

Authentic Minister in Luke 3:7-14 and Implications for John's Ministry!

Cosmas C. Uzowulu OFMCap (SIST)
uzowulucc@yahoo.com

Abstract

After introducing John the Baptist in 3:1-6, Luke now presents to the reader a glimpse of his ministry. In the next two sections, Luke highlights two elements of that ministry: in 3:7-14 John announces the arrival of God's judgment and about the need for repentance, and in 3:15-18 Luke presents John's preaching about the Coming One and the greater baptism that comes with him. John 3:7-14 may be divided into two sections. Luke 3:7-9 gives John's prophetic preaching on God's coming wrath. The nearness of judgment causes John to call for true repentance, while warning that racial heritage alone is not good enough to escape God's wrath. Luke 3:10-14 gives the crowd's response, along with John's elaboration on what repentance means. This text helps to elucidate the challenges an authentic minister encounters in the field of his ministry and the impact of his ministry in a corrupt society.

Key Words: Authentic, ministry, repentance, warning, judgment.

0. Introduction

Luke 3:7-14 argues that the times tied to John (and Jesus) are inseparably linked to God's eventual judgment

and that Jewish heritage does not exempt one from responding properly to God. Salvation and preparation for God's coming involve a ready heart, responding to God on his terms. Religious heritage and ancestry are irrelevant before God in comparison to proper response. As a result, the children of Abraham (that is, those who know God) are not limited to a certain race, because God is able to create his children, even "out of stone". God's children are not born at physical birth, but are transformed from the heart. Finally, the fruit of appropriate repentance shows itself in how one treats others. The concrete character of the exhortation leads to many practical themes about walking with God.

John's call for repentance is preparatory for the greater baptism and message of God to come in Jesus (3:15-18). Though their ministries function in continuity to one another, John's ministry is not in itself normative today, since it was a pre-cross ministry that could not address salvation in terms of resurrection realities or expectations. Nevertheless, the attitude demanded by John is illustrative of key concepts that Luke will develop, and thus his ministry foreshadows work that Jesus and his followers would do (3:10-18; 24:44-49). Luke portrays John's ministry as a call to repentance. Every minister, like John, should be involved in this kind of ministry with its unforeseen implications.

1.1 Warning of God's Judgment and a Call to Repentance (3:7-9)

1.1.1 The Rebuke That is a Warning about Judgment (3:7)

John begins his announcement by addressing the crowds, which came for his baptism. The imperfect tense *elegen* (he was saying) has been taken in a couple of ways. Plummer¹ is of the opinion that the durative tense indicates a summary of what John said on several occasions. This view is possible, but not likely. Luke employs the imperfect *elegen* so often that a vivid usage is more likely (6:20). If vivid, as an imperfect tense, it presents the action to the reader as in progress. The point Plummer wishes to make, however, is clear from the context, even if it is not specifically made by the tense. Luke clearly intends to represent what is typical of John's preaching.

Luke in a simple way addresses John's audience as "the crowd" (*ochlois*). This may represent a summary of what the other Evangelists note at other points in their presentation of John's ministry. It is possible that Luke is expanding the audience, a position that is possible, since *ochlos* is a common word for him and the change is in line with the broad audience mentioned at other points in the other Gospels (esp. 3:10-14). Fitzmyer² suggests that

¹ A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, ICC (Edinburgh: Scribner, 1896), 88.

² J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (i-ix)*, AB 28 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 467.

a broad audience is suitable for the Lucan emphasis that the message is for all. What John said was said to all, as Luke notes, while Matthew (16:1, 6, 11-12) points out that the religious leaders needed to heed the warning.³

John's words are harsh, shocking the listeners like a prophetic woe. They are called the "sons of snakes". The snake's poisonous and destructive nature is the point of comparison.⁴ This exact figure is absent in the OT, Josephus, and the rabbis.⁵ Nevertheless, the OT does have figures that refer to God's enemies as vipers (Isa 59:5; Jer 46:22). They need to change their way of life or face the wrath of God (John 8:44). John addresses his audience as opposed to God if they do not prepare for his coming. Given such a condition, a remedy is urgently needed.

John makes a final remark before issuing a remedy. As he retains the figure of snakes, he mentions fleeing the coming wrath. When brush fires surface in the desert, snakes often come out of the ground to flee. John provokes the folks as he demands to know who informs them to flee from the coming wrath. Are they ready to run from their holes in recognition that destructive fire draws near? The reference to wrath (*orgēs*) is an allusion to the Day of the Lord, when judgment would come (Isa

³ Cf. I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 139; similarly, H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, vol.1, HKNT (Freiburg: Herder, 1969), 163.

⁴ Cf. W. Foerster, "Echidna" in *TDNT* 2: 815-16. Acts 28:3 refers to a poisonous snake.

⁵ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 467, similarly, J. Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, WBC 35a (Dallas: Word, 1989), 147.

13:9; 30:27; Amos 5:18-20 etc). In the NT, one's position in relation to Jesus is the key to avoiding the wrath of judgment (Acts 17:29-31). John sees the judgment coming, because with hope of salvation also comes the day of judgment. This is the normal OT thinking.

Discussion exists over John's question, "Who told you to flee the coming wrath?" Is this a legitimate inquiry as to how they have come to sense that the day draws near?⁶ Or is it a rhetorical and ironic question that doubts the sincerity of those who were coming to him?⁷ The following positive response suggests the former, while the greeting that calls them snake favors the latter. There seems to be another way to read the question. One can see in it a real rebuke that is not designed ironically, but seeks to grab their attention and raise the question, "Do you really understand what my baptism is about?" The question is an invitation to perceive that John's message about wrath requires repentance, regardless of one's status in life. Such a response is indispensable in order to escape God's judgment. The stakes in John's ministry are high. In fact, they are the highest stakes of all. Those who comprehend who is really calling them through John will escape. Those who do not understand the person behind the call will face God's wrath. The question presents a choice and warns the audience that God's judgment is linked to their decision.

⁶ Cf. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, 164 n.21.

⁷ Cf. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 139; similarly, G. Stählin, "Orgē and Thumos" in *TDNT* 5:444-45.

1.1.2 The Call to Make Fruit Worthy of Repentance (3:8a)

Luke invites us to have a deeper reflection on the whole issue. In assessing the significance of John's ministry, the one coming to be baptized needs to consider the significance of the baptism. The issue is not a washing by water, but the response that baptism portrays. The aorist imperative (*poiēsate*, make) indicates a specific call to produce fruit that is the appropriate product of repentance.⁸ Authentic and sincere repentance manifests itself in concrete action.⁹ John is not really concerned with external religious practices, but with real encounter with God. The use of the plural *karpous* suggests a repetitiveness to the action, while the singular *karpon* in Matt 3:8 looks at the product as a collective unit.¹⁰ The Baptist says there is an appropriate product of repentance. Submitting to baptism from John is a commitment before God to change one's life, while awaiting the approach of God's salvation.

1.1.3 The Warning Not to Rely on Ancestry (3:8b)

In demanding for a concrete response, John offers a warning against a great potential error – to rest in one's

⁸ Cf. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, 89.

⁹ Cf. J. Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (RNT 3; Regensburg: Pustet, 1977), 142.

¹⁰ Cf. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, 89.

heritage rather than respond to God. The desire to rest in Abrahamic heritage is something that ought not enter their minds. John expresses the warning in the (negated) imperative *me arxēsthe legein* (do not begin to say). Such a thought should not cross their mind or their lips. John's warning is that at an individual level, Abrahamic heritage guarantees nothing before God. The best religious pedigree by itself is not an adequate source of protection before him. Each individual must assess himself or herself aright. By itself the richest of biological connections is worthless spiritually if the spiritual environment and exhortation are ignored.

The issue for one to become a child of God is not a matter of inheritance, but of God's power and work. The elucidation of the Abraham remark is introduced with the solemn phrase *legō gar humin*. The picture of God producing life out an inanimate object attributes adoption into God's family to the work of God and not to the natural rights of having a certain genealogy and faithful ancestors (Cf. Gen 12:1-3). The NT often observes that people rely so much on such connection at a natural level, and yet there is no link to Abraham in terms of faith that has eternal significance (Cf. Luke 16:24; John 8:33-39; Acts 7:2; Rom 4:1; Gal 3:29). From John's own perspective, all must repent and come to God. For one to become a child of God, it has to do with ones response to God on God's own terms, terms that involve repentance. God's ability to raise up children from rocks may suggest that possibility that God can bring anyone of any race to respond and be his child. Gentiles may as well be in view here.

1.1.4 The Second Reminder of Judgment (3:9)

John follows with an eschatological warning of great significance, since he focuses on the nearness of the approaching judgment.¹¹ *Ēdē* (already) serves along with the present tense *keitai* (is lying) to stress the nearness of God's decisive judgment. Hendriksen¹² notes correctly that that *ēdē* is in the emphatic position, since it comes first in the sentence, an emphasis heightened by its isolation from the verb it modifies. The implication is that John's audience may not think God's decisive judgment is near. However, it is nearer than they think, since the ax is ready to fall.¹³

The ax primed to fall is a very clear figure for the clearing away of those who are not fruitful. The passive verb *keitai* may well suggest that God is the agent who will wield the ax.¹⁴ The picture is of the ax aimed at the root. If the ax falls, it will chop away at the roots, and the tree will be destroyed.¹⁵

¹¹ Cf. *The Gospel according to Luke* (i-ix), 469.

¹² Cf. W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 206 n.172

¹³ Cf. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, 90.

¹⁴ Cf. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 141.

¹⁵ Cf. F. W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 87; similarly, F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas: Lk 1,1-9,50*, EKNT 3/1 (Zurich: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989), 173.

The removal of the fruitless vine pictures destruction, and it parallels OT use. Hosea 10:1-2 and Jer 2:21-22 use the image to depict the nation's destruction in judgment, while Isa 10:33-34 uses the figure to depict the removal of the Assyrians, and Amos 2:9 uses it of the Amorites.¹⁶

The trees that are fruitless are not only cut down, they are also cast into fire. The image of the fire of judgment also has OT roots. Both Jer 11:16 and Ezek 15:6-7 employed the image to speak of the consuming destruction that crushed the nation and produced the exile. Thus, the summary of John's message on repentance finishes where it started—with a graphic warning about God's coming wrath in judgment for those who fail to discern the times correctly and act on it. In other words, John is calling for a personal decision that would determine one's fate. With the ministries of John and Jesus came the crucial time of decision.

The ultimate die is cast with regard to God, by how one relates to the message about the forgiveness of sins in the context of the repentance preached by John. Jesus' coming will move people to look at themselves and make decisions that determine their eternal fate. One can be helped in understanding Jesus by understanding how John prepared the way for his Master. Just as in John's Gospel the cross can be seen as the source of the decisive defeat of Satan, even though the ultimate defeat

¹⁶ Cf. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 469; similarly, J. M. Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 52; likewise, E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 89.

is yet to come, so John's coming can be regarded as judgment drawing near, even though the actual judgment they discuss is yet to come. For the decision that one makes about John's ministry and about his greater successor Jesus will determine precisely whether God's judgment will fall. The Baptist warns the people to see their need for a total change and to live fruitfully. The Baptist opens the door for the Messiah, who will ultimately bring the forgiveness that the responsive ones know that they actually need.

1.2 The Appropriate Fruit of Repentance (3:10-14)

1.2.1 Fruit of Repentance Described for the Crowd (3:10-11)

John's message does not fall on deaf ears. The response of three distinct groups in 3:10-14 constitutes a section that is unique to Luke's Gospel.¹⁷ The crowd is the first among the groups to press John for elaboration and clarification. If the crowd is to produce fruit worthy of repentance, what are they to do? In making such an enquiry, the crowd understands clearly that John is not calling them to participate in an efficacious religious rite but he is calling on them to respond with concrete action. They are asking him in effect: "What is the product that reflects true repentance?" The crowd wishes to know what repentance entails.

John gives a practical response on what true repentance is all about. He does not invite the crowd to his ascetic

¹⁷ On Luke's love triads, see G. Dellling, "*Treis*" in *TDNT* 8:223-24.

lifestyle, nor does he call for a commitment to a series of ritual religious acts, nor does he point to the sacrifices associated with the Jewish faith. Rather, the Baptist points to meeting the needs of one's neighbours. Giving an undergarment to the one in need fits the OT prophets' concern about the proper treatment of one's fellow humans, especially the poor (Job 31:16-22; Isa 58:7-8; Ezek 18:7-9; Mic 6:8).¹⁸ Individuals, who have adhered to this repentant call, are not to worry about social separation; rather they are to care for the needs of their neighbours. Such exhortations of compassion are also present in the ministry of Jesus (Luke 16:19-31) and in the teaching of the early church (James 1:26-27; Eph 4:28). The basic option involves an unselfish approach to life, which sees a person in basic need and gives a spare possession to meet it.¹⁹ The call to share is voluntary, but it also is a reflection of a morally appropriate compassion for one's neighbour.²⁰ Refusing the call reveals what is in the heart. There is a prophetic ethical demand in John's reply. The one who understands the proper product of repentance will attempt to meet such needs. Is it any wonder that both John and Jesus were popular with the masses, who could appreciate the importance of meeting such needs? John says that sharing basic needs with one's neighbour is the proper fruit that grows out of repentance.

¹⁸ Cf. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, 87; similarly, Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, 168 n.47; likewise, Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, 52.

