

Nearly 13 years ago, an unemployed computer technician called Guy Goma, turned up at the BBC headquarters in London for a job interview. This is what happened next. [Video: Guy Goma](#)

It is a classic case of mistaken identity. Every time I see Guy's face as he realises that he's been mistaken for a technology expert Guy Kewney, you just feel so bad for him. Of course, he did an amazing job at making it up as he went along.

But in some situations, mistaking someone's identity is far more serious. That was why John the Baptist was so careful to clarify who he was. He didn't want anyone to mistake him for the Christ, because he wanted everyone to put their trust in Jesus!

John 1:19-34: "Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.

²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

²⁴ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶ "I baptise with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

1. The Issue of John the Baptist

We don't get much background information about John the Baptist here in this gospel. It seems that the apostle John was assuming that we would be familiar with what is in the other synoptic gospels.

So we don't read here about the remarkable story of John's birth, his life in the desert, his strange clothes of camel hair or his diet of locusts and wild honey. Instead, the apostle John went right to the heart of the matter – the true identity of John the Baptist. This arose because of the impact of John's ministry.

a) His Message

John's message was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Matthew 3:2. He called people to turn from their sins, to get ready for the soon coming rule and reign of God.

b) His Impact

And this message resonated with lots of people. "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River." Matthew 3:5–6 Many people accepted John's message and were baptised to show that they were turning from their sins and seeking to follow God's way.

Now we might have expected the religious leaders in Jerusalem to be happy about all of this. People were getting right with God, they were committing themselves to him, they were living in expectation of the coming of God's kingdom.

But the problem was, John didn't fit into the religious establishment of the day. He hadn't been to the seminaries of the Jewish faith. He hadn't risen up the ranks of the Pharisees or priests.

c) His Identity

So the questions that they wanted to ask John were: "Who are you?" John 1:21. Who did John think he was to declare God's coming kingdom?

And then secondly, **“Why.. do you baptise?”** John 1:25. Why was John baptising people? After all, baptism in that day was only supposed to be for Gentiles – for pagan non-Jews who wanted to convert to Judaism. So why was John baptising Jews who were already God’s people? What was he trying to say?

In response to this, John’s reply was clear. I think we could summarise as, **“Don’t trust in me, trust in Jesus.”**

2. Don’t Trust in John

First of all, John made it clear that he didn’t want people to trust in him. He did that by clarifying who he was not and who he was.

a) He Was Not The Christ

First of all, he was not the Christ. When the Jewish establishment sent a delegation of priests and Levites to question John, **“He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Christ.””** John 1:20

For centuries the people of Israel had been waiting for the Christ to come. Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew word, Messiah. Both refer to the anointed one,. In the Old Testament people were anointed with oil to appoint them to special tasks.

And in John’s day, there were many ideas about what the Christ would do. Some thought he would bring peace, others emphasised righteousness, others saw him leading a military revolution to overthrow the Romans, others thought he would raise up the nation of Israel to world-wide prominence.

And John was not ridiculing the idea of the Messiah. He said that the Messiah’s appearance was imminent, in fact he was already among them: **“Among you stands one you do not know.”** John 1:26.

But John wanted everyone to be clear. Whatever their idea of who the Messiah was and what the Messiah would do – John was not him! He was not the Christ.

b) He Was Not Elijah

Neither was he Elijah. **“They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?”** John 1:21

Elijah was a prominent and powerful prophet of the Old Testament. And he had not died, but was caught up to heaven alive in a chariot of fire. And then at the end of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi predicted that he would return again before the Messiah. **“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.”** Malachi 4:5

And John did fulfil Elijah’s role as the messianic forerunner, as Jesus made clear. And yet, John did not want people to be in awe of him as if he was Elijah returning from heaven. And so in reply to their question, he said, **“I am not.”** John 1:21

c) He Was Not The Prophet

Lastly, the people asked: **“Are you the Prophet?”** John 1:21

This probably refers to the prophecy given through Moses: **“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”** Deuteronomy 18:15 It was the promise of a great leader who would speak God’s truth to the people and lead them to freedom, just as Moses had done.

But John knew that he wasn’t that leader. **“He answered, “No.”** John 1:22 He didn’t want people looking to him as the ultimate revealer of God’s truth and rescuer of God’s people.

d) He Was The Voice

Now all of this was not because John had a problem with his self-esteem. It wasn’t because he thought of himself as nothing or that he saw his ministry as unimportant and insignificant.

When this delegation pressed him for an answer as to who he was, he answered: **“I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”** John 1:23

This was a quotation from Isaiah 40 which was a promise about someone who would come as the forerunner to the Messiah, who would prepare the people to receive the Lord into their lives. And John saw his ministry as a fulfilment of that

promise. As he said in John 1:31: [“The reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”](#)

And so this is why John was so eager to confess that he was not the Christ, or Elijah or the Prophet. He did not want anyone to misunderstand who he was and mistakenly put their faith in him because he knew that his job was to point people to the real Christ, who of course is Jesus.

3. Trust In Jesus

And when he did this, he said four amazing things about Jesus.

a) He is the Superior One

First of all, he said that Jesus is the superior one. With amazing humility, John declared about Jesus: [“He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”](#) John 1:27

Untying someone’s sandals was the lowest of all tasks. It was so despised that it was only done by the slaves of a household. But John didn’t even think that he was worthy to do that for the coming Messiah. He wasn’t worthy even to be his slave.

Again, that is not because he had an unhealthily low self-esteem. But rather it was that he had a proper perspective on the greatness of Christ. Even although he was older and started his ministry before Christ did, he understood that Christ was superior because in some way he was pre-existent! He said about him that [“A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.”](#) John 1:30

b) He is the Sacrifice for Sins

Secondly, he said that Jesus is the sacrifice for sins. When John saw Jesus coming towards him, he said, [“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”](#) John 1:29 The first of seven specific titles given to Jesus in this section of John 1. And it is a title that was previewed throughout the Old Testament.

For example, when Abraham was stopped from sacrificing his son, God provided a ram as a substitute to die in his place, just as Abraham had said, [“God himself will provide the lamb.”](#) Genesis 22:8

When God rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, they had to take the Passover lamb and kill it and put its blood on the sides and top of the door-frame, because God had promised, [“When I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.”](#) Exodus 12:13

And when Isaiah prophesied about the suffering of the coming servant of the Lord when he will be pierced for our transgressions, he said, [“He was led like a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”](#) Isaiah 53:7

And these all pointed to the ultimate Lamb of God:

- Our Substitute who will die in our place.
- Our Passover Lamb who will set us free from slavery to sin and death.
- Our Sacrifice who will take upon himself the punishment that we deserved.

This is the core message of this gospel. This is who we need to look to. This is who we need to trust in. He is the Lamb of God who takes away this sin of the world.

c) He is the Spirit Baptizer

And if we do trust in Jesus, then we can receive an amazing gift, as thirdly, John said that he is the Spirit Baptizer.

John had a ministry of baptism. He said, [“I baptise with water.”](#) John 1:26. This was not Christian baptism, which points to our salvation through faith in Jesus as the Lamb of God. Rather this was a baptism of repentance, to express the desire to turn from sin and live a new life.

But when Jesus came, even although he didn’t need to repent, he was baptised by John. And when that happened, John said, [“I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.”](#) John 1:32 Jesus’ ministry was empowered by the Holy Spirit who indwelt him.

But Jesus’ ministry, would also lead to the indwelling of the Spirit for everyone who trusted in him. John continued: [“I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see](#)

the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.” John 1:33

The coming of the Spirit on Jesus, revealed to John that he was indeed the Christ. But it also was a preview of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

And as we'll see in this gospel, the Spirit is the one who gives us

- New birth into God's family.
- New life that will last forever.
- New understanding of God's truth.
- New power to witness to this world.

But we can only receive this baptism of the Spirit through Jesus. This wonderful gift is for all who put their faith in him and his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. Jesus is the Spirit Baptiser.

d) He is the Son of God

But finally, he is also the Son of God. John declared: “I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” John 1:34 John understood and accepted the true identity of Jesus. But how did he know?

Well, it was because it was revealed to him at Jesus' baptism. The other gospels all record that when Jesus came out of the water, a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Matthew 3:17

4. Don't Try and Be God

So this is why John didn't want anyone to mistake him for the Christ.

- He knew that Jesus was infinitely superior to him.
- He knew that Jesus was the only sacrifice for our sins.
- He knew that Jesus was the only one who could give us the Spirit.
- He knew that Jesus was the only Son of God.

And so he wanted people to trust in Jesus.

And this attitude is crucial for each and everyone of us. The temptation that all human beings have faced it to try and take God's place and role in our own lives and in the lives of others.

This was the temptation presented by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Genesis 3:5.

And since then, we as human beings have tried to be God in a variety of ways.

- We've put ourselves first in our lives. We want to be the one who is in charge, who leads, who decides what we do, or what others should do. We ignore the fact that Jesus is the Superior One.
- We've tried to make ourselves right with God, to pray for our own sins – rejecting Jesus as the only Sacrifice who can take away the sins of the world.
- We've tried to clean up our own lives, change our own hearts, and tried to fix other people as well – refusing to accept that this is only possible through the power of the Spirit.
- And we've tried to take the glory and praise as if our accomplishments are through our own strength – denying that only Jesus is worthy of that glory because he is the Son of God.

And so we need to learn from John.

a) Trust in Jesus

We need to remember who we are not - that we are not Christ. And so we need to trust in Jesus because “Salvation is found in no-one else.” Acts 4:12

b) Point People To Jesus

And we need to remember who we are – that we are called to be witness to Christ, and so our job is not to point people to ourselves, our church, our pastor, our doctrines or our lifestyle, but to point people to Jesus. As Paul wrote: “We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.” 2 Corinthians 4:5

