

Messianic Expectations

John 1:6-9, 1:19-28

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

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John the Baptist didn't just say it one time, he said it three times: I am not Messiah. Brad Pitt is not Messiah, neither is Tiger Woods. George W. Bush, John Kerry, the Republicans, the Democrats, capitalism, democracy, the constitution, the Supreme Court and law are not Messiah. Joe Gibbs is not Messiah. In a Washington Times article, it was pointed out how hesitant Joe Gibbs is to be in the spotlight because he does not want himself to be the center of attention. He wants his players to get the attention. It's not right, he said. As a humble man, he doesn't want to call himself into people's central view of the importance of the football team. He's sheepish about the accolades he receives. Even on opening day, Gibbs sent the team out but he quietly went through the crowds, so they did not have an opportunity to give him acknowledgment. After the game was over and they won, he gave out 53 game balls, saying thank you to the team. Bill Parcells is not Messiah either.

We do not need to tell teenagers and parents of the need for a messiah at a time when they are discovering tension in the home. We do not need to tell parents that their teenagers in rebellion are not Messiah. We do not need to tell teenagers, who have already discovered that their parents are not Messiah. However, during the teen years, the teens and the parents both know they need a Messiah to come and intervene in the house. I had lunch with Rabbi Kushner a few years back, the author of *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I was seated next to him. So I turned to him, because I knew I didn't have much time, and I said, What do you think about Jesus? He said, Wow, you don't waste any time do you? He surprised me when he said, Jesus is the only human being that ever got it all right. I said, That's pretty high esteem for Jesus. He said, I do have high esteem for Jesus. I said, Let me guess: it would be too much for you to say that Jesus is Messiah, the son of God. He said, That's a bridge too far.

Who is Messiah? Israel's expectations of Messiah were clearly articulated by the prophet Isaiah. A human being, anointed by God to bring good news to the poor, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captive that the Lord's favor would be shown in his life. He would bring the day of vengeance of God. He would comfort all who are mourning. He would give garlands instead of ashes to people in death. He would praise people who have faint hearts and lift them up. He's a great light to be seen in darkness, He's a great lawyer who would liberate and defeat enemies, a judge who brings justice, a physician whose heals, a prince who brings peace, a king who establishes eternal government, a prophet who speaks God's voice, a counselor who brings comfort. But to confuse things, Isaiah also says that there will be a suffering servant. Israel did not expect Messiah to be a suffering servant.

Who is Messiah? There are many among us today who want a messiah who comes with vengeance. Who comes to settle accounts, as an enraged God who comes back to earth to clean up things. We want a kind of Clint Eastwood, a terminator, or a Wyatt Earp messiah. We're like that bumper sticker that says Jesus is coming back and he's "angry." Some believe for Jesus to be a true messiah, he has to have a personality change. He's gone from the gentle Jesus to the terminator of Christ. Angry people seem to want an angry messiah: someone to make sure they can get even. Max Depree in his book, *Leadership as an Art*, says leaders are called not to inflict pain, leaders are called to bear pain. Leaders should pattern themselves after the messiah who is the suffering servant, the servant leader. Sometimes our in our expectations of a messiah, we have the wrong view. Sometimes we have too high an expectation that someone will measure up to be messiah. I saw a cartoon of a pastor nominating committee seated around a table, looking quite frustrated and disillusioned. One of them looks out the window and sees a young man walking across the lake on water and carrying a Bible in his hand with a big smile on his face, and he says, I think we've found our pastor. I don't walk on water.

Sometimes in our unrealistic expectations, we in America are focused on the personality. We worship our heroes, athletes, and musicians. We have messianic substitutes. Even to the point that we will tolerate in a pastor or a primary leader moral lapse because they have great charisma, marvelous gifts. Because they can preach a wonderful sermon, or they can bring the money in or bring the crowds together. We too often choose charisma over character. Unrealistic messianic expectations. Sometimes our expectations are grandiose. We look forward to the new leader coming, and we think this one is going to make everything right. Make sense of all our confusion, teach us the right theology, repair all of our brokenness, mend our wounds and our risks, bring joy in all our sadness, provide for all our needs, make all the people do the right thing, reconcile all the divisions, resolve all the conflicts, solve all the problems, satisfy all our desires, answer all our questions, straighten of our crookedness, order our chaos, smooth our rough spots, level the playing fields, comfort all fear, explain all the mysteries. It just won't happen that way.

People have come to me in the past, these are people who have been Christians for many years, who know the Bible and still come to me and say, "pastor, what do we believe about Jesus?" And I will turn to them and say, "What do you believe about Jesus?" "Oh well, I'm not an authority on Jesus." And I say, "How long have you been walking with him?" "Well, you're the pastor." Or they come to me and say, "Pastor, pray for me, you're closer to God." Implied in that: you're God-like and I'm not. Or sometimes the pastors bring that kind of adoration and esteem on themselves. The person walks into the pastor's office and says, "I want to lead a Bible study and the pastor turns to the person and says you see all these books behind me, when you study all these books and know them, you'll be prepared to lead a Bible study." Sometimes we pastors are so wrapped up in our own grandiosity--grandiose expectations that are unrealistic, romanticized, and inflated.

Personal narcissism is a huge problem in American leadership: people who are so needy to have the adoration and the attention, that they can't share the power. Sometimes people in the congregation develop the wrong expectations about the person who is going on their behalf. When I left Bethlehem, and I said I was going to the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., they had many statements they wanted me to go with as their commissioning. You are the right man for the job. You are a man in D.C. You go get 'em tiger! We need someone like you to set those people straight. You tell it like it is. Wow, what a mess, you can fix it. We're sending you to clean up that town. Don't let the snakes get you, we're counting on you, give 'em hell. The one I love the most though, we're sending you from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. Be careful, you know what they did to Jesus in Jerusalem. Messianic expectations. The

messianic complex: I'm always right. I don't need anyone else. I don't need your advice. I don't need your counsel. I'm in charge here. I don't need to be accountable to you. I give the orders. I do the talking. I make the decisions. In the book called, *The Addictive Organization*, by Anne Wilson Schaefer and Diane Fassel, they clearly state in research that organizations take on the personality of their chief leader. That's a scary thought. Either for good or for ill, organizations tend to live into the addictive or healthy patterns of their leadership. If the organization is led by a Napoleonic-Complex person, the organization tends to become addicted to that personality if they are going to survive.

Petes Cazzaro, pastor of a large church in Brooklyn, discovered that he was calling too much attention to himself, that he needed the people to need him. He came to an awareness in his life that it was not healthy in his discipleship to have the people so dependent on him, so he wrote the book, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. He says, "It was not good that I needed to be the center of everything in the church. It is not good to be the Messiah, because I'm not." We can have disappointments with the real Messiah. Sometimes our messianic expectations can be misplaced, even John the Baptist, who was the first to believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Messiah, was the first to doubt. He sent emissaries to Jesus when Jesus wasn't performing well. Jesus, are we still looking at you as the Messiah or are we looking for someone else. You are not doing what we expected. Jesus will disappoint us. God will disappoint us. We will disappoint each other. We cannot see the whole picture because we have limited, finite views of reality. We are sinful. We will miss God's purpose. We will make mistakes. We will see through a glass darkly, as Paul puts it. Only one can fulfill our desires, our hopes, and our expectations: that's the living God. And we often misunderstand how God accomplishes that. The Messiah will not be controlled by our hopes and expectations. Earl Palmer's commentary on John 1 has this to say: Jesus both fulfills and disappoints. He fulfills and disappoints John the Baptist. Jesus does not do what the great prophet John had expected him to do. In Jesus there's both a mixture of fulfillment and disappointment. The fact that Jesus so marvelously disappoints all our expectations of what we think the Messiah should be, is in itself one of the most eloquent proofs of his true Messiah-ship, Palmer says. He goes on to say Jesus is not possessed by our expectations as he is not possessed even by our hopes and dreams and by the ones of so great a man as John the Baptist. We do not determine who Messiah is or what Messiah will do.

Sometimes people have a view of God that God will do whatever they want. The pastor has enough faith, the pastor can make God do whatever they want. When I was in Dallas as a pastor, a small group gathered to pray for a young man who was dying of cancer. The group got together and prayed: Lord, heal this man. John got worse. They got more people together and prayed: Lord, heal this man. We love him; we have faith that you can do it. John got worse. Finally at a prayer meeting, I said: Lord, it's become evident that we have been praying for a long time for his healing and you're not doing it. If it is your will, help him find your powerful presence in the midst of his suffering and death. Oh, I had people turn on me in anger and say, Pastor, how could you do that, how could you have such a lack of faith, don't you believe God can heal him?

We don't like to have our expectations challenged. We create a theology that says we can control God, even in our prayers. When John was dying, he said you know, as I come close to my last days, I am so glad that I have people who have come from everywhere to pray for me, it is an amazing thing. I am so glad that Jesus Christ has become real to me in the midst of my suffering. I know him to be the Messiah who suffers with me.

What can we expect from leadership who follows Messiah. The first thing we must reassert is there is no leader who is Messiah. Leaders point to the Messiah, and they testify to the light but leaders are not Messiah. Christian leaders: the word Christian has to do with the ones who follow the Christ or the Messiah. These are messianic leaders. Messianic leaders have a mission from God; they have a purpose. Messianic leaders are self-aware. John the Baptist knew who he was not and he knew who he was. Messianic leaders are humble. John went on to say, I am not worthy to untie the sandals of the coming Jesus. Messianic leaders are truth tellers, they are in touch with biblical truths, they are in touch with the incarnational truths of Jesus, and they are in touch with their own personal truths. They tell the truth about themselves. Messianic leaders know why things are going the way they are going -- because they understand the very real nature of God. There's meaning, theology, and purpose in them. Messianic leaders know Jesus personally. And when they know Jesus, they know they are not Messiah. Messianic leaders may have a crisis of conviction. They may have doubts. They may make mistakes. They may not be able to solve all problems, but they know who can. Messianic leaders follow Jesus Christ but, in doing so, they live with ambiguity, paradox, unanswered questions, and mystery.

Jesus is the Christ, Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is the anointed one, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the mighty God, the prince of peace, the wonderful counselor. Jesus is also the suffering servant. He shows us that to be a messianic follower and leader is to be a servant leader who is willing to suffer and give one's life for other people. Jesus is the Messiah who empowers his followers to serve him with dignity, love and grace. Jesus Christ is Messiah.

Amen.