it. Read it properly. And the man said, When He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene. He said, That is not what the scripture actually says, Mr. Armstrong said. You are not breaking that sentence down properly. And so of course he said, What do you mean? And Mr. Armstrong said, You have to remember that the Greek does not have punctuation but this verse is perfectly clear about what it says. Actually, there should be a comma after the word rose. So it should sound like this: Now when He rose, early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene. And the man said, You are just saying that. You do not have any proof that that is the way it should be read. And Mr. Armstrong said, Really?

Let us turn to Matthew 28:1. He said Scripture interprets Scripture.

Matthew 28:1 Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.

Ah. He said, This says something that corrects or interprets what it said in Mark 16:9. After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn. After the Sabbath is when? What time of day? What would be the first minute after the Sabbath? What time of day would you be in? Evening. Because the days go from sunset to sunset. So "after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene came and the other Mary came to see the tomb." He said, So the tomb was already empty after the Sabbath, just after the Sabbath. And so he said that text in Mark 16:9 was

being used as a proof text. It was taken out of its context and made to "prove" (and I will put that in quotes), a false doctrine that Jesus rose at dawn.

Anyway, that was enough to make the heckler leave, so Mr. Armstrong continued on his campaign. But it is just one example of many that can be found in the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament and especially in the epistles of Paul. That is done frequently.

Now people use John 3:16, a wonderful verse, as I mentioned last time, as a proof text. So this is Part Two of that particular sermon series that I am doing and this will be the last one. John 3:16 contains an amazing hopeful message. It is true. I mean, I do not want you to think at all that what is said in John 3:16 is not true, but it is a wonderful verse that proclaims God's love for His human creation and it contains the gist of His purpose for mankind. Many call it, as I mentioned last time, the gospel in miniature.

We might as well turn there. I should have had you turn there earlier. It is indeed a concise statement of Christ's message but it does not stand alone.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Very hopeful. It should be motivating to us that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son Jesus Christ, that He decided in time immemorial and came up with a plan so that all the people that He created could have an opportunity to believe in the Son and have eternal life in the Family of God. I mean, that is what we believe. That is what we are looking forward to. We have come partly along on this particular process that He is describing here and we are just waiting for the culmination of it with the return of Christ and the establishment of His Kingdom. It is all here in a few words.

But again, it does not stand alone. When a complex, comprehensive matter like salvation is proof texted to a single sentence without anything else to help it or modify it, a great deal of critical detail and explanation are sacrificed, and a lot of understanding as well. So no single verse contains all

the truth a person needs to attain to salvation. But John 3:16 does give the gist of it. A thumbnail sketch we might say, an overview. But because it is so short, it lacks crucial elaboration that give us details and nuances on our understanding of this. And other parts of the Bible provide those things so that we understand limitations and other things, definitions, and more deep understanding when it could be elaborated on by one of the apostles.

And as I said last time, God would not have inspired 66 books with 1,189 chapters and 31,102 verses if He could cram it all down into 25 words. He would have given us a 3 by 5 card instead of a Bible. We just have to make sure that we understand this in its fullness because we are not to follow bumper sticker Christianity. There is a whole big book here for us to take to the depths as far as we can. So John 3:16, as magnificent as it is, leaves out or glosses over a lot of necessary truth.

Here is another one we can pick out of the air, Ephesians 2:8. You know what Ephesians 2:8 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." Wonderful verse. It has been hijacked by Protestants ever since Luther and made to be the rallying cry against Catholicism, against works.

They have even added a word to it. Saved by faith *alone*, they say. But even though as it stands, it is perfectly fine, it does not define or elaborate on the concepts of grace, salvation, and faith, and only in the next verse or two, verse 9 is, "Not of works lest any man should boast." Then it goes on in verse 10 about talking to us that Jesus Christ has created us for good works. So, that is not included, and they often do not go any farther than verse 9 because they do not want you to get the idea that there is anything you must do after you pledge yourself and say that you believe in Jesus Christ. There is a whole lot more there. And the same is true of John 3:16.

First I will give you a summary, but we are going to continue on from where we left off last time and finish John chapter 3, so that we understand the whole chapter and the whole context of John 3:16.

Last time we broke down the first two-thirds of the chapter, we went all the way to verse 21. We broke this down into three sections. First, it was verses 1 through 8, and then 9 through 15, and finally, 16 through 21. And we saw

how Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus sets up His very bold statement that He made in verse 16. So as a review, as a summary of what we went over last time, I would like to break this down into these thirds and give you the most pertinent teachings that came from it.

I am going to go ahead and read these sections. The first section, verses 1 through 8.

John 3:1-8 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs which You do unless God is with Him." Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Now, I am not going to go into all the details of born again and all of that. I just want to get the major principles that we pull out of here. And that is, Jesus here reveals that to understand and experience, this is the word *see*, He says to see the Kingdom of God, to understand and experience the Kingdom of God requires a spiritual rebirth or a regeneration. And that regeneration consists of first, God's calling, and then baptism and receipt of the Holy Spirit.

I kind of skipped over repentance there, but I hope you understand that that is part of baptism. So He mentions particularly the water and the Spirit here showing that baptism and the receipt of the Holy Spirit are intimated, they are part of the process of being born from above, we might say. And He goes on to say that one cannot see this change take place because it is a spiritual matter. It happens in a person's heart and mind.

So the process is spiritual. And when one is given the Holy Spirit he is given or enabled, that is a better word, to have spiritual discernment. Paul even goes so far to say in I Corinthians 2:16 that we are given the mind of Christ and that we then can understand the things of God and make proper decisions about them.

Let us go on to verses 9 through 15.

John 3:9-15 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How could these things be?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man, who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

This second section confirms that the Old Testament indicated the spiritual process that Jesus was teaching to Nicodemus. Jesus was surprised that Nicodemus could not figure this out. "You know the Old Testament so well. Why do you not see this in there?" That there has to be a spiritual change and that the Kingdom of God is first spiritual and then, of course, it will be a kingdom of this earth when Jesus Christ returns.

However, the Jewish leadership could not understand this, they missed this or outright rejected it because of their, using a term we can take from Jesus, their earthiness. They were of the earth. They could not comprehend this spiritual truth. They could not believe it. And their theology had a fatal flaw in that it was focused entirely on physical Israel. They could not see beyond the bounds of physical Israel.

But Jesus is telling him that the truth of salvation is focused on turning to and believing the Son of God. It is not on Israel being a great nation and having sway over the nations of the earth. And He tells Nicodemus that he

should have known this. Because he knew exactly when Jesus said Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. He had probably read that section in the Pentateuch a hundred times. But he never had the mind, never had the Spirit of God to understand what that meant. That it foreshadowed Jesus Christ being lifted up so that all men can be saved. That is what the serpent in the wilderness was supposed to do. People were supposed to turn to and look at the serpent and be healed. Their life would be saved after all the snake bites and everything that were happening there.

And so that physical sign moves easily into comprehension when you understand that serpents—what might a serpent be a symbol of and turning to, look at, gazing upon something lifted into the air on a pole? And of course, the culmination was that people's lives were saved. Just take that up one notch, one spiritual notch, and it fits wonderfully into the story of salvation, if you will.

Let us go on to the next one. I do not want to spend too long on this summary. Verse 16.

John 3:16-21 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen that they have been done in God [or in obedience to God]."

Now this third section explains that salvation and eternal life come through God's gift and the sacrificial work of the Son. God gave His Son, and what did His Son do? He gave His life for our sins. Also, it explains, especially in verse 16, that this salvation and eternal life is not just for Israelites. He tells Nicodemus that right away.

He does not say, For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that the Israelites who believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. No, He makes it very general, *whoever*. Whoever believes in Him. And that He would expand the possibility of salvation out to the whole world—to everyone. But they had to believe in the Son.

Now the distinction that He shows here between those who are saved and those who are condemned is belief, not ancestry as the Jewish peoples, Jewish leaders and teachers thought. They thought if you came from Abraham and you were circumcised, you were going to be saved. You were part of the righteous people, and that is pretty much all you needed. You would be part of the Kingdom of God.

But Jesus punctures Nicodemus' balloon on that point and makes sure he understands that it is not anything physical, it is this enigmatic belief, *believe in the Son of God*. And what He goes on to say here as we go into the later parts of this particular section is that belief is not just intellectual or emotional. It is not just agreement with a certain set of laws or a statement or whatever. But He goes on to make sure that Nicodemus understands, or at least gets witnessed to at this point, that it is the doing or the practicing of the truth that separates those who believe from those who do not believe.

You have to believe intellectually and emotionally, but you also have to then practice the truth. "Everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen that they have been done in God."

And so you have one group who does not practice the truth. They actually hide from God. They do not want to be seen. They do not want to be exposed by the light, and so they get further and further away from Him and are condemned. But those who love the light and believe in the Son and practice His way come further and closer to the light and are saved and are given eternal life.

So the difference here that we are looking for, if we want to just put it in simple terms, is that belief rises or falls on obedience. So it is obedience

versus disobedience. If you obey, believing in the Son, and you move forward, you will be saved and given eternal life. But if you disobey and you draw back, well, perdition is the end result—destruction, judgment, condemnation. So, what this demonstrates is the, I do not know exactly what to call it, but we will just say the progressive nature of the salvation process. Meaning that one thing follows another and Jesus is trying to lay it out for Nicodemus.

Maybe He is speaking in parables here, so he does not quite understand, but we can pick it out. What He tells Nicodemus is that God first must change the heart. He is the first one that comes in and begins the process by, as my dad said, flipping the switch so that he could understand. Giving faith to the person so that he could believe. Granting repentance. God does all these things to initiate the process.

Then it is the person's turn. There has to be a decision to turn to and believe in Jesus Christ. There is some requirement on our part. It is something required on our part so that we are fully synchronous with Jesus Christ and the way of God. We have to make a choice that we are going to abandon the old way, the old man, and to follow Jesus Christ and put on the new man. And so when we do that and are baptized, have hands laid on us, then we receive God's Spirit.

Now, the person's response then at this point to the receiving of God's Spirit, and I should say not just at this point but for the rest of his or her natural life, is obedience. Obedience to the truth. Growth. Maturity, spiritual maturity. Producing fruit. Doing the works of God. So, like I said, there is a progression here that we are seeing in how Jesus describes this process.

It has a definite beginning point with God's working in a person's mind, and it goes through these other steps to a definite ending point, which is eternal life in God's Kingdom. But we have to go through this long progression, this process, which we call sanctification, you know, starting with justification and going through sanctification to glorification at the end. It is all part of salvation. And Jesus drops these little nuggets of information in here, scatters them throughout this chapter, but He is actually explaining a process we know well. He is just putting it in a different form for us to consider.

That summary that I have just given you should help us with the final one-third of the chapter. And I think the final third of the chapter should go fairly quickly. There is not a lot of new information here. The final third of this chapter is a retelling of some of these themes that have already popped up in the first two-thirds of the chapter. But John thought it was necessary to give an example here. We will see the example of John the Baptist. And then for a little bit of extra commentary on the subject to finish out the chapter.

So verses 22 through 36 is what we will be focusing on. In this section, the first nine verses, that is verses 22 through 30, are straightforward. There is not a whole lot of Johannine brilliance, I will just put it that way, that we have to figure out. But the last six verses, 31 through 36, is a little bit deep, denser, and it is an exposition on the supremacy of Christ.

First, as God's messenger, as His witness, and ultimately as man's sovereign. So we can see if we just take a step back, how that fits then into what we have already gone over here in the last sermon. Because what he does in this last section, especially 31 through 36, is focusing on just how important Christ is to the process, to the witnessing of the truth and for everything that comes, all the way to being given eternal life.

Let us take the simpler section here first.

John 3:22-30 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized [meaning the public, a lot of people came and were baptized]. For John had not yet been thrown into prison. Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him." John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but I have been sent before Him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice.

Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."

I will chop it down into a few verses here and try to explain what is going on. Verses 22 through 24 is the transition between what Christ said to Nicodemus and what John would say once the setting has been set. And it sets up the tension in John's disciples who see Jesus is baptizing more than John. It makes them jealous. They are a bit envious.

Just as a sidelight, if you would go into the next chapter, verse 2, it says that Jesus Himself did not baptize, but it was His disciples that were doing it and Jesus just supervised them.

But the beginning here in verse 22 seems odd. "After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea." That is strange. I thought they were in Judea. They were in Jerusalem. That is where the meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus had taken place. But it is kind of, I do not know what you would call it, a funky translation. It could have been made so much clearer, but they essentially made it literal here in the New King James. And what it actually means is that Jesus and His disciples went into the lands of Judea, and what it means is they went into the countryside of Judea. They left Jerusalem, which is in Judea, but then they went into another part of Judea, which were rural areas. There might have been some small towns here and there, but they went into a place that was not as populated as Jerusalem. If John 4 occurs immediately after all of these things, then He was heading north to Galilee. He was already on His way, so He descended from Jerusalem into the area of Benjamin, and then into Ephraim after that. And He was actually encroaching upon Samaritan territory at this point by going north.

And it says John was nearby in Aenon and Aenon is north of Jerusalem on the border or just inside Samaritan land. So, they were close by and Jesus is ready to take that long journey where He got so tired and famished into Samaria. Aenon, by the way, means springs so there was plentiful water there for baptizing. And it may be that Jesus and His disciples were on one part of the springs and John the Baptist and his disciples were at some other nearby springs.

This occurred, both the discussion with Nicodemus and this baptizing tour that was taking place, very early in Jesus' ministry. As a matter of fact, we could even say that it was before He actually launched His ministry. Notice the critical verse, verse 24, "For John had not yet been thrown into prison."

Let us go to Mark 1, verse 14, where Jesus launches His ministry in Galilee.

Mark 1:14 Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

So there is just a small time between what happened with Nicodemus and this moving on to Aenon and John being put into prison, and Jesus going through Samaria into Galilee and launching His ministry up there in the north. So, I think what happens in John a lot of times is he writes about situations, events that the others did not write about. And here he has four chapters at least before Jesus' ministry even begins.

That means when He said the fields are ripe for harvest, that was before His ministry took place, if this journey through Samaria took place at the time we think it did. So, just something to think about, that Jesus was gearing up here for His ministry and John lays out some of the deepest theology was already being taught to certain ones, right at the beginning or before the beginning of His official ministry.

Let us go on. In verses 25 and 26 is when they have this dispute with the Jews about purification. Now, my question is, why did this dispute over purification with the Jews lead John's disciples to complain about Jesus baptizing? What was it about this argument that they were having that made them accuse Jesus of taking John's prime spot? Well, let us go back to Mark. I should have had you stay in Mark 1. Verse 4, which is Mark's bit about John the Baptist.

Mark 1:4 John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

John had a baptism of repentance to be remitted or pay for sins. You remember that in Acts 2:38, Peter also says that they should be baptized for the remission of their sins. So, that is the kind of baptizing he was doing, the same kind of baptizing that Jesus would later command the church to do as part of this process of salvation. And so, this was new. This was new to Judea because the Jews did actually baptize, but they did it solely for reasons of ritual purification.

They had baptismals or whatever you want to call them, called mikvahs, and people could walk down the steps of the mikvah [which is filled with water] and pass through and walk up the steps on the other side and be clean. And to be clean enough in a ritual sense to go to the Temple and offer their sacrifices or whatever they needed to be ritually cleaned for. They did this in the same way that they would wash their hands before eating, and for the same reason. As Mark 7:2-4 says they wash their cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches for a ritual purpose.

Now, the dispute involved the deep differences between these two types of baptism and the reasons for the baptism. The Jews likely argued with the disciples of John that a baptism of repentance was not in the law. That if you went back into the Pentateuch, you would find no baptism for repentance for the remission of sin. And they would say that there is nothing in the Old Testament that would show that baptism remits sin. There is no way that baptism can clean you of sin.

And they were right on those counts. Baptism cannot cleanse you of sin. Only Christ can do that. And there is no actual command anywhere in the Old Testament to baptize for the remission of sin. Now we do know, let us go to Acts 19, that the apostle Paul recognized that the baptism of John was a symbol. It was not effective. It was a precursor of what Jesus would have the church do.

Acts 19:1-6 And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples, he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "We have not so much as heard as whether there is a Holy Spirit." And he

said to them, "In what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.

So the baptism of John then was symbolic at the time. He was calling them, the people of Judea and Samaria, to repentance, but he did it looking forward to Jesus Christ when they could have true repentance and true baptism and a true receipt of the Holy Spirit. But John's baptism was not spiritually effective as it was not done in the name of Jesus Christ, and it was not done for the remission of sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So those who were baptized under John had to be rebaptized in the name of Jesus Christ and have hands laid on them in order to receive the Holy Spirit. So we could see John's baptism as a precursor to the true baptism of those called into the church.

