

Historic Commentary

(Third Sunday of Advent - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 1: 6-8, 19-28 from Selected Church Fathers and Reformers

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on John 1](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): As might be expected of one who speaks from the very treasures of the Spirit, John the Divine has arrived bringing to us sublime doctrines and the best way of life and wisdom, as though he had just arrived from the very heavens. In fact, it is likely that not even everyone there in heaven should know them. Do these things belong to a fisherman? Tell me. Do they at all belong to a rhetorician? To a sophist or philosopher? To anyone trained in the wisdom of the Gentiles? By no means. The human soul is simply unable to engage in philosophical speculation on that pure and blessed nature; on the powers that come next to it; on immortality and endless life; on the nature of mortal bodies that shall hereafter be immortal; on punishment and the judgment to come; on the inquiries that shall concern deeds and words, thoughts and imaginations.

[Chrysostom](#): While all the other Evangelists begin with the incarnation ... John, passing by everything else—his conception, his birth, his education, and his growth—speaks immediately of his eternal generation.

[Augustine](#): There are two births of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one divine, the other human.... Consider that first begetting: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Whose Word? The Father’s own. Which Word? The Son himself. The Father has never been without the Son; and yet the one who has never been without the Son begot the Son. He both begot and yet did not begin to do so. There is no beginning for one begotten without beginning. And yet he is the Son, and yet he is begotten. A mere human is going to say, “How is it that he is begotten, and yet he does not have a beginning? If he does not have a beginning, how was he begotten?” How, I do not know. Are you asking a mere human how God was begotten? I am overwhelmed by your questioning, but I appeal to the prophet: “His begetting who can tell the tale of?”

[Hilary of Poitiers](#): I will not endure to hear that Christ was born of Mary unless I also hear, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God.”

Cyril of Alexandria: There is nothing older than “the beginning” if we stay with the definition of beginning (for there cannot be a beginning of a beginning), or else it would diverge from being in truth a beginning if there is something else one can imagine before it or that arises before it. Otherwise, if anything can precede what is truly “beginning,” our language respecting it will go on into infinity with beginnings continually cropping up and making the one we are looking at a “second.” ... And since its ever-backward flight has no termination, reaching up to the limit of the ages, the Son will be found to have been not made in time but rather invisibly existing with the Father. For “in the beginning was” the Son. But if he “was in the beginning,” what mind, tell me, can leap over the force of that word was? When will the “was” stay within a boundary, seeing that it always runs before ... whatever conception follows it?

Origen: But it is as the beginning that Christ is Creator, according to which he is wisdom. Therefore as wisdom he is called the beginning. For wisdom says in Solomon, “God created me in the beginning of his ways for his works,” that “the Word might be in the beginning,” in wisdom. It is wisdom that is understood, on the one hand, taken in relation to the structure of contemplation and the thoughts of all things, but it is the Word that is received, taken in relation to the communication of the things that have been contemplated to spiritual beings....

Eusebius of Caesarea: Who beside the Father could clearly understand the Light that was before the world, the intellectual and essential Wisdom that existed before the ages, the living Word that was in the beginning with the Father and that was God, the first and only begotten of God that was before every creature and creation visible and invisible, the commander-in-chief of the rational and immortal host of heaven, the messenger of the great counsel, the executor of the Father’s unspoken will, the creator, with the Father, of all things, the second cause of the universe after the Father, the true and only begotten Son of God, the Lord and God and King of all created things, the one who has received dominion and power, with divinity itself, and with might and honor from the Father.

Cosmas of Maiuma:

The Father begot me, creative Wisdom, before the ages;
He established me as the beginning of his ways
For the works now mystically accomplished
For though I am the uncreated Word by nature,
I make my own the voice
Of the nature I have now assumed.
As I am a man
In reality, not a mirage,
So divinized is the nature which,
By the manner of the exchange,
Is united to me.
Wherefore know that I am one Christ
Who saves that of which and in which I am.