¹⁹ Cf. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, 88.

²⁰ Cf. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, 90.

1.2.2 Fruit of Repentance Described for Tax Collectors (3:12-13)

Luke next reports the specific request of two groups that were among the least popular in Jewish society: toll collectors (3:12-13) and soldiers (3:14). Only the toll collectors are said by Luke to have come forward to be baptized. Either this is stylistic variation, or Luke is highlighting that this group was responsive, as other Lucan references to them seem to indicate (5:27-30: 7:29, 34; 15:1; 18:9-14; 19: 1-10).

To understand a little about the reply that John gives to the toll collectors, one must examine the background of the office.²¹ Taxes in the Roman Empire were a complex affair. There were different ranks of collectors, and there were different taxes to collect. The system of collection was known as tax (or toll) farming. City rulers leased the right to collect taxes to an individual or group, who had bid for this right and had paid for it in advance. Thus, the collector would not only have to collect the tax that Rome stipulated, but he also would have to add a surcharge to meet his expenses, an additional charge over which he had total control.²²

Judaism reacted with extreme distaste to those who took up this profession. One of the reasons was that people, whose business required them to travel, might be taxed at each locale throughout a region, and they regarded these surcharges as corruption and robbery. Even non-

²¹ O. Michel, “*Telōnēs*” in *TDNT* 8, 94-105

²² In *Antiquities* 12.4.2-9 # 10-220. Josephus has a vivid story of such a crafty collector, Joseph, who extorted much money during the rule of Ptolemy V.

Jews disliked them. Jews excommunicated toll collectors because they were regarded as corrupt people and robbers.²³ Only a few of these toll collectors were commended for how they carried out their tasks. A group of such tax collectors were sensitive to John's message and asked him what they should do.

In addressing John, the toll collectors employed the word *didaskale*, a term that was often used of a rabbi to denote profound respect.²⁴ In fact, in Luke, non-disciples often address Jesus with this title (9:38; 10:25; 11:45; 12:13; 18:18). The tax collectors were basically asking, "What needs to change?"

John's reply is very direct and clear: the toll collectors are not to give up their profession. Rather, they are to live and act honourably and fairly. John is not a political revolutionary, for he does not attack the right to collect taxes. What John argues is that taxes should be collected without extortion, surcharges, kickbacks, payoffs, or bribes. The tax collectors are to do their job and not take advantage of their authority and position. They must exact only what has been appointed (*diatetagmenon*) to them to collect. In summary, they are to be honest stewards. The fruit of repentance in a toll collector would be fair business practices, in contrast to corrupt toll collectors. The call is one of fairness to one's neighbour. It parallels the call made to the crowd. The penitent one lives differently, manifesting an appropriate response in his or her vocation and profession.

²³ R. J. Donahue, "Tax Collectors and Sinners: An Attempt at Identification", *CBQ* 33: 39-61 (1971), 49-53.

²⁴ Cf. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, 90.

1.2.3 Fruit of Repentance Described for Soldiers (3:14)

The third group, the soldiers, demand how they should react. Indeed, it is generally agreed that these soldiers were Jewish rather than Roman.²⁵ The soldiers, perceiving a need to change as a result of John's warning and exhortation in 3:7-9, ask what they should do.

The Baptist responds in three parts: two prohibitions and an exhortation. First, they are not to intimidate anyone so as to extort money violently. John commands the soldiers not to employ strong-arm tactics to gain financial advantage. Extortion is the basic idea and is strictly prohibited by John. John's answer about the product of repentance reflects itself in practical moral demands and an absence of power.

The meaning of the second prohibition, *sukophantēsēte*, is debated. It seems originally to have meant "to shake figs", that is to expose figs by shaking the tree.²⁶ Two approaches have been applied to this meaning: it means, in a very simple manner, to be an informer against

²⁵ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 471; similarly, Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas: Lk 1,1-9,59*, 174 n.39; likewise, Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 143.

²⁶ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 471, 470-71

someone else,²⁷ or more strongly, it means to falsely accuse or to gain monetary advantage, that is, to extort by fraud.²⁸ The term is employed in the NT only here and in 19:8. Since the context surrounding the verb is monetary, the second idea of extortion by fraud or false representation seems to be the likely meaning.²⁹ Again, this sense conforms to everyday uses found in the ancient papyri.³⁰ Thus, the soldier is not to use his position so as to take monetary advantage of those under his authority. He is not to seize additional money by force to supplement his basic wage. Being a soldier itself is not considered to be unlawful, but the soldier should not take advantage of the citizenry.