Anyway, I have gone all this way to explain that the Jews probably mentioned to John's disciples that they had seen Jesus and His disciples baptizing and drawing huge crowds. That was probably the only thing. They had been in this discussion and the Jews said, Oh, your master is over there baptizing under repentance and Jesus is over there baptizing even more than your master is in the same baptism of repentance, and you are both wrong.

And so all they took from the argument basically was Jesus is over there baptizing and He has got more than John, more people coming to Him than John. So in a way, this argument about purification is not important as it is that John's disciples and the Jews were arguing and this bit of information came up. So they took this bit of information to John. Jesus is more popular than you are.

And John did not blink. He reacted admirably. If only I could act with such humility, it would be wonderful. He betrayed no sense of envy. Not even a little bit of rivalry with Jesus was there. He is a prime example of a man who was humble, who was poor in spirit. He knew that he was nothing and that everything that he had had been given to him from God.

And he acknowledged in his response that God had given John a singular work, a specific work to do, that he was the forerunner for Jesus Christ. He was to go before Him and announce that He was coming and that everybody should pay attention to Him because He is the Great One. We could say that John realized that he was not the main event. He was just the warm-up band. Jesus was the main event. And when Jesus wanted to come out on stage, John had to go, had to quit what he was doing and go off stage.

So what we see here is that instead of reacting with pride and envy, he deferred to Christ as his Master, as his superior. John's attitude is a fine attitude to cultivate for anyone. Know your place. Stay in your lane. Honor everybody. And especially honor God and all that He has done for us, and do not think that we are anything to be deferred to. Do not think that we are anything special.

And these words are on-theme (what John said),

John 3:27-30 "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but I have been sent before Him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."

What he said here is on-theme. The Son of God is the focal point of salvation. One must believe in Him, in His work to be saved and have everlasting life. Even the greatest prophet, John, whom Jesus said was the finest born among women, has to take a backseat to Him. No one is more important than the only begotten Son. The first and the foremost. The Firstborn. No one else compares, and so we all must humbly place ourselves under Him and look to Him and emulate Him and try to be like Him as much as possible in our character.

Let us finish here then in verses 31 through 36.

John 3:31-36 "He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. He who believes in the Son has everlasting life, and He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Now this paragraph, I guess we will call it, is an expansion on John's testimony, what he had just said about Jesus and him having to decrease now that Jesus had come on and really begun His ministry. The primacy of God is the theme here. The One who is from heaven is the most important, and we have to pay special attention to Him. Christianity focuses on Christ.

He is God. He is the True Witness. He is the Lamb of God. He is the Messenger of the gospel. He is the Revelator. He is the Model of godly character. He is our Master. He is the Teacher. He is the King. He is the Head of the church. He is our High Priest. He is our Mediator of the New Covenant among so many other roles that allow us to attain to salvation. Either we see Him doing things or He teaches us or He does those things for us. It all goes through Him.

Now, I am sure you are aware that the apostle John keys in on the titles used to identify Jesus as God throughout the gospel. I mean, if you just start at the beginning of the book of John and you start listing them you come up with a list that is long. I will give you some: the Word, the Light, the only Begotten, the Prophet, the Lamb of God, Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Judge, the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the I Am, the Shepherd of the sheep, the Door of the sheep, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the True Vine, the King of the Jews. And more.

By these titles alone, we can understand that He is *everything* to us. No wonder God truncated it to *you must believe in the Son*.

Now the passage here in John 3:31-36 summarizes then the main themes of the entire chapter and we could say the main themes of the entire book of John. That which comes from above, he says, is superior to anything earthly which is finite and limited. That is, anything earthly is finite and limited.

Let us go to John 8 and just see how this is repeated later on. Starting in verse 23.

John 8:23-29 "You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins." Then they said, "Who are You?" And Jesus said to them, "Just what I have been saying to you from the beginning. I have many things to say and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him." They did not understand that He spoke to them of the Father. Then Jesus said to them, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him."

