

1. Background of John the Baptist

Mark says that the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ begins with John the Baptist. "This is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (v. 1)." We interpret the Greek word 'Euangelion', which is translated as good news, as the gospel. There is a story that Jesus, the Son of God and the Messiah, tells, and that story is very good news. There is a person who preached the Good News first, and he introduces himself as John the Baptist. The story of John the Baptist's life and the story of the life he created are in the same direction as the contents of the gospel that Christ (Messiah) will unfold in the future. In order for us to understand the story of John the Baptist, we must first look at the history of Israel.

When you think of Greek Empero, is there a king that comes to mind? Who is it? Americans still like it so much that they give the king's name to their sons and daughters. That's Alexander the Great. After Alexander's sudden death, Greece splits into four kingdoms. One of them was the Seleucid Empire, which ruled over Syria. Prior to the Seleucid dynasty, the areas inhabited by Jews were governed autonomously by priests. Because empires like Assyria, Babylon, and Persia only received taxes and left them to rule autonomously. However, among them, the Seleucid dynasty, which appeared after Alexander's death, began to directly rule Palestine. In particular, Antiochus VI Epiphanes decides to completely destroy the religion of Israel. Antiochus Epiphanes IV forced the Israelites to serve the Greek gods in order to stop serving the God Yahweh. In the temple of Israel, the gods of Hella are put in, and circumcision is prohibited. And when the Israelites hold a sacrifice, they force them to slaughter a pig and eat pork. Isn't the pig the most hated animal by the Israelites? At this time, there is a resistance movement centered on the priests, and the representative resistance movement is the Maccabeus Revolt. It happened in 167 BC. Maccabee means a hammer, and it was the nickname of Judah, the son of Mattathias. This revolt succeeds, and Israel is ruled by the descendants of the Maccabees instead of the Seleucids. The descendants of the Maccabees are called the Hasmonean dynasty. The forces that actively helped the Maccabi Rebellion was a group called "Hassidim". The word Hassidim is derived from 'Hesed', which means mercy or love, and means "the godly one." However, the Hassidim are very disappointed to see that the Hasmonean dynasty seizes both priestly and political power. He felt that the Hasmonean dynasty had fallen. This godly group, the Hassidim, leave the temple in Jerusalem and scatter to the provinces. These Hassidim are divided into two categories. The group of priests of Hassidim begins an ascetic community life in the wilderness around the Dead Sea, such as Qumran. This group of priests is called the Essene people. And the other type of Hassidim were the Pharisees people who were in charge of practicing and teaching the law centered on local synagogues. The Pharisees were a group of laymen, not priests.

The reason why I pointed out such a long history is to understand John's background. Many people think that John may have lived a monastic ascetic life in the wilderness as an Essene. The Essenes people lived a community life in this kind of wilderness and lived an ascetic life cut off from the world. They were people who never married, did not own private property, and lived a monastic life. It is said that the Essenes wanted to continue their movement by adopting children from priests because they did not have marriage or sex life. John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, had John in their old age, so they may have died while he was a child. So it is assumed that John was entrusted and raised by the Essene community.

2. John the Baptist

It doesn't matter whether John is an Essene or not. His life is only similar to that of the Essenes. The important thing is that John is creating new movements unheard of in Israel's history. That the movement has its roots in the Essenes. The movement that John started in Israel was "Baptism". Then you ask what does baptism have to do with the Essenes? Archaeologists find traces of Essenes living as a community in the Qumran area. Ritual baths were also found there, where rituals of purification were performed by dipping and washing the body in water. Essene people went into a bath to cleanse themselves from sin and to keep themselves clean. The baptism of John the Baptist is very similar to the purification ceremony of the Essenes.

The reason why John is called the Baptist is because John performed a new rite called the baptism of repentance to the Jews. Even in the Old Testament, there is no law requiring baptism anywhere. Rather, baptism is a ceremony that goes against the Old Testament. In the Mosaic Law, we are told to offer sacrifices to wash away sins and purify them. The only way to repent was to kill an animal and offer it as a sacrifice. By the way, John the Baptist is doing a new ceremony of repentance against this law. Baptism was a ceremony performed to receive Gentiles into the

Jewish community. But Jews are receiving that baptism. For what reason did John the Baptist perform baptism to the Jews? And what does this baptism have to do with the gospel, the good news?

3. The Form and Nature of Repentance

We have worship services every Sunday. Pray to God, praise God, and listen to His Word. There are rituals or ceremonies in the religion we practice, but they have a certain form, and the form (style) is a means to pursue a certain essence. If I had to choose between form and essence, I would choose essence. The same goes for repentance. Repentance also has a form and an essence. What is the nature of repentance? I could say three things. First, I am heartbroken and remorseful for my wrongdoing. Second, the essence of repentance is not only to feel sorry for the person who has suffered damage due to my wrong actions, but also to compensate for the damage. Third, the essence of repentance is to move in the opposite direction through a resolution and determination not to commit such a sin again.

In the law of Moses, the form that embraced the essence of repentance was the redemptive sacrifice. It is to pursue the essence of repentance while performing the form of the ransom sacrifice. However, as time passes, only the form remains and the essence disappears. It has become a religion with no substance and only a shell. There are also the opposite cases. There were also people who had a heart to repent and possessed the essence of repentance, but did not have the financial power to buy sacrifices. People like this were pointed at as bad people who did not even know how to repent. Religious leaders often used tactics like these.

