

## CHRIST MUST INCREASE

*3<sup>22</sup>After this, Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside; there he spent some time with them, and baptized. <sup>23</sup>Now John also was baptizing at Enon near Salim, because there was plenty of water there; people were coming and were being baptized. <sup>24</sup>John had not yet been put into prison. <sup>25</sup>Now an argument arose between John's disciples and a [certain] Jew over the matter of purification rites. <sup>26</sup>So they came to John, and said to him, Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, the one about whom you testified, he is baptizing and everyone is coming to him. <sup>27</sup>John replied, A man can only receive what is given to him from heaven. <sup>28</sup>You yourselves can testify that I said, I am not the Christ; rather, I have been sent ahead of him. <sup>29</sup>The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands by and listens for him, greatly rejoices when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That is my joy, and it is now fulfilled. <sup>30</sup>He must increase, but I must decrease. <sup>31</sup>The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and he speaks of the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. <sup>32</sup>He testifies of what he has seen and heard; but no one accepts his testimony. <sup>33</sup>[But] whoever has accepted his testimony can affirm that God is true; <sup>34</sup>for the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, because he gives the Spirit [to him] without measure. <sup>35</sup>The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. <sup>36</sup>Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; but whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, on the contrary, the wrath of God remains upon him. (Jn. 3:22-36)*

### **Introduction**

There was once a young man who attended Yale University. He was a very brilliant young man who had a special interest in the natural sciences. He was well aware of his abilities and had a desire to make a name for himself, not only in America but internationally. But after coming to personally receive Christ as his Savior, he experienced a change not only in the direction of his life but also in the whole orientation of his life. Although he continued to retain a keen interest in the natural sciences, from now on a new master-interest possessed him: the desire to enjoy the Word of God. But even more significantly, his objective was no longer his own self-exaltation; it was now the glory of God. He resolved never to do anything except what would promote the glory of God (Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards, a New Biography*, The Banner of Truth Trust, P.O. Box 621 Carlisle PA, 1987, pp. 41-43.)

Sad to say, few men so conscientiously and so zealously seek to promote the glory of God, as did Jonathan Edwards. Nevertheless, this orientation to promote the glory of Christ, however feeble it may be, and however much it may need to be cultivated, is the true orientation of the Christian's life. Because of our respective identities—that is to say, because of who Christ is and because of who we as Christians are in relation to Christ—Christ must increase, but we must decrease.

In the passage presently before us we meet a man who vividly serves as a model for us as Christians: John the Baptist. When Jesus and His disciples left Jerusalem they

spent some time in the Judean countryside; there great multitudes came flocking to Jesus. When the disciples of John saw what was happening, how the crowds were multiplying around Jesus, they feared for their own master's popularity and reputation. John responded to their concern with the beautiful words, "*He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease*" (Jn. 3:30.) Christ must increase, but I must decrease. This is the true orientation of the Christian's life.

## **I. Christ Must Increase, Because to Him Belongs the Pre-Eminence (Jn. 3:31)**

Referring to Jesus, John declares, "*The one who comes from above is above all ... The one who comes from heaven is above all*" (vs. 31.) By the grace of God, John had come to know and appreciate the true identity of Jesus Christ. As noted in a previous lesson, the Apostle Paul further explains the true identity of Jesus in Philippians 2:6, "*existing in the form of God, he did not consider the being on an equality with God a thing to be exploited.*"