Chrysostom: As when our ship is near shore and cities and ports pass in view before us that on the open sea vanish and leave nothing to fix the eye on, so the Evangelist here takes us with him in his flight above the created world leaving the eye to gaze upon emptiness and an unlimited expanse...For the intellect, having ascended to “the beginning,” enquires, “What beginning?” Finding then that the “was” in the text exceeds its imagination, [the intellect] has no point on which to focus its thought. Looking intently onward but being unable to fix its gaze, it becomes wearied and turns back to things below. Indeed, this expression, “was in the beginning,” is expressive of eternal and infinite being.

Augustine: We are not now discussing, brothers and sisters, possible ways of understanding the text, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It can only be understood in ways beyond words; human words cannot suffice for understanding the Word of God. What we are discussing and stating is why it is not understood. I am not speaking in order that it may be understood but telling you what prevents it being understood.

Basil the Great: Our outward word has some similarity to the divine Word. For our word declares the whole conception of the mind; since what we conceive in the mind we bring out in word. Indeed our heart is as it were the source and the uttered word the stream that flows from there.

Augustine: Words, by their everyday usage, sound and proceeding out of us, have become common, almost despicable things to us, seeming to be nothing more than words. However, there is a word that remains inward, in the very person himself; distinct from the sound that proceeds out of the mouth. There is a word that is truly and spiritually that which you understand by the sound, not being the actual sound itself. Notice, for instance, when I say “God,” how short the word is I have spoken—four letters and two syllables [in Latin]. Is this all that God is, four letters and two syllables? Or is that which is signified as costly as the word is paltry?... What then is in your heart when you think of a certain substance, living, eternal, all-powerful, infinite, everywhere present, everywhere whole, nowhere shut in? When you think of these qualities, this is the word concerning God in your heart. But is this the sound that consists of four letters and two syllables? Therefore, those things that are spoken and pass away are sounds, are letters and are syllables. His word, which sounds, passes away; but what the sound signified—and what is in the speaker as he thought it and in the hearer as he understood it—that is what remains while the sound itself passes away.

Prudentius:

Though you came from the mouth of God,
Born as his Word on earth below,
Yet as his Wisdom you lived
Forever in the Father’s heart.
This Wisdom uttered made the sky,
The sky and light and all besides;
All by the Word’s almighty power
Were fashioned, for the Word was God.

But when the universe was formed
And ordered by unchanging laws,
The Cause and architect divine
In the Father's bosom still remained,
Until the slow revolving years
In centuries at length had passed,
And he himself condescended to come
Down to the world grown old in sin....
But such destruction of humankind
The heart of Christ could not endure;
And lest his Father's handiwork,
Unvindicated, should be lost,
He clothed himself in mortal flesh,
That by arising from the tomb
He might unlock the chains of death
And bring man to his Father's house.
This is your natal day, on which
The high Creator sent you forth,
And gave to you a form of clay,
Uniting flesh with his own Word.

Augustine: We have found the genuine poor person. We have found him to be kind and humble, not trusting in himself, truly poor, a member of the poor man, who became poor for our sake, though he was rich. Look at this rich man of ours, who "for our sake became poor, though he was rich;" see how rich he is: "All things were made through him, and without him was made nothing." There is more to making gold than to having it. You are rich in gold, silver, flocks, household, farms, produce; you were unable to create these things for yourself, though. See how rich he is: "All things were made through him." See how poor he is: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Who can fittingly reflect on his riches, how he makes and is not made, how he creates and is not created, is not formed but forms, forms changeable things while changelessly abiding ephemeral things while he himself is everlasting? Who can fittingly ponder his riches? Let us ponder his poverty instead, in case being poor ourselves we may just be able to grasp it.

