

A Man Sent from God

Paul S. Rees, D. D.

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John." John 1:6.

Does God have a way of revealing His mind and conveying His truth through men who are set apart for this purpose? The Hebrew people have believed it every since Abraham. The Christian community of the world has believed it ever since Jesus chose His apostles.

High among the representatives of this group of God-called and God-sent men stands the strange and fascinating figure whom we know as John the Baptist. We speak of him as the forerunner of Jesus. He was the last of the old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament preachers.

It was such a man who, a few months before the public appearance of Jesus Christ, stirred the citizens of Jerusalem and Judea as they had not been stirred for decades. He was free; he was fearless; he was flaming. He took religion out of the moth balls, where the priests had ceremoniously laid it away, exposed it to the blazing sunlight of honesty and reality, and brought the people low before the living God Who calls men to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Yes, There was a man sent from God," and whenever that fact obtains in the world, humanity is so much the richer in the experience of God that is offered to it.

It is not difficult to find in John's experience those significant characteristics that are true, or should be true, of all the preaching ministers of Jesus Christ.

I

Consider, for one thing, that "a man sent from God" will have a compelling sense of avocation. I am concerned that the verb in our text gets the underscoring it deserves. "There was a man sent from God." To hear some people talk, you would think that a preacher is a self-appointed busy-body who goes around snooping into the private and public morals of the community. There may be such men wearing the cloth of clergy, but they are leagues removed from the high ambassadorship of a man like John.

Some years ago an inquiring clergyman wrote to a half-hundred representative ministers in the larger denominations, asking among other questions, "When you entered the ministry, did you believe yourself called of God?" Out of forty-eight responses, forty-six replied, "Yes." That was an excellent score. It represented the prevailing feeling about the ministry, say, fifty years ago. But then came a disconcerting answer. To the question, "Do you find the idea of a supernatural call to the ministry unpopular today?" every-one of the forty-eight replied, "Yes."

That is tragically disheartening, especially when it is the judgment of men who obviously were not confused by the word "supernatural." They did not understand the word to mean, necessarily, something dramatic or spectacular in the way of a "call." Five of them said that the seed of conviction as to their being divinely summoned to the ministry was planted in their minds by their Sunday School teachers in the form of advice and counsel; three of them through the advice of a pastor; eight of them by brooding on man's lost condition and the needs of the world; and four of them by a distinct sense of God's voice. But the notable thing is that all these men, arriv-

ing at their commission by different roads, entered the ministry with a gripping and compelling conviction that a Hand higher than their own, higher indeed than any human hand, had lifted them into the pulpit.

One man, for example, had wanted to be a physician. He had read an entire medical library. Then came a period of inner struggle and the speaking of an inner voice. "You ask me why I am preaching," he says. "Medicine is not for me. This is where God wants me." Such is the language of a man sent from God.

Another told of an offer made to him by a business man who wanted him to take a place on his sales staff. It would have meant a big increase in income. "But," said the preacher, "he didn't even tempt me. It was not for me . . . I'm a called man. God wants me right here and in no other place." Such is the conviction of a man sent from God.

The preacher needs to feel firmly that he belongs to this tradition and may perhaps, by the grace of God, enhance it. Without it he is not likely to sustain within him a worthy sense of the solemnity and glory of his office, nor is he likely to be shock-proof against the manifold difficulties and hazards that lie along his preacher pathway. When William Carey's son entered the ministry the father wrote to a friend, "My son, Felix, has been called to preach the Gospel." To the senior Carey it was a tremendous thing, as indeed it seemed to be to the son. Years later, when the son accepted an appointment of the Crown to be British ambassador to the court of Siam, William Carey, in disappointment and distress, wrote to his friend, "Felix has driveled into an ambassador." Such is the sentiment of any man who is convinced, as Carey was, that the ministry of Jesus Christ is the world's worst profession, but its highest calling. In comparison with it, everything else pales.

II

Concerning "a man sent from God," let it be said, further, that in the wilderness of the world's life he will be a directing voice. As your eye travels down the exciting verses in this first chapter of John, it comes, in verses 22 and 23, to a question and its answer. John's preaching was so fresh and demanding and startling that they asked him about his identity: "What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord."

A "voice . . . crying in the wilderness!" This vivid description of the preacher should have captured the imagination of men in that far-removed time, even as it should capture ours today. Does anyone need to tell you that we live in "wilderness" times—times of vast confusion and unrest? The plain truth is that business men are bewildered, scientists are alarmed, educators are at sea, youth is confused, parents are frustrated, and, to make it as bad as possible, many of our religious leaders are too puzzled and perplexed to give a lead.

Take youth bewilderment, for example. Some time ago a young man in New York, describing his personal predicament to a minister, declared: "What I need is something to believe in, something to hold to."

Now it is the business of the Christian minister to speak to that wistfulness, to give an

answer to that cry, to bring order into that confused soul. How is he going to do it? Obviously, his voice in this wilderness must be a voice of spiritual authority. Catch the thrill, if you will, of the sentence which follows our text. After saying, "There was a man sent from God whose name was John," the apostle declares, "The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe."

The authority of the preacher is that of a "witness." In this sense he is not the peddler of opinions; he is the announcer of facts. It is supremely his responsibility to testify to the fact of Jesus Christ, Who is here described as "the Light of men. Speaking of the unique message of the Christian Church, Dr. Herbert Farmer, in his book, "The Servant of the Word," says, "Its fundamental dogma . . . is that in Jesus Christ God came into human history, took flesh and dwelt among us, in a revelation of Himself which is unique, final, completely adequate, wholly indispensable for man's salvation." Dr. Farmer is entirely correct. If a man is not convinced that God has thus appeared in history, in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, he has no Christian witness. He may be a priest presiding over rituals, or a sectarian propagandist out to make additions to the membership of somebody's "church," or a parlor-pink reformer who vainly imagines that you can bring in the Golden Age by social reform or political revolution, but emphatically he is not, in any New Testament sense, a preacher.

This, then, is the authoritative witness of the man sent from God: that God has done something in history, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, which makes possible the forgiveness of sins and the renovation and regeneration of human character; and, further, that what God has done in Christ constitutes a personal claim upon every human soul, a demand for surrender and faith and the dedication of life to the Love that has redeemed us. That is what makes the task of the preacher so intimately personal, even when he is addressing a congregation of a thousand or two. It is what makes his message so thrillingly relevant to the actual needs of men everywhere.

III

Consider, furthermore, that when a man is sent from God, there will be at the center of his ministry an incomparable vision. That vision—which John both caught and shared—is described in the words of verse 29: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" It is an exclamation as magnificent as it is memorable.

The man of God who lives in the hallowed glory of this vision will be found saying two things—one to the people and one to himself. To the people he will say, If you want the principles of the kingdom of God to become effective in your life, and in the life of society, you must let this transfiguring vision of Jesus Christ and Him crucified smite you and cleanse you perpetually like the sunlight.

If anybody thinks that John was merely an eccentric hermit or an impractical mystic, he must have forgotten the Baptist's sermons on practical righteousness. Read the account of his preaching in the third chapter of Luke. He told the people to share their food and their clothing with the needy. He told the tax-collectors that they must cease gouging and impoverishing the citizens. He warned the sol-

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