The exhortation is to be content with one's wage. *Opsōnion* is almost exclusively a military term for the provisions given to a soldier. The military wage of the day was a basic provision of food and minimal subsistence—a level of support that might tempt one to

²⁷ H. Alford, *The Greek Testament, vol 1: The Four Gospels* (London: Bell, 1874), 471; similarly, A. B. Bruce, *The Synoptic Gospels* (EGT 1; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897), 483.

²⁸ H. K. Luce, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, CGTSC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 111; similarly, Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, 93; likewise, Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, 53.

²⁹ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 144; similarly, Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 471; likewise, E. Nestle, "Sykophantia im biblischen Griech", *ZNW* 4 (1903), 271-72; likewise, C-H. Hunzinger, "Sukophanteō" in *TDNT* 7, 759.

³⁰ D. L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, ECNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 313, for references to these papyri especially footnote 32.

take advantage of position and to supplement income through excessive use of civil authority. If one was content and satisfied, then one would be less tempted by this possibility.

John's response to the three groups says to be compassionate, loving and fair to fellow human beings and not to take advantage of another or leave another in destitution for one's own gain. Rather, one is to be content and satisfied with what one has. Look to meet needs, rather than aggravate them.

1.3. Implications

John, as a minister, has a unique ministry, since there is only one forerunner to prepare us for the Christ; yet his ministry reflects the OT prophets in general. This point of connection helps us bring the contexts. The kind of preparation John calls for is like the message Jesus calls his disciples to take to the world (Luke 24:47). So this passage reveals the kind of heart that God desires. The passage also shows an apparent mix between secular history and sacred history. In a sense, we cannot distinguish the two, since God is involved in all history. We tend to divide the secular and the sacred today. The prophet John is as concerned to announce the coming of Jesus as he is to discuss Toll Collectors/Soldiers. The prophetic role is to address sin or blessing wherever it surfaces.

This passage illustrates how a minister of the Word should perform his task. The minister must bear good news as well news that exposes sin. Some ministers in the

past tended to emphasize sin so much that one wondered where grace might be found. Today our problem is the opposite: being able to confront people with their accountability and culpability before God. A minister of God's message must be balanced in delivering both messages. Forgiveness cannot occur except where one realizes responsibility for sin and repents of it.

Recognizing that we are accountable to God can be either suffocating or liberating. It suffocates us when we insist on continuing to sin, deepening our culpability; it liberates when we turn to God for forgiveness and experience the blessing of being forgiven.

If one asks what a transformed life looks like, the simple answer here involves treating people with generosity in meeting their needs and in refusing to abuse authority (3:10-14). In other words, a transformed life transforms our ways of relating to others. People are not to be ignored, used, or abused. God honours those who honour others. That is why in the Lord's Prayer we pray to have our sins forgiven as we forgive others. The forgiven person is to become a forgiving person. The delivered person is to be a delivering person. As the Father has shown his goodwill to us, so we should show it to others.

An important note in this text is the idea that cultural connections do not assure salvation. Being born in a "Christian country", growing up in a "Christian home" mean nothing, if we have not personally responded to the offer of forgiveness found by coming to Jesus. No amount of church attendance, and no history of Christ in the family can substitute for a personal turning to Jesus with an awareness that he provides forgiveness for our

sin. There is no greater application of the forerunner's message than to turn to the Stronger One he pointed to as bringing the salvation of God. To trust Jesus for forgiveness is to apply this text in its most ultimate form. This is what John did as a minister/forerunner and this, indeed, is what every contemporary minister ought to do in carrying out his or her ministry.

1.4. Conclusion

Luke 3:7-14 represents a sample of John's call to repentance. It emphasizes the nearness of God's coming wrath. In one sense, it is the negative side of saying that the kingdom draws near (Matt 3:2). With the opportunity of promise comes also the risk of judgment for rejecting the promise. Matthew notes the positive experience, while Luke notes the danger. The declaration makes it clear that crucial times are approaching; key decisions need to be made. The best way to prepare is to answer John's call to repentance. One should live in light of an awareness of God's coming and his judgment. John's message involves a unique setting, not to be confused with the post-cross perspective of the NT Letter. John preached to the Jewish people and prepared them for the promise, by helping them to understand sin and their relation to it (1:17, 76-77). Religious heritage, even Abrahamic heritage, is no guarantee against that day when the ax will fall against those who are not fruitful. The recognition of one's need for repentance is crucial. True repentance exhorts people to be fair with others and meet their basic needs with fundamental aid. This is what God desires of those who know that he is present

and coming: a concern for him is expressed through concern for others. A minister is expected to call people to be aware of this.