By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul tells us that Christ Jesus exists in "*the form of God.*" The Greek word translated "*form*" (μορφή) was a philosophical term, not referring to the external appearance of a thing—as we would be inclined to use the term, speaking of "the form of a thing,"—but to the essence, or better, the specific character, of the thing or person. The New Testament commentator, Jac. J. Muller, writes, "by *form of God* is meant ... His divine nature, which is inseparable from His person and in which the Divine Being realizes Himself [i.e.; knows and expresses Himself] in His ... inherent, divine glory and godly attributes" (Jac. J. Muller, "The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, pp. 78-79.) The New Testament scholar, John Murray, concurs, "the *form of God* would refer to the sum of those characterizing qualities that mark God off as specifically God" (John Murray, *Christology*, unpublished classroom notes, Westminster Theological Seminary Library, Philadelphia, p. 36.) By way of illustration: the "form" of an apple is not merely the shape of the apple, it includes all those qualities that make an apple an apple and distinguish it from every other fruit and every other thing in all of creation. Thus, "*the form of God*" includes all those attributes and qualities and characteristics that make God what He is, and that distinguish Him from everyone and everything else. When the apostle informs us that our Lord Jesus Christ was "*existing in the form of God*" he is telling us in the strongest possible terms that the Lord Jesus Christ possesses all the attributes and the very identity of God—all that defines God defines Christ Jesus. Paul then proceeds to inform us that Christ Jesus possesses "*an equality with God.*" The previous term, "*the form of God,*" speaks to us about the reality and the fullness of Jesus Christ's deity. This next term, "*being on an equality with God,*" speaks to us about the dignity and the honor Jesus Christ possesses by virtue of His absolute deity, the honor He possesses because He is God.

Jesus Christ really is the One who *"came from above;"* He is God; and as such, *"he is above all"* (i.e.; all the pre-eminence rightfully belongs to Him. In his day, John the Baptist recognized this and responded accordingly:

*John bears testimony about him, crying out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me; because he was before me.'" (Jn. 1:15)*

*John answered them by saying, "I am baptizing with water; but among you stands someone whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>namely, the one who comes after me. I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals." (Jn. 1:26-27)*

*He must increase, but I must decrease. (Jn. 3:30)*

The people of this world seek to usurp the pre-eminence and the glory for themselves. Note, for example, the attitude of King Nebuchadnezzar: *"The king said, 'Is not this great Babylon, which I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?'" (Dan. 4:30.)* Consider the thinking of the men who built the tower of Babel, *"Then they said, 'Come, let us build a city for ourselves with a tower whose top shall reach unto heaven; so that we may make a name for ourselves'" (Gen. 11:4a.)*

But it is Jesus Christ who must increase, because to Him belongs the pre-eminence. John 3:31 serves to explain John 3:30,

*"The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and he speaks of the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all" (Jn. 3:31); that is why "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30.)*

This is the Christian's true orientation, namely, that Christ be exalted. David understood this in his day, and prayed accordingly,

*... David blessed Jehovah in the presence of the whole assembly; and David said, May you be blessed, O Jehovah, the God of our father Israel, forever and ever. <sup>11</sup>To you, O Jehovah, belongs the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Jehovah, and you are exalted as head above all. (1 Chron. 29:11)*

The Psalmist expressed the same devout attitude when he prayed, *"Not unto us, O Jehovah, not unto us, but unto your name be the glory, because of your lovingkindness and truth" (Psl. 115:1.)*

Do we truly recognize and acknowledge who Jesus Christ is? Do we bow before Him in worship and praise and adoration?

## II. Christ Must Increase, Because We are His Servants (Jn. 3:28)

In John 3:28 John the Baptist re-affirms his own role and position in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ: *"You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ; rather, I have been sent ahead of him'"* (Jn. 3:28.) John admits and testifies that he himself is not the Christ (i.e.; the promised Messiah); rather, he has been sent to prepare the way for the Christ—in other words, he is Christ's servant. In verse 29 John compares himself to the best man at a wedding and he views Christ in the role of the bridegroom: the best man's duty is to serve the bridegroom.

Likewise, as Christians, we must realize that Christ has redeemed us to be His own possession: *"our Savior Jesus Christ; <sup>14</sup>... gave himself for us, so that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people to be his own possession, [a people] zealous for good works"* (Titus 2:13-14.) One aspect or dimension of our identity as a Christian is that we are servants of Christ; as the Apostle Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:15, *"he died for all, so that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and rose again for their sakes."*

Service to Christ is to be rendered in every area of our lives, *"Therefore, whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"* (1 Cor. 10:31.) We are to serve Christ by fulfilling our God-given roles in marriage: *"Wives, [submit] to your own husbands as to the LORD ... <sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her"* (Eph. 5:22,25.) We are to serve Christ by fulfilling our God-given roles within the family: *"Children, obey your parents in the LORD, for this is right. <sup>2</sup>Honor your father and mother ... <sup>4</sup>And, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath; but nurture them with the discipline and instruction of the LORD"* (Eph. 6:1-4.) We are to serve Christ by fulfilling our God-given roles in the workplace:

