

RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP (LESSON 13)

The New Testament opens after 400 years with no prophetic voice. Malachi closed the Old Testament by predicting the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 4:2) and the coming of a messenger (3:1) who would introduce the Messiah and prepare Israel to receive Him. The New Testament begins with this messenger. He was called John the Baptist (Mark 1:2), literally John the Baptizer. John was eccentric. He came after the manner of Elijah. He was a loner. He didn't thrive on public opinion. He didn't think like the religious leaders of his day. He wasn't politically correct. His preaching was like fire. To understand what John did to disciple men, one must first understand his world. William MacDonald describes him. "What kind of a man was John? Today he would be called a fanatic and an ascetic. His home was the desert. His clothing, like Elijah's was the coarsest and the simplest... He was scarcely luxurious. He was a man who subordinated all things to the glorious task of making Christ known... We learn here that simplicity should characterize all who are servants of the Lord." John immediately introduced a practice that is not found in the Old Testament (at least overtly). He preached the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4-5). John introduced the idea of baptism to the New Testament reader, but he didn't introduce it to the New Testament people. The ceremony of baptism had been practiced by the Jews for centuries. John's baptism specifically was a preparatory act for the coming of the Messiah. The Jews baptized proselytes as a sign of separation from their old life and as an identification with the Jewish faith. W. E. Vine points out that Baptism comes from the Greek verb "baptisma" consisting of the process of immersion, submersion, and emergence from "bapto", meaning to dip. He further states that the baptized person was closely bound to, or became the property of the one into whose name he was baptized. From the time of their baptism, Jewish proselytes were considered the property of the synagogue which virtually claimed ownership of their lives. When the Jews baptized a person they were publicly requiring an allegiance to the Jewish community. When John baptized a person, he was procuring a commitment in advance that was tantamount to ownership and lordship of the coming Christ. To be baptized in the name of Christ signifies a whole-hearted belief that will produce a whole-hearted allegiance to Jesus. Baptism is a part of the larger idea of discipleship. It is a public first step of identifying with Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19). John the Baptist was a radical. To follow him was radical. John, however, would introduce his converts to Jesus, the greatest radical of all.