

Free To Be

By Mike Feazell

Who would you say was the greatest man ever born? If you are a Christian, you might say, “Why, Jesus Christ, of course!”

Suppose Jesus himself were asked the question. What do you suppose he would say?

You might be surprised to know that Jesus did once attribute that distinction of greatness to a certain man. He told his disciples, “I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28).

Major celebrity

John the Baptizer was an amazingly popular figure. Everybody in Jerusalem and people from all over the Judean countryside went out to listen to him preach. But they didn’t just listen—they responded; they confessed their sins and were baptized! Not only was John popular, he was also successful.

For all his popularity and success, though, John was strikingly different from the average man. Many people respond to great popularity and success with a certain degree of pride and swagger. But from the beginning, John the Baptizer was different.

‘Not about me’

Perhaps you have seen the slogan, “It’s not about me.”

That was the root of John’s message. He preached about someone else, someone who would come after him whose sandals John did not consider himself even worthy to tie.

John wasn’t interested in the limelight. He wasn’t interested in the praise or admiration of others. He was interested in preparing the way for someone else, and he didn’t let personal ambition get in the way of doing his job well.

Free to be

John was a baptizer. Among the preparations he made for the coming of Christ was the task of preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It was into this kind of baptism that the people listening to him entered.

Baptism was not an invention of John, nor was it unique to the Israelites. From ancient times, baptism

was a well-known symbol, an outward sign, of a new spiritual birth, of entering into a new form of life.

For those whom John baptized, it marked their confession that they were sinners. When we admit we are sinners, we are laying aside our human pride and confessing the truth of what we really are. But we are not making that confession blindly. We are making it in the light of the revealed knowledge that God loves us immeasurably, and that he has made atonement for us in Jesus Christ.

In other words, because God has revealed to us that he is for us, we are free in Christ both to fearlessly acknowledge our sinfulness before God, and free to accept God’s gift of atonement and his new creation of us in Jesus Christ.

We’re free to be who God has already made us to be. Because we have met with the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we can entrust ourselves to him fully and without reservation. Safe in his love, we can give over to him even the crushing burdens of our darkest sins and fears.

New creation

Within that confession of our sinfulness is our recognition that we need God’s forgiveness. We admit that we are rebels who have betrayed God’s love, and we place ourselves at his mercy, having now renounced our rebellion and pledged faithful obedience.

But actually becoming that new person, entering that new life, turning over that new leaf, is another question entirely. When we try to do that, we find ourselves failing—fighting our old ways, but losing so often we can easily fall into despair.

That is, unless we trust God to be who he really is for us in Jesus Christ!

In Christ, we are a new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15). And we are set free (Galatians 5:1)! God has freed us to be the new, redeemed, healed and complete persons he has made us to be in Christ. We can use that gift of freedom to hear and obey our heavenly Father, or we can reject it and continue to live as though God had not made us his covenant partner, as though he had not made us the beloved recipients of his overflowing grace in Christ (verse 13).

No longer must we live in spiritual bondage, struggling in vain to grasp here and there a little respect, dignity, security and love in this heartless world. No longer must everything in life be about us and our

anxieties about not getting all the things we think we want. No longer must we live in opposition to God, ourselves and our neighbor.

The Holy Spirit both gives us ears to hear God's command and provides us our new life in Christ. In that new life provided by the Holy Spirit, we are free to choose to be the person in Christ God has already chosen us to be. To do otherwise is not freedom, but a return to bondage.

In Christ

All this repenting, believing and passing through the waters of baptism have meaning only because God gives them meaning. Only because the Son of God took the indescribable action of becoming one of us—living sinlessly as one of us, dying on the cross as one of us, being resurrected as one of us, ascending to and being received by the Father as one of us—does any of it make any sense at all.

It makes sense because God, in his divine freedom to be who he wants to be for our sakes, makes it make sense. We are saved by God's grace—his love, his utter faithfulness to his redemptive purpose for the humanity he loves so much that in Christ he took humanity itself into himself.

A lesson in humility

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus

Christ, and through Christ to reconcile to himself all things in heaven and earth through Christ's death (see Colossians 1:19-20).

That is the way God chose to make us into a new creation. The Son of God took humanity into himself, and in his perfect obedient sacrifice of love, he reconciled humanity to God. It is to this God, the God who in immeasurable love humbled himself to take all our burdens upon himself, including our ugliest sins, and turn us into a new and beautiful creation in his Son, that we owe complete allegiance and obedience.

John's ministry was a ministry of humility. Baptism is an expression of humility. The Son of God humbled himself to become one of us for our sakes. And the new life in Christ that is given to us by our Creator and Redeemer is a life of humility.

It's not about me. If it were about me, what would I do? How can I heal my own past, my present and future? How can I redeem my own faults, sins, betrayals and rebellion? How can I secure my future or the future of those I care about?

No, thank God, it's not about me. It's all about Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate (in the flesh) for our sakes. He is the one who heals our personal history, redeems our every dark sin, secures our future and gives us deep peace and rest. co

In Other Words

Hand in Hand

By Kalengule Kaoma

I enjoy watching people at airports and bus stations. Someone is reading a book. A few people are reading newspapers and magazines. Over there, a lady is cleaning her eyeglasses. Then a young man sits down to eat a quick meal. All the busy people are using their hands!

There is a wonderful saying about hands in the Ndebele language of the Nguni people of Matabeleland Province, Zimbabwe. The saying is *Izandla ziya gezana*. Taken literally, it states the obvious. "It takes one hand to wash the other."

"*Izandla ziya gezana*," however, is used to refer to a number of social situations. For example, it refers to the expectation that people in communities should help each other. When one neighbor helps another, the one who is helped will go and help yet another. One act of kindness spreads to others. It takes one to help another.

Another application of "*Izandla ziya gezana*" is when everyone comes together to rally behind a community member who is in need. In times of grief, disaster, weddings, or celebration, the Ngunis come together to support one another. They say "*Izandla ziya*



gezana," with the meaning, "we are all in this together."

Just as hands work together for a common purpose, the Nguni people believe that working together will accomplish much. "*Izandla ziya gezana*" encourages people to join hands with others in order to produce bigger results.

There are many things that need our attention in the communities where we live. Why not look around and find something to do for your neighbor? There is wisdom in what the Nguni say, "*Izandla ziya*

gezana." We can do a lot more if we work together. After all, as one hand washes another, both are connected to the same body. In the same way, all humans are connected to one another in Jesus Christ, in whom we all live and move and have our being.

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