

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

by [John K. Stendahl](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

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

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

The fourth evangelist does not offer such an explanation; in fact, he depicts no baptism at all. Instead John the Baptist there declares 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 also about the identity of the one who is anointed.

There may be nothing more to this than the eagerness of St. John to brook no rivals to the majestic and powerful Jesus he portrays. Though there are indications in all four Gospels that John the Baptist'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 here. Maybe we are to learn something more from John the Baptist's insistence that he is not the Messiah. Maybe we are to learn to say that about ourselves.

"I am not the Messiah."

The 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 to *Who am I?* or *Who are you?* That truth is "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 as we seek too much from others or wish to be too much to them. The messianic impulse, the assumed role of rescuer of the other, can diminish and destroy. And the reciprocal expectation that this special person will be a savior is not limited to the private spheres of life. These are issues in international relations, in social movements and classes, in political appeals. We see dangerous faith placed in false messiahs and messianic arrogance in nations and ideologies.

In this context, it is salutary that we should remember John the Baptist's pointing away from himself and to Jesus. We are not, any or 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 charismatic others. We already have a Messiah, and he ain't us.

In John's Gospel, this needed humility is worked by focusing on Jesus, 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 curious: it is a quality of the Messiah himself to do something very like what John the Baptist does. 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 stirring already in the lives

of those to whom he speaks.

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