After the Hasmonean dynasty, the Herod family began to rule Israel. It is said that the average term of office for the high priest was 5 years while the Herod family ruled Israel for 100 years. Originally, the high priest served for life. The previous high priest must die before the next high priest can be established. But in the Gospels, it says that "the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes" resisted Jesus. The high priest is in the plural. Because he appointed a person who brought a lot of bribes to the Herod family as the high priest and appointed many people. The bribes they paid were enormous amounts of money, about \$1 million to \$2 million in today's money.

If I became the high priest by paying a bribe of one to two million dollars, where would all the attention be focused during my service as high priest? Shouldn't we recover more than the bribe paid? That is why, from that time on, these high priests put up the name of God and became frantic about making money. One of the means of making money was usury with the offerings or tithes that people paid. Their second means of earning money was selling sacrifices at high prices. If you go to the general market, you can buy a sheep for 100 dollars, but the temple sells it for 300 dollars. But is there any choice not to buy it? Buying a sheep from the market is considered unclean. Under the law, only those things recognized as clean by the priests could be sacrificed. If people bring animals they raise at home or animals bought in the general market, the priests say that they are all unclean. People have no choice but to buy sacrifices at the temple. In a way, the temple was doing religious business.

Luke 3:2 says, "Annas and Caiaphas were the Jewish high priests. At that time God spoke to Zechariah's son John." Annas and Caiaphas are father-in-law and son-in-law. He is holding the position of high priest in one family. Luke does not mention Annas and Caiaphas without meaning. The opposing forces of John the Baptist were the temple system represented by the forces of the high priests. The baptism movement was a holy movement to counter them and restore the essence of repentance and, furthermore, the essence of religion. John the Baptist's battle was a battle of substance against form. The fight against the temple system that has lost its essence and remains only a shell is the beginning of this gospel.

The reason why the religious business of the chief priests is evil is that they use people as means. It is to think of people as a means to satisfy one's own desires. It is a very evil act to use people to satisfy one's own interests. Because man is a being made in the image of God. John the Baptist, on the other hand, fought against formalized religion. This is because the formalized religion was an evil religion that used people as its means. Mark says that this battle between form and essence is the beginning of the gospel of our Lord Jesus. John the Baptist tried to live out the gospel even by breaking the formality of the law. This is the gospel hidden in the baptism movement. It was the baptism movement that opened the way to meet God to those who were sacrificed in the religious business and could not meet God.

4. The gospel of restoring the image of God

Is today different from the time of Jesus? Can we confidently say that Christianity today is not in the business of religion? We worship every week. There is a certain format in worship, and the format was created to contain the

essence. The essence of worship is to meet God. Are you meeting God through the form of worship? Is your spirit being renewed through worship? Do you have the heart to discern God's will through preaching and to live by doing that will?

The fight against form to find the essence was the beginning of the gospel that John showed. In other words, it tells us that the story of the Good News that Jesus will create in the future will be a constant battle to find the essence. In that sense, Jesus and John are standing on the same road. Jesus used to say that he came to this earth to find the essence of the law and fulfill the law. Jesus emphasized that the form of worship offered in the temple is not important, but the importance of faith in mercy and love, which is the essence of the law. And Jesus showed that mercy and love directly. Jesus was most displeased with Judaism, which operates as a temple system, doing religious business. It can only be frustrating because the temple that should have saved people is killing people. A person who owes the form of God is restored and a person is used and used as a means in the temple that needs to be made anew. People made in the image of God became tools to satisfy the desires of the high priests.

In modern times, Christianity seems to have become a species of capitalism. The most important thing in capitalism is profit and efficiency. In capitalism, being productive and being efficient is considered good. So capitalism uses numbers to make it easy to recognize. We often judge good and evil through numbers. A big church with a lot of members is a good church, and a church with a small number of members is a bad church. It's good when a lot of offerings are collected, and bad when little is collected. Can the essence of religion be contained in numbers?

German philosopher Byung-Chul Han criticizes digital society in his book "Transparent Society". He talks about the importance of narrative, that is, the story, which is easy to miss in the digital society. He said that the word digital comes from the Latin word "digitus" which means finger. Fingers are for counting numbers. So digital society is based on numbers. Even the Facebook Timeline and Instagram Stories items are based on numbers. Someone's humanity is judged by the number of likes and hearts. Friends are counted in numbers, and attachment and liking are expressed through numbers. Today everything is countable. This is because performance and efficiency can only be expressed in numbers. In numbers, the story of our lives loses its meaning. In numbers, human beings are used and objectified.

Jesus never looked at people as tools. It was His purpose to restore the image of God in man. The high priests came to the temple and treated John as a heretic when people flocked to him because they had to give them a profit. When the people who had to raise their income through the temple sacrifices flocked to Jesus, they tried to get rid of

Jesus for blasphemy. The way John prepared for the coming of the Lord was a desperate struggle to return to the essence. The beginning of our gospel should be like this. It doesn't matter what commandments you kept or didn't keep. It must be a life of pursuing and practicing the essence hidden in the commandments. Now we have to create our own story of mercy and love. We have to create a beautiful story unique to our church. The church is not a place filled with offerings or people. The church is a place filled with beautiful gospel stories. We must gather at church with the beautiful stories we have created in our lives for a week. And we must gather here to hear the story of the gospel of the Lord and return to our place of life with a new imagination.

I hope that the essence of our faith will be restored through worship every Sunday. I hope the essence of valuing and loving a person is restored, not efficiency expressed through numbers. I hope it is a faith that knows that the lives of others are as precious as I am. We must move forward with a faith that makes love of God and love of neighbors into stories by practicing them with our lives, not faith that we only know in our heads. John the Baptist and Jesus are still inviting us to this holy struggle.