*Servants, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, as though you were serving Christ; <sup>6</sup>not only to win their favor when they are watching you, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. <sup>7</sup>Render service to them with good will, as [rendering service] unto the LORD and not unto men; <sup>8</sup>knowing that each person will be paid back by the LORD for whatever good thing he does. (Eph. 6:5-8)*

*Masters, do for your servants that which is just and fair; knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. (Col. 4:1)*

One aspect of service to Christ is rendering a ministry of humble service to fellow Christians:

*After he had washed their feet, he put on his clothes and sat down again. [Then] he asked them, Do you know what I have done to you? <sup>13</sup>You call me, Teacher, and, Lord; and you speak correctly; for so I am. <sup>14</sup>If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>I*

*have given you an example, so that you also should do as I have done to you.*  
(Jn. 13:12-15)

We acknowledge Christ's pre-eminence and give Him the pre-eminence when we render service to Him. We do so when we render service directly to Him in the form of submission to His commandments, thereby acknowledging His lordship and the fact that that divine lordship indeed extends over every aspect of our lives. We also render service to Him by rendering service to fellow Christians who bear His name and in whom His Holy Spirit dwells:

*Then the King shall say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; <sup>36</sup>I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you took care of me; I was in prison, and you came to visit me. <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will respond to him by saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you? Or thirsty, and gave you a drink? <sup>38</sup>And when did we see you a stranger, and take you in? Or naked, and clothe you? <sup>39</sup>And when did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you? <sup>40</sup>Then the King shall answer and say to them, I tell you the truth, Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me. (Matt. 25:34-40)*

Again, we render service unto Christ when we faithfully representing Him before the world and offer Him to the people of the world with whom we come into contact. The Apostle Paul urges us as Christ's disciples, "*become blameless and pure, children of God without blemish, in the midst of a perverse and depraved generation, among whom you shine like stars in the universe, <sup>16</sup>firmly holding the word of life*" (Phil. 2:15-16.)

### **III. Christ Must Increase, And that Should Bring Us Happiness (Jn. 3:29)**

In seeing Christ gain the pre-eminence that is rightfully His, John the Baptist describes himself as being filled with joy:

*The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands by and listens for him, greatly rejoices when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That is my joy, and it is now fulfilled. (Jn. 3:29)*

The very fact that Christ receives the pre-eminence and the glory that are rightfully His fills the Christian's heart with joy:

*And I heard what sounded like the voice of a great multitude, and like the sound of many waters, and like the sound of mighty thunders, saying, Hallelujah; for the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. <sup>7</sup>Let us rejoice and be*

*exceedingly glad, and let us give him the glory; for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his wife has prepared herself.* (Rev. 19:6-7)

As Christians, we should be able to identify with the joy of the hymn writer, Frances R. Havergal, as she expresses her emotion at the thought of and anticipation of Christ's coming to reign in glory:

You are coming, O my Savior,  
You are coming, O my King,  
In Your beauty all resplendent;  
In Your glory all transcendent;  
Well may we rejoice and sing.  
Coming! In the opening east  
Herald brightness slowly swells;  
Coming! O my glorious Priest,  
Hear we not Your golden bells?

O the joy to see You reigning,  
You, my own beloved Lord!  
Every tongue Your Name confessing,  
Worship, honor, glory, blessing  
Brought to You with glad accord.  
You, my Master and my Friend,  
Vindicated and enthroned;  
Unto earth's remotest end  
Glorified, adored, and owned.

## **Conclusion**

Christ must increase, but I must decrease. This is the true orientation of the Christian's life. Consider the Apostle Paul's divinely inspired perspective on life, he testifies, *"to me to live is Christ"* (Phil. 1:21a.) Consider, too, his divinely inspired perspective on the trials we as Christians may encounter: it is Paul's *"earnest expectation and hope, that in no way shall I be put to shame; on the contrary ... as always, so now also, Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether by life, or by death"* (Phil. 1:20.)

Christ must increase, but I must decrease. Is this the theme of our life? Is this a process that is taking place in our lives to an ever-greater degree?