Sometimes the role of a Christian is to stand alone – especially true in the presentation of the gospel – you will be like a voice crying in the wilderness – that was the ministry of John the Baptist.

Luke 3 is 18 years after the end of Luke 2 when Jesus was 12-years old – Luke 3:23 says He began His ministry at age 30 – the whole chapter contains the ministry of John the Baptist – Matthew 11:11 – “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” – John’s role was to:

- Clarify the issues – prepare the hearts of the people through a rejection of religion and a call to repentance – Luke 3:3 – “And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”
- Introduce Jesus – through His baptism – Luke adds His genealogy
- Serve as a bridge between Old Testament and New Testament – Luke 16:16 – “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.”

The advance of the gospel is specific – it comes at a specific time, in specific words, to specific people, with a specific message

I. A SPECIFIC TIME

A. The national scene – gives credibility to historicity

Julius Caesar died in 44 B.C. – after a long power struggle, Caius Octavius (Octavian) his grand nephew, adopted son, and intended heir, gained power when he defeated Marc Antony, his chief rival to the throne, at the battle of Actium in 31 B.C. when Antony and Cleopatra both committed suicide – two years later the Senate honored him with the title “August” (religious title signifying religious veneration meaning “exalted one”) – he dominated the Mediterranean area – brought the Pax Romana – ordered a census over “…all the inhabited earth…” in Luke 2:1 – he ruled until A.D. 14

When Augustus was established as emperor, the Senate did so with the idea that his powers would cease upon his death and not be passed on to his heirs – he got around this by appointing a co-regent, through whom he planned to yield his powers – when the first co-regent died, he conferred co-regency upon his son-in-law, Tiberius – then adopted him and made him his heir – the timing of his ascension to the throne is unclear – if 15th year is dated from the time Tiberius was made co-regent in A.D. 11, then the 15th year would be A.D. 25 or 26 – if the time is dated from the death of Augustus in A.D. 14, the date would be A.D. 28 or 29 – plus, if Luke recognized the Jews’ practice of reckoning a ruler’s term from the Jewish New Year following his accession, then the date could be A.D. 30.

B. The local scene – four leaders

- Pontius Pilate – when Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided among his sons – Archelaus was given rule over Judea – cruel king – banished in A.D. 6 – series of governors followed – Pilate was the fifth governor over Judea – he ruled from A.D. 26-36 – had upset the Jews before by entering Temple area with banners with Roman pictures on them – John 18:37 – “I have come to the world to testify to the truth.” – Pilate asked, “What is truth?” – eventually sacrificed truth for politics.
• Herod – tetrarch (ruler of a 1/4th) of Galilee and Perea – known as Herod Antipas – full brother of Archelaus, the one who killed John – ruled from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39 – his wife Herodias (his niece, who had been married to his brother Philip and was also the sister of Herod Agrippa I), went to Rome after Agrippa I (nephew) was given title of King to ask for the same title – at the same time he arrived in Rome, the new Emperor, Caligula, was reading a letter from Agrippa saying Antipas was in league with Parthians to overthrow Rome – Antipas was banished to Lyons in Gaul, along with Herodias.

• Philip – tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis – another son of Herod – rebuilt Paneas at head of Jordan River – renamed it Caeserea Philippi in honor of Caesar and himself – good ruler who cared for his people – ruled from 4 B.C. to A.D. 34.

• Lysanias – we know nothing more about him

C. The religious scene

Annas and Caiaphas were high priests – According to Josephus, Annas served as high priest A.D. 6–15 then deposed by Roman officials – retained de facto power – five sons and Caiaphas, his son-in-law succeeded him – Caiaphas was the actual high priest during the time Luke describes, but Annas still controlled the office – Jesus was taken to Annas first after His arrest, then to Caiaphas

There were 20,000 priests in Israel during this time – most were corrupt – Jesus overthrew moneychangers in Temple twice – they had reduced worship to a business

II. A SPECIFIC WORD

Luke 3:2 – “...the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.”

God’s Word is first of all a proclamation – “The word of the Lord came” was used 110 times in Old Testament – it came directly to every leader in Old Testament – Abraham, Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, Isaiah, etc. – and every time it was something specific:

• Abraham – don’t be afraid
• Samuel – pick a king
• David – your hands are bloody – you can’t build My Temple
• Elijah – go and challenge Ahab
• Came to Jeremiah 21 times

God continued that in the New Testament:

• All Scripture is “inspired by God” – 2 Timothy 3:16
• It is given by the Holy Spirit in spiritual thoughts combined with spiritual words – 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 – “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.”
• God intended every word to be taught – Matthew 28:20 – “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...” – Acts 20:27 – “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose (thoughts, deliberations, counsel) of God.”
• It is sufficient for all man’s needs – 2 Timothy 3:17 – “so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

Today – much of the impact of the revealed Word of God is being cut away – the “Emerging Church” movement (Brian McLaren in A New Kind of Christian):
• Changes some key words – “repent” becomes “rethink” or “reinvent” your life – “sin” becomes “moral variabilities” – evangelism becomes “dancing in rhythm with God”
• Says we can’t really be sure about what the gospel really is because we must recognize the mystery of God
• We aren’t to rely on the words of Scripture as much as doing the deeds
• We can’t present it as ultimate truth because it will offend the post-modern seeker of truth

A voice in the wilderness means giving a specific word

III. A SPECIFIC PERSON

God’s plan is not an aura – an essence – it’s not some kind of vague atmosphere – it is a specific message, usually mediated through a specific person – Luke 3:2 – “…the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.”

