

Messianic complex: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Who am I? Who are you? Not the Messiah.

by [John K. Stendahl](#) in the [November 20, 2002](#) issue

"I am not the Messiah."

John the Baptist baptized Jesus. The synoptic Gospels all say so and the kerygma in Acts connects the beginning of Jesus' ministry with John's baptizing. But although Mark seems to find it quite right that Jesus of Nazareth should have been among those who heeded John's preaching, the three other evangelists appear concerned over the suggestion that Jesus was in some way a disciple of this other preacher.

In Matthew's account, John himself raised the issue and makes clear that he knows who is greater: "I ought to be the one baptized by you." Luke offers us another perspective, providing the story in which John is destined from before birth to be the prophet for his younger cousin. Matthew tells of Jesus explaining the baptism as a "fulfilling of all righteousness," and Luke describes the baptism as an occasion of Jesus' solidarity with others and his devotion to God.

The fourth evangelist, however, does not offer an explanation; in fact, he depicts no baptism at all. Instead John the Baptist speaks to the superior authority and divine agency of Jesus. The baptizer does not baptize Jesus but attests to his identity as the Christ and the Lamb of God. "[John] himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." He is explicit both about his own nonmessianic status and about the identity of the one who *is* anointed.

There may be nothing more to this than the eagerness of the evangelist to brook no rivals to the majestic and powerful Jesus he portrays. Though there are indications in all four of the Gospels that John's disciples constitute a sect distinct from the party of Jesus, in the fourth Gospel their leader says plainly, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Yet perhaps there is more for us here than that, more at stake than a coincidence of rivalry, loyalty and high Christology on the part of the evangelist. Maybe we are to

learn something more from John's clear insistence that he is not the Messiah. Maybe we are to learn to say that about ourselves.

I am not the Messiah.

That negative affirmation may seem obvious, but consider the degree to which faith draws us toward a more positive set of identifications. We are anointed people. We are in Christ and he lives in us. We are his agents, his hands in the world. We are called to emulate him, to cross the false and imprisoning boundaries of the world with God's transgressively redemptive love. We are to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. As Luther said, we are to be "little Christs," and in no small and timid way. We do have a messianic calling, don't we? We are needed and called to do what Jesus would be doing.

All of that is true and worthy to be recalled. But in John the Baptist's denial is the opposite point, and it too speaks needed truth. Who am I? Who are you? *Not the Messiah.*

Messianic ambitions for ourselves and messianic expectations of others are not just the quaint delusions of people certified as mentally ill. They are found in us and around us as we seek too much from others or wish to be too much to them. In a song that is at once poignant and cruel, Bob Dylan wrote one version of John's denial: "You say you're looking for someone who's never weak but always strong / to protect you and defend you whether you are right or wrong, / someone to open each and ev'ry door, but it ain't me, babe . . . / It ain't me you're looking for."

The messianic impulse, the assumed role of rescuer of the other, can be an egoism that diminishes and destroys. And the disempowering reciprocal expectation that this special person will be one's savior is not limited to the private and personal spheres of life. These are issues in international relations, in the interplay of social movements and classes, and in political appeals. We have seen dangerous faith placed in false and flawed messiahs. Many of us are praying very hard now over the particular messianic arrogance that often drives our own nation and its policies.

In this context, it is salutary that we should remember John's pointing away from himself and to Jesus. We are not, any nor all of us, the Messiah. That position has already been filled. To let Jesus be our Christ, our anointed savior and rescuer, may still entail seeking to be engaged in his saving work and mission—of course it

does—but it also commands us to humility, a letting go of our seducing desires either to rescue or to be rescued by others. We already have a Messiah, and he ain't us.

In John's Gospel, this needed humility is worked by focusing on the person of the beloved Jesus, the revelation that *he* is the Truth and the Way and the Life. He is the light to which both John the Baptist and John the evangelist were sent to testify.

In the synoptics, however, and especially in Mark, focusing on Jesus reveals something quite curious: it is a quality of the Messiah to do something very like what John the Baptist does here. Jesus points away from himself and seeks to deflect the messianic expectations put upon him. Trying to evade his superstar status and the attributions of glory, he points instead to what is near and soon and already stirring in the lives of those to whom he speaks.