So we have a picture here of the heavenly Man, Jesus Christ, who brought eye-and-ear witness testimony straight from God the Father. Straight from the Source! We could say straight from the horse's mouth, if you will. One can believe the Son of God because His teaching came from the Father. It is that simple. He did not need anybody to establish His credentials. He had them just by coming straight from God and bringing the testimony that God the Father wanted Him to say.

It is the truth! How do you explain that to people who cannot understand the difference between the heavenly and the earthly? But there is a dark side to this because if one does not believe Jesus' words, which came directly from the Father, you are calling God a liar. And it starts to get very dangerous. If

you want to look something up on that, it is John 12:44-50. I want to read I John 5, verses 9 and 10, a little bit more succinct here.

I John 5:9-10 If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son.

Now Christ's testifying of heavenly things and no one accepting them is another theme that comes out throughout this chapter. And we have learned that people cannot accept His testimony, not unless the Father calls them and brings them to Christ. You know, the famous John 6:44. Without the enabling of the Holy Spirit, which God gives freely to those who believe, no one can believe. No one can receive that word. No one can truly use the Word of God, certainly not in its fullness. We may be able to copy a few good practices but we cannot really use the Word of God to any depth without the Holy Spirit.

Now it is not just on God. I was going to go to Matthew 13:10-16. That is where the disciples asked Jesus, Why do You speak in parables? And Jesus says, "It's been given to you to know these things, but it's not been given to them." And then He goes on to say that they have actually refused to hear. They have stopped their ears, they have covered their eyes, and they will not hear. And Paul says in Romans 1, starting in verse 18, going down through verse 24, a similar thing. That even though God's attributes are evident, they, the people, have come up with weird and strange ideas and worshipped the creation rather than the Creator. And God said, "Well, okay, I'm just going to let you go down that road," and gave them over then to a mind that just does not understand and becomes more perverse as it goes along.

So, human unbelief has two prongs, two causes we could say: God's withholding His Spirit from humanity, and also on the other hand, deliberate human refusal to hear God. And think about it. Even when God gives us His grace and His Spirit, we still have a lot of unbelief to overcome because it has been there in our human nature for so long. It takes a long time to overcome it.

This section of John 3:31-36 also recalls the fact that the Father loves the Son. You might want to jot down John 5:20. And it is for this reason that the Father loves the Son, that He gives Him the Spirit without measure. You can trust Him. The Son loves the Father. The Father loves the Son. They are all in sync. And when Jesus was on earth, God gave Him the Spirit without measure so He could do that work and bring it all to pass.

And our redemption is based on the fact that the Father loves the Son. That is what John 3:16 is telling us. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." Think about it. The Father loves the Son so much that He wants to give all creation to Him. He also wants to give Him a bride, a Kingdom, and all authority in the universe. And because the Father loves the Son we get to share in His inheritance with Him because we are part of the bride that is given to the Son because the Father loves the Son.

Finally, this section in John 3:31-36 repeats that eternal life rests on believing in the Son. And its opposite, failure to believe in the Son, incurs the wrath of God, His condemnation, and ultimately eternal death. These are the only two alternatives. It is one or the other. Is it believe the Son of God? Or, disbelieve the Son of God? Which will we choose?

Herbert Armstrong said it is either the give way or the get way. And he was right. There are only two ways. There is the godly way, and there is the ungodly way. There is the Tree of Life, or there is the Tree of Knowledge apart from God that leads to death. This has been the message from the beginning. What we have seen in John 3 is a New Covenant spiritual version of that. It is basically a New Covenant version of what we see in Deuteronomy 30, starting in verse 15.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God [That is believing in the Son.], to walk in His ways [That is believing in the Son.], and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments [That is believing in the Son.], that you may live and multiply; and that the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them [That is the other way. That is the one who will not

come, the way where the people will not come to the light, but they hide themselves in darkness and do not want their ways exposed.], I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore [he tells us the right way to go] choose life, that both you and your descendants may live [and to us live eternally]; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him [Is knowing the Lord not the way to eternal life? John 17:3], for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

Because we have been called, because we have believed, because we have been given the Spirit of God, we have been given a rare and precious opportunity to believe in the Son of God and to receive eternal life and salvation. Seize it, as Moses implores us, or God implores us through Moses. Seize it and cling to the Son so that you will inherit the Kingdom of God with Him.