

# PART 11 – GREATER THAN JOHN DISCUSS AND APPLY

## **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. Have you ever heard Christians preaching in a way that you found offensive or off-putting? If so, why was that and do you think your reaction was justified?

*Read Matthew 3*

2. Imagine yourself stumbling upon someone who looked and spoke like John dunking people in the nearest river to your home. Would you be drawn to listen or not?
3. Why do you think John's words were especially strong about the men who were Pharisees and Sadducees?
4. What was the significance of John's baptism – what did he understand his mission to be?
5. What do John's words about Jesus and his reaction to Him say about who Jesus is and what He will accomplish (in particular, what does it mean to baptise with fire and with the Holy Spirit)?
6. Why did Jesus insist that John should baptise Him?
7. What do verses 16-17 indicate about who Jesus is, His relationship to God and the nature of the divine being?

## **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- What is your reaction to way John the Baptist preached and what he said? Do you react against being described as a sinner in danger of God's judgement and being called to change?
- Why do you think it matters so much to God that we repent (acknowledging our sin and seeking His forgiveness)? Does this make sense in your experience of life and relationships?
- Does John's example – a great man who drew crowds but gave way gladly to someone greater – challenge you in any way? Is it a common attitude in your experience and what does that say about human beings?
- Do you find the pointers from the Bible to the sinless nature of Jesus convincing and if they are true what does that say about Him and how do you feel in comparison?
- Making an honest assessment of your life and thoughts, what are the most important things to you (what could Satan tempt you with)? Do you think these might be taking the place God deserves?

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 11 – GREATER THAN JOHN

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

#### ***What was the significance of John's odd behaviour?***

John dressed in camel's skin and ate honey and wild locusts. He was also teetotal, since the angel Gabriel told his father he was never to touch alcoholic drinks (Luke 1:15). Some people think this may indicate that he was to live as a Nazarite. The Law of Moses included provision for people to live for a period of time as a Nazirite, taking vows not to eat or drink products of grapes or any form of alcohol and not to cut their hair (Numbers 6:1–21). If John followed these principles he may also have had long hair, which would not have been the norm for Jewish men in his time, although this is speculation.

John's clothing and diet may not have been as odd in his context as in ours, since there were various radical Jewish groups, some of whom may have lived in a similar style in the desert, but it is obviously noteworthy enough to be mentioned. His clothing may have been a deliberate decision in order to identify with Elijah, since some translations of 2 Kings 1:8 say that Elijah wore a coat made from hair, but again this is somewhat speculative. What we can be certain about is that John was a mighty prophet of God and his life was dedicated to preaching repentance and preparing the way for the Messiah. His lifestyle was subservient to this mission.

#### ***You describe baptism as immersion of adults, but is it not something done to babies?***

There are two main approaches to baptism in the Church today. Some churches sprinkle the babies of Christian parents with water and call this baptism. Others immerse adults who have professed faith in Jesus Christ in water, calling that baptism. Most scholars of the New Testament recognise that the baptisms of the New Testament by John and by Jesus' disciples were immersions in water. This is, in fact, the basic meaning of the Greek word translated as 'baptism'.

The practice of infant baptism developed later in the Church and became popular after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Some Christians defend through a parallel with the circumcision of infants in the Old Covenant, describing it as a pledge from the parents to raise the child according to Christian principles in the hope of future faith. Others believe it has some spiritual benefit for the child.

Other Christians are unconvinced by either of these arguments and fear that they might give the impression that the child is now a 'Christian'. They seek to practise only what is described in the New Testament and to express the sense of baptism as a personal identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus. They must also remember its significance as a marker of identification with and inclusion in the Church. Most churches that practise believer's baptism do not regard infant sprinkling as true baptism and expect people who have been sprinkled to be baptised by immersion after they come to personal faith. The approach taken in this course reflects the author's conviction that believer's baptism is correct, but it must be understood that genuine and sincere Christians are found on both sides of the debate.