Irenaeus: By what God, then, was John, the forerunner, who testifies of the Light, sent [into the world]? Truly it was by him of whom Gabriel is the angel, who also announced the glad tidings of his birth: [that God] who also had promised by the prophets that he would send his messenger before the face of his Son, who should prepare his way, that is, that he should bear witness of that Light in the spirit and power of Elijah. But, again, of what God was Elijah the servant and the prophet? Of him who made heaven and earth, as he does himself confess. John, therefore, having been sent by the founder and maker of this world is ... deemed "more than a prophet." For all the other prophets preached the advent of the paternal Light and desired to be worthy of seeing him whom they preached. But John both announced [the advent] beforehand in the same way as the others did, and actually saw him when he came and pointed him out and persuaded many to believe on him, so that he did himself hold the place of both prophet and apostle.

Jerome: Where we say “sent,” the Hebrew says, “one sent forth”; in Greek apostolos, in Hebrew siloas. You see, therefore, that this John, the prophet, is not only a prophet but also an apostle. Isaiah is sent; he was an apostle. “Here I am, send me!” “Sent” is a term well said.... Those who have come on their own authority and have not been sent are the thieves and robbers. But this man has been sent from God, “whose name was John” and whose name corresponds to his calling. The name “Ioannes” is interpreted as the grace of the Lord, for io means Lord, and anna means grace. And so John is called the grace of the Lord. His mission as messenger he receives from the Lord.

Cyril of Alexandria: Since, according to what was said by God through Moses, “At the mouth of two and three witnesses shall every word be established,” wisely does [John the Evangelist] bring in addition to himself the blessed Baptist.... For he did not suppose that he ought, even if of gravest weight, to demand of the readers in his book concerning our Savior credence above that of the law, and that they should believe him by himself when declaring things above our understanding and sense.

Origen: Some try to undo the testimonies of the prophets to Christ by saying that the Son of God had no need of such witnesses.... To this we may reply that where there are a number of reasons to make people believe, persons are often impressed by one kind of proof and not by another. And with respect to the doctrine of the incarnation, it is certain that some have been forced by the prophetic writings into an admiration of Christ by the fact of so many prophets having, before his advent, fixed the place of his birth [and by other proofs of the same kind].... It is to be remembered too, that, though the display of miraculous powers might stimulate the faith of those who lived in the same age with Christ, they might, in the lapse of time, fail to do so; as some of them might even get to be regarded as fabulous. Prophecy and miracles together are more convincing than simply past miracles by themselves.... We must remember too that people receive honor themselves from the witness that they bear to God.... He, therefore, who maintains that there is no need for the prophetic witness to Christ deprives the choir of prophets of their greatest gift. For what would prophecy, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, have that is so great, if one exclude from it those matters related to the dispensation of our Lord?... John, too, therefore came to bear witness concerning the light.

Augustine: How right it was for the Lord to call John a lamp. This is what the Lord said about John: “He was a burning and a shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to exult in his light.” What, though, does John the Evangelist say about him? “There was a man sent by God, whose name was John; this man came for witness, to bear witness about the light; that man was not the light.” Who? John the Baptist. Who says this? John the Evangelist. “That man was not the light.” You say “that man was not the light,” while the light itself says about him, “That man was a burning and a shining lamp? “But I know,” he says, “what sort of light I am talking about; a light, I am well aware, in comparison with which a lamp is not a light.” Listen to what comes next: “That was the true light that enlightens everyone coming into this world.” John does not enlighten every person; Christ does. And John recognized himself as a lamp, in order not to be blown out by the wind of pride. A lamp can both be lit and be put out. The word of God cannot be put out; a lamp always can.

Cyril of Alexandria: The rational portion of the creation, being enlightened, enlightens by sharing ideas from one mind as they are poured into another. Such enlightenment will rightly be called teaching rather than revelation. But the Word of God “enlightens everyone that comes into the world,” not after the manner of teaching, as the angels, for example, or people, but rather, as God after the mode of creation, he engrafts in each of those that are called into being the seed of wisdom or of divine knowledge and implants a root of understanding. In this way, he renders the living creature rational, allowing it to participate in his own nature and sending into the mind, as it were, certain luminous vapors of the unutterable brightness in a way and mode that only he himself knows. For one may not, I think, say too much on these subjects. Therefore our forefather Adam too is seen to have attained wisdom not in time, as we, but right away from the first beginnings of his being he appears perfect in understanding, preserving in himself the illumination given of God to his nature as yet untroubled and pure and holding the dignity of his nature unadulterated.

The Son therefore lights after the manner of creation, as being himself the very Light. And by participation with the Light the creature shines forth and is therefore called and is light. The creature mounts up to what is above its nature by the kindness of him who glorified it and who crowns it with diverse honors. And so each one of those who have been honored may with good reason come forward and lift up prayers of thanksgiving.... For truly does the Lord commit acts of mercy, rendering those that are little and a mere nothing according to their own nature, great and worthy to be marveled at through his goodness toward them, even as he has, as God, willed to adorn us ungrudgingly with his own goods. And so he calls us gods and light. In fact, what good things are there that he does not call us?

Augustine: But the apostles too, my brothers and sisters, are lamps for the day. Do not imagine that John alone is a lamp and that the apostles are not. The Lord said to them, “You are the light of the world.” And in case they should suppose they were light of the same sort as the light about which it is said, “That was the true light, which enlightens everyone coming into this world,” he went on immediately to teach them this true light. After saying, “You are the light of the world,” he added, “Nobody lights a lamp and puts it under the bushel.” In calling you light, I meant you are a lamp; do not jump about for joy in your pride, in case its little flame gets blown out. I am not placing you under a bushel; but in order to shine, you shall be on the lampstand. Listen to the lampstand; be lamps, and you shall have a lampstand. The cross of Christ is a great lampstand. Whoever wishes to shine must not be ashamed of this wooden lampstand.

Augustine: The Lord Jesus Christ said, “Elijah has come already, and he is John the Baptist.” John, however, when asked, proclaimed that he was not Elijah, just as [he proclaimed] that neither was he the Christ. And, indeed, just as he truly proclaimed that he was not the Christ, so he truly proclaimed that neither was he Elijah. How then shall we compare the words of the herald with the words of the judge? Far be it from the herald to lie, for he says what he hears from the judge. Why then did he say, “I am not Elijah” and the Lord said, “He is Elijah”? Because in him the Lord Jesus Christ wished to prefigure his future coming and to say that John was in the spirit of Elijah. And what John was to

the first coming, this will Elijah be to the second coming.... When John was conceived, or rather when he was born, the Holy Spirit prophesied that this was to be fulfilled with regard to that man. "And he will be," he said, "the forerunner of the most high, in the spirit and power of Elijah." Not then Elijah but "in the spirit and power of Elijah." What is "in the spirit and power of Elijah"? It means in the same Holy Spirit in place of Elijah. Why in place of Elijah? Because what Elijah is to the second coming, this John was to the first.

Gregory the Great: When in another place his disciples asked our Lord about the coming of Elijah, he answered, "Elijah has already come, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they please; and if you want to know, John is Elijah." John, when he was asked, said, "I am not." ... If we carefully examine truth himself, what sounded contradictory is found to be not contradictory. The angel said to Zechariah, of the promised birth of John, that "he will come in the spirit and power of Elijah." This is said because just as Elijah is the forerunner of the Lord's second coming, so was John the forerunner of his first; as Elijah will come as the forerunner of the Judge, so was John the forerunner of the Redeemer. John, then, was Elijah in spirit; he was not Elijah in person. What the Lord spoke of the spirit, John denied of the person. It was right that the Lord should make a spiritual assertion about John to his disciples and that John should answer the same question to the materialistic crowds not about his spirit but about his body. What John said appears to contradict truth, yet he did not depart from the path of truth.

Gregory the Great: When John himself was asked, he answered, "I am not a prophet." He who knew that he was more than a prophet said he was not a prophet. He is said to be more than a prophet because it is a prophet's task to foretell things to come, not to point them out as well. John is more than a prophet because with his finger he pointed to the one he spoke of [right at that moment].

Augustine: The voice came before the Word. How can the voice be before the Word?... We have heard that Christ is the Word; let us hear that John is the voice. When he was asked, "You then, who are you?" he answered, "I am the voice of one crying in the desert." So if Christ is the Word, John the voice, John was taken over as the voice in order that the Word might be spoken to us. And that the Word might come to us, the voice preceded it. That is why it is both true that Christ was before John in eternity, and that all the same, he had not to be born first, unless John came to us before the Word as the voice. So there is going to be a time when we shall see the Word as he is seen by the angels; now, however, let us make progress in the Word, so that we may remain with him forever.

Gregory the Great: I have said before that the prophet called him a voice because he preceded the Word. What he was crying is disclosed to us, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." What else is anyone doing who is preaching the true faith and good works but preparing the way for the Lord to come to his hearers' hearts so that the power of grace may enter them and the light of truth pervade them? He makes the Lord's paths straight when he predisposes the mind for good thoughts by his good preaching.

Gregory the Great: John did not baptize with the Spirit but with water, since he was unable to take away the sins of those being baptized. He washed their bodies with water but not their hearts with pardon. Why did one whose baptism did not forgive sins baptize, except that he was observing his vocation as forerunner? He whose birth foreshadowed greater birth, by his baptizing foreshadowed the Lord who would truly baptize. He whose preaching made him the forerunner of Christ, by baptizing also became his forerunner, using a symbol of the future sacrament. With these other mysteries he makes known the mystery of our Redeemer, declaring that he has stood among people and not been known. The Lord appeared in a human body: he came as God in flesh, visible in his body, invisible in his majesty.

Augustine: And yet, just notice how this forerunner of his Lord, of one who is God and man, how much he humbles himself. No one has arisen greater among those born of women than this man, and here he is, questioned about whether he is himself the Christ. He was so great that people could make this mistake. They wondered whether he was himself the Christ, and they wondered about it seriously enough to question him. Now if he had been a son of pride, not a teacher of humility, he would not have taken steps to make them think that, but he would simply have accepted what they were already thinking. It would possibly have been overreaching himself to wish to persuade people that he was the Christ. If he had tried to do so and had not been believed, he would have been left high and dry, both rejected and dejected, both despised among people and condemned in God's eyes. But there was no need for him to persuade people. He could already see they were thinking this about him. He could simply accept their mistake and boost his own prestige.... Consider how inferior to him he would have been, even if he had been worthy. Consider how much he would have been debasing himself if this is what he had said: "He is greater than I am, and I am only worthy to undo the strap of his sandal." He would have been calling himself worthy at least to stoop down to his feet. But now, as it is, see how exalted he proclaimed him to be when he declared himself unworthy even to touch his feet, or rather his sandals! So John came to teach the proud humility, to proclaim the way of repentance.

Ambrose: Moses was not the bridegroom, for to him comes the word, "Loose your shoe from off your foot," that he might give place to his Lord. Nor was Joshua, the son of Nun, the bridegroom, for to him also it was told, saying, "Loose your shoe from off your foot," lest, by reason of the likeness of his name, he should be thought the spouse of the church. None other is the bridegroom but Christ alone, of whom John said, "He who has the bride is the bridegroom." They, therefore, loose their shoes, but his shoe cannot be loosed, even as John said, "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ... To whom else but the Word of God incarnate can those words apply? "His legs are pillars of marble, set upon bases of gold." For Christ alone walks in the souls and makes his path in the minds of his saints, in which, as upon bases of gold and foundations of precious stone the heavenly Word has left his footprints ineffaceably impressed.

Reformers:

Johannes Brenz: “I baptize with water.” That is to say, “What I do, I do by God’s authority, as confirmed by Isaiah’s testimony.” And we read, “The word of the Lord was made to John,” namely, a word that commanded him by God’s authority to preach a baptism of repentance. “Therefore, the fact that I baptize with water is not due to my temerity or arrogance, but it is due to God’s command. My teaching and baptism, however, are nothing but a preparation and a mortification which look to a future justification. But there is another who now lives among you who is held in contempt as one unknown. He is a true Savior and life-giver, whom you do not know, that is, whom you treat with contempt and whose teaching you regard as heretical; he is a man you regard as vile. Yet he is so great that I acknowledge myself to be completely unworthy to untie the strings of his shoes.” As the saying goes, “I am unworthy to hold out a chamber pot to him.” When you hear “John’s baptism,” do not think only of the dipping of water, but think of the entire business, duty and office of John. For baptism includes both teaching and dipping in water, by which people were consecrated to repentance. I think that the baptism of John and the baptism of Christ were no different in terms of the external performance and ritual. The difference between the two must be sought solely in the teaching. John’s teaching defines John’s baptism. And it is rightly by the teaching of Christ that Christ’s baptism must be considered. John’s teaching mortifies and prepares for justification by the preaching of the Law. Accordingly, his baptism is a sacrament of mortification and future justification. Christ’s baptism gives life and justifies the believer. Accordingly, his baptism is a sacrament of vivification and justification. For such things become sacraments when a word joined to a sacrament promises or furnishes certain things.

Philipp Melanchthon: Now if you seek an allegorical meaning for the shoe, it signifies the Word or the gospel, because we should walk in the Word, not in the light of nature. Thus, “By the Word of the Lord they pitched their tents, and by his Word they marched.” “And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace,” that is, that you should be prepared for the gospel of peace. And, “I have shod you with violet-colored shoes.” Therefore, John says, “whose shoes I am not worthy to bear,” that is, whose Word or gospel I am not worthy to bring. And here, “I am not worthy to loosen his shoe strings,” that is, to unfold the gospel. In whatever way you explain it, it remains that John, who would serve Christ, is acknowledging his unworthiness that all flesh might not boast.

John Calvin:

Vs 6. There was a man.

The Evangelist now begins to discourse about the manner in which the Son of God was manifested in flesh; and that none may doubt that Christ is the eternal Son of God, he relates that Christ was announced by John the Baptist, as his herald. For not only did Christ exhibit himself to be seen by men, but he chose also to be made known by the testimony and doctrine of John; or rather, God the Father sent this witness before his Christ, that they might more willingly receive the salvation offered by him.

But it might at first sight appear ridiculous that Christ should receive testimony from another, as if he needed it; while, on the contrary, he declares that he does not seek testimony from man, (John 5:34.) The answer is easy and obvious, that this witness was appointed, not for the sake of Christ, but for our sake. If it be objected that the testimony of man is too weak to prove that Christ is the Son of God, it is likewise easy to reply, that the Baptist is not adduced as a private witness, but as one who, having received authority from God, sustained the character rather of an angel than of a man. Accordingly, he receives commendation not for his own virtues, but for this single circumstance, that he was the ambassador of God. Nor is this at variance with the fact, that the preaching of the gospel was committed to Christ, that he might be a witness to himself; for the design contemplated by the preaching of John was, that men might attend to the doctrine and miracles of Christ.

Sent by God.

He does not say so for the purpose of confirming the baptism of John, but only mentions it in passing. This circumstance is not sufficient to produce certainty, since many run of their own accord, and boast that God has sent them; but the Evangelist, intending afterwards to speak more fully about this witness, reckoned it enough, for the present, to say in a single word, that John did not come but by the command of God. We shall afterwards see how he himself affirms that God is the Author of his ministry. We must now recollect – what I formerly noticed – that what is asserted about John is required in all the teachers of the Church, that they be called by God; so that the authority of teaching may not be founded on any other than on God alone.

Whose name was John.

He states the name, not only for the purpose of pointing out the man, but because it was given to him in accordance with what he really was. There is no room to doubt that the Lord had reference to the office to which he appointed John, when he commanded by the angel that he should be so called, that by means of it all might acknowledge him to be the herald of divine grace. For though the name יהוחנן (Jehohannan) may be taken in a passive signification, and may thus be referred to the person, as denoting that John was acceptable to God; yet for my own part, I willingly extend it to the benefit which others ought to derive from him.

Vs 7. He came for a testimony.

The end of his calling is briefly noticed; which was, that he might prepare a Church for Christ, as, by inviting all to Christ, he shows plainly enough that he did not come on his own account.

Vs 8. He was not that light.

So far was John from needing commendation, that the Evangelist gives this warning, lest his excessive brightness might obscure the glory of Christ. For there were some who gazed so eagerly upon him that they neglected Christ; just as if a person, enraptured with beholding the dawning of the day, would not deign to turn his eyes towards the sun. In what sense the Evangelist employs the word light we shall immediately see. All the godly, indeed, are light in the Lord, (Ephesians 5:8,) because, in consequence of their being

enlightened by his Spirit, they not only see for themselves, but likewise direct others by their example to the way of salvation. The apostles likewise are peculiarly called light, (Matthew 5:14,) because they go before, holding out the torch of the Gospel, to dispel the darkness of the world. But here the Evangelist speaks of him who is the only and eternal source of illumination, as he immediately shows more clearly.

Vs 9. The true light was.

The Evangelist did not intend to contrast the true light with the false, but to distinguish Christ from all others, that none might imagine that what is called light belongs to him in common with angels or men. The distinction is, that whatever is luminous in heaven and in earth borrows its splendor from some other object; but Christ is the light, shining from itself and by itself, and enlightening the whole world by its radiance; so that no other source or cause of splendor is anywhere to be found. He gave the name of the true light, therefore, to that which has by nature the power of giving light

Which enlighteneth every man.

The Evangelist insists chiefly on this point, in order to show, from the effect which every one of us perceives in him, that Christ is the light. He might have reasoned more ingeniously, that Christ, as the eternal light, has a splendor which is natural, and not brought from any other quarter; but instead of doing so, he sends us back to the experience which we all possess. For as Christ makes us all partakers of his brightness, it must be acknowledged that to him alone belongs strictly this honor of being called light

This passage is commonly explained in two ways. Some restrict the phrase, every man, to those who, having been renewed by the Spirit of God, become partakers of the life-giving light. Augustine employs the comparison of a schoolmaster who, if he happen to be the only person who has a school in the town, will be called the teacher of all, though there be many persons that do not go to his school. They therefore understand the phrase in a comparative sense, that all are enlightened by Christ, because no man can boast of having obtained the light of life in any other way than by his grace. But since the Evangelist employs the general phrase, every man that cometh into the world, I am more inclined to adopt the other meaning, which is, that from this light the rays are diffused over all mankind, as I have already said. For we know that men have this peculiar excellence which raises them above other animals, that they are endued with reason and intelligence, and that they carry the distinction between right and wrong engraven on their conscience. There is no man, therefore, whom some perception of the eternal light does not reach.

But as there are fanatics who rashly strain and torture this passage, so as to infer from it that the grace of illumination is equally offered to all, let us remember that the only subject here treated is the common light of nature, which is far inferior to faith; for never will any man, by all the acuteness and sagacity of his own mind, penetrate into the kingdom of God. It is the Spirit of God alone who opens the gate of heaven to the elect. Next, let us remember that the light of reason which God implanted in men has been so obscured by sin, that amidst the thick darkness, and shocking ignorance, and gulf of errors, there are hardly a few shining sparks that are not utterly extinguished.

Vs 19. And this is the testimony.

Hitherto the Evangelist has related the preaching of John about Christ; he now comes down to a more illustrious testimony, which was delivered to the ambassadors of the Priests, that they might convey it to Jerusalem. He says, therefore, that John openly confessed for what purpose he was sent by God. The first inquiry here is, for what purpose the Priests put questions to him. It is generally believed that, out of hatred to Christ, they gave to John an honor which did not belong to him; but this could not be the reason, for Christ was not yet known to them. Others say that they were better pleased with John, because he was of the lineage and order of the priesthood; but neither do I think that this is probable; for since they expected from Christ all prosperity, why did they voluntarily contrive a false Christ? I think, therefore, that there was another reason that induced them. It was now a long time since they had the Prophets; John came suddenly and contrary to expectation; and the minds of all were aroused to expect the Messiah. Besides, all entertained the belief that the coining of the Messiah was at hand...

All ambassadors – even those who are not sent on matters of great importance – obtain the name and authority of ambassadors, because they hold special commissions. Such were all the Prophets who, having been enjoined to deliver certain predictions, discharged the prophetic office. But if some weighty matter come to be transacted, and if two ambassadors are sent, one of whom announces the speedy arrival of another who possesses full power to transact the whole matter, and if this latter has received injunctions to bring it to a conclusion, will not the former embassy be reckoned a part and appendage of the latter, which is the principal? Such was the case with John the Baptist, to whom God had given no other injunction than to prepare the Jews for listening to Christ, and becoming his disciples. That this is the meaning, will still more fully appear from the context; for we must investigate the opposite clause, which immediately follows. I am not a prophet, says he, but a voice crying in the wilderness. The distinction lies in this, that the voice crying, that a way may be prepared for the Lord, is not a prophet, but merely a subordinate minister, so to speak; and his doctrine is only a sort of preparation for listening to another Teacher. In this way John, though he is more excellent than all the prophets, still is not a prophet

Vs 26. I baptize with water.

This ought to have been abundantly sufficient for the correction of their mistake, but a reproof otherwise clear is of no advantage to the deaf; for, when he sends them to Christ, and declares that Christ is present, this is a clear proof not only that he was divinely appointed to be a minister of Christ, but that he is the true Elijah, who is sent to testify that the time is come for the renovation of the Church. There is a contrast here which is not fully stated; for the spiritual baptism of Christ is not expressly contrasted with the external baptism of John, but that latter clause about the baptism of the Spirit might easily be supplied, and shortly afterwards both are set down by the Evangelist.

This answer may be reduced to two heads: first, that John claims nothing for himself but what he has a right to claim, because he has Christ for the Author of his baptism, in which consists the truth of the sign; and, secondly, that he has nothing but the administration of the outward sign, while the whole power and efficacy is in the hands of Christ alone. Thus

he defends his baptism so far as its truth depends on anything else; but, at the same time, by declaring that he has not the power of the Spirit, he exalts the dignity of Christ, that the eyes of men may be fixed on him alone. This is the highest and best regulated moderation, when a minister borrows from Christ whatever authority he claims for himself, in such a manner as to trace it to him, ascribing to him alone all that he possesses.

It is a foolish mistake, however, into which some people have been led, of supposing that John's baptism was different from ours; for John does not argue here about the advantage and usefulness of his baptism, but merely compares his own person with the person of Christ. In like manner, if we were inquiring, at the present day, what part belongs to us, and what belongs to Christ, in baptism, we must acknowledge that Christ alone performs what baptism figuratively represents, and that we have nothing beyond the bare administration of the sign. There is a twofold way of speaking in Scripture about the sacraments; for sometimes it tells us that they are the laver of regeneration, (Titus 3:5;) that by them our sins are washed away, (1 Peter 3:21;) that we are in-grafted into the body of Christ, that our old man is crucified, and that we rise again to newness of life, (Romans 6:4, 5, 6;) and, in those cases, Scripture joins the power of Christ with the ministry of man; as, indeed, man is nothing else than the hand of Christ. Such modes of expression show, not what man can of himself accomplish, but what Christ performs by man, and by the sign, as his instruments. But as there is a strong tendency to fall into superstition, and as men, through the pride which is natural to them, take from God the honor due to him, and basely appropriate it to themselves; so Scripture, in order to restrain this blasphemous arrogance, sometimes distinguishes ministers from Christ, as in this passage, that we may learn that ministers are nothing and can do nothing.