

Examining John's Success

By Patrick Swayne

As someone blessed to be able to grow up attending the services of the Lord's church, I have occasionally heard those of the generations ahead of me speak fondly of the era of the "Gospel Meeting." Some were old enough to remember a time when these meetings had hundreds of visitors in attendance and last for at least a week. For all the tales I heard of these meetings though, I never heard anyone talk about an entire community coming out to hear the gospel. However, in the Bible we can find this impressive statement regarding the ministry of John the baptizer: "Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). While it's possible that "all" is a case of exaggeration for the sake of emphasis, it can certainly be said that John had an impact greater than anything even the oldest members of our congregations have seen. How did John have such a profound impact on his world? Mark's account provides at least four things for us to consider as we attempt to answer this question.

First, John's ministry was characterized by simple, direct teaching. John "came [...] preaching a baptism of repentance for remission of sins" (Mark 1:4). Three things can be noted from this simple summation statement offered by Mark. One, John taught about sin; he did not refer to wickedness as a genetic defect, a disease, or the byproduct of a sinful nature, but taught that wickedness was a choice. Two, John taught about repentance; he addressed the sin of his audience head on and guided them as to how they could "change their mind" (which is what repentance really means) about sin. Three, John taught about baptism; he was clear in prescribing a way his audience could take a first step towards God in faith.

Second, John did not surround his message with "pomp and circumstance," but with genuine humility. Often, we place a lot of emphasis on the packaging of the gospel – preachers must be dressed in formal attire, tracts must be in full color and on glossy paper, etc. However, Mark records, "Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6). John lived simply, and his simple life was not an act – Mark was clear to point out both his attire and his diet. This serves as a twofold reminder: 1) the message is more important than the medium, and 2) the message needs to be presented in a way that the audience needs and not always in the way that it expects. John's humble attire would have stood out in stark contrast to the clothing of the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:5).

Third, John exalted the Messiah above himself. John's message to those who followed him was, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose" (Mark 1:7). John saw himself as being so far below the Savior that he could not even reach up to touch his feet. Only when the message of Jesus Christ is exalted above the human messenger can the gospel truly shine through.

Fourth, John had an unshaking conviction in what he did. Mark tells us that Jesus public ministry began “after John was put in prison” (Mark 1:14). John did not commit any crime; later in Mark’s account, it is revealed that the reason for John’s imprisonment was preaching against Herod’s unlawful (according to God’s law) marriage (Mark 6:14-29). This eventually resulted in John being beheaded (Mark 6:27-28). However, the prospect of death and even death itself did not cause John to change or silence his message.

In order to be truly successful in achieving what the “Gospel Meeting” was originally all about – giving people the chance to “meet” the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ – we need to be mindful of what has worked in the past. This doesn’t mean we should recreate the forms of the past, whether it is wearing camel skin like John or setting up a tent for a week-long meeting as they did in the heyday of the “Gospel Meeting” era. What it does mean is that we should extract from successful efforts unchanging principles that can be successfully applied in any era.

John teaches us by example to teach directly and clearly, behave humbly, exalt Jesus, and exhibit an unwavering conviction in our message and the one who gave it. The gospel will always be “in season” at times and “out of season” at others (2 Timothy 4:2), so obedience to the message will not always be about what we do or don’t do. However, if we do as John did, we’ll give ourselves the best chance possible to achieve the success he did and give our audience the best chance possible to hear the saving message of Jesus Christ.