A. God’s purpose

How does God prepare the hearts of man for the Gospel? – He began the Messianic journey through fulfilling a 700-year-old prophecy – Isaiah 40:3-5 – cf. Luke 1:17 – now, 30 years later God began to fulfill His purpose for John

Why did God designate John to prepare the way for the Messiah? Why did Jesus have to be born a baby and wait 30 years to begin preaching? Why didn’t He just bring Jesus on the scene and let Him start preaching? – He wanted to make sure the Jews knew when the Messiah was coming:

• The picture of Isaiah 40:3-5 is the Jews returning home after Babylonian captivity
• But a fuller fulfillment was promised them in Malachi 3:1 – “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His Temple and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming…”

We don’t see forerunners of the Messiah today – because the Messiah has already come – but we do see people advancing the cause of the gospel before it reaches people’s hearts.

• A purpose – John “…came into all the district around the Jordan….” – Luke 3:3 – he purposed to go
• A plan – John went “…preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Luke 3:3

B. His plan

God’s plan is always to make the words of Scripture known

• Great Commission – Matthew 28:20 – make disciples by “…teaching them everything I have commanded you…”
• The instruction of the church is to “preach the Word” – 2 Timothy 4:2
• The “foolishness of preaching” is that which brings man to salvation – 1 Corinthians 1:18

IV. A SPECIFIC MESSAGE

A. Preparing the way

Luke 3:4-6 – the idea is to prepare the way for the coming of the King – Luke 1:17 – “It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah…. ” – in ancient times, when a King was going to visit an area, a courier would go in advance – people would clean up the town, fix the roads, paint and spruce things up to get ready – the passage from Isaiah 40:3-5 gives the picture of preparing for the Messiah – path made straight – ravines filled in – mountains carved out – rough roads smoothed – speaking figuratively of preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah with the message of salvation.

The misconceptions and erroneous ideas people hold must be swept away before people can understand the gospel:

• Rejection of religious leaders – Luke 3:7 – “…You brood of vipers….”
• Removing the prop of their Jewishness – Luke 3:8 – “…do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our Father’, for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up
children to Abraham." – if God was interested in bringing only Jews into the kingdom, He could do that by making the stones into ethnic Jews!

People don’t like to hear this message – often it is criticized as “negative” or “narrow.”

B. Proclaiming the message

Luke 3:3 – The specific message John preached was “...a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...” – radically different than what they had been taught.

The gospel of repentance is this:

• There is a righteous, holy God – His standard never moves, He doesn’t cut corners, He doesn’t “wink” at sin – God is so serious that He often killed people who tried to distort His message in the Old Testament – Aaron’s sons offered up “strange fire” in Leviticus 10:1 – they threw incense in the fire to try and imitate God’s act in Leviticus 9:24 where fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering on the altar – “...when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.” – Leviticus 10:2 – God said, “You want fire?” – “And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. – and God said, “… By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.’ So Aaron, therefore, kept silent.” Leviticus 10:3 – good call!

• Our sin separates us from God – the guilt, burnt, drink, meal, wave – all were basically sin offerings that were made to cover sin – sin was serious! – Hebrews 9:22 – “…without shedding blood, there is no forgiveness” – God’s justice demands that He hate sin and evil – in fact, Scripture says He hates the sinner – Psalm 5:5,6 – “The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all who do iniquity. You destroy those who speak falsehood; The LORD abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit.” – Leviticus 20:23 – “you shall not follow the customs of the nation which I will drive out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I have abhorred them.” – today, most presentations of the gospel ignore sin – the gospel has become “Jesus loves you and He wants to give you a new life” – but a gospel that doesn’t deal with sin is not the gospel.

• God’s grace bridges the gap between His law (which demands justice) and His love (which saves) – Romans 5:20 – “…where sin increased, grace abounded all the more...” – Ephesians 2:4-5 – “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us ... made us alive together with Christ (with grace you have been saved)...”

• We embrace the gospel through faith – Ephesians 2:8-9 – “For by grace (God’s gift of something you don’t deserve) you have been saved through faith; and that (faith) not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

QUESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

1. Why do think Luke included all the specific historical information in Luke 3:1?

2. What is significant about the timing of the words, “the word of God came to John” (Luke 3:2) during the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas?

3. What is John’s role according to Luke 1:17 and Isaiah 40:3-5? What importance do you attach to this role?

4. Read Matthew 3:1-12. Describe John’s appearance and message. Why do you think it was so austere?

5. How did John’s message of “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” different from the religious message of the times?

6. What can we learn from the ministry of John?