

The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

**COURSE SYLLABUS: John Part II**

| <b><u>WEEK</u></b> | <b><u>TOPIC</u></b>  | <b><u>WEEK</u></b> | <b><u>TOPIC</u></b>  |
|--------------------|--|--------------------|--|
| 1                  | <b>Witness of Works – John 5:1-18</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A Tale of Two Sinners</li> <li>▪ God’s Ongoing Work</li> <li>▪ The Battle is Joined</li> </ul>          | 9                  | <b>Rivers of Living Water</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revelation &amp; Concealment</li> <li>• Jesus’ Origins</li> <li>• No Man Ever Spoke Like Him</li> </ul>             |
| 2                  | <b>Two Resurrections</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keynote Address</li> <li>• Realized Eschatology</li> <li>• First &amp; Second Resurrections</li> </ul>               | 10                 | <b>Pericope de Adultera</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Textual Criticism</b></li> <li>• <b>In or Out?</b></li> <li>• <b>Judge with Righteous Judgment</b></li> </ul>      |
| 3                  | <b>Call the Witnesses!</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How Do We Know It’s God?</li> <li>• Missing the Point</li> <li>• Jews Outside of Jesus</li> </ul>                  | 11                 | <b>I Am the Light of the World</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowing the Father</li> <li>• Hostility Increases</li> </ul>   |
| 4                  | <b>Manna in the Wilderness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moses Wrote of Jesus</li> <li>• The Nature of the Miracle</li> <li>• Grace upon Grace</li> </ul>               | 12                 | <b>Free Indeed!</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emancipation Proclamation</li> <li>• The Slave and the Son</li> <li>• Before Abraham was, I AM</li> </ul>                     |
| 5                  | <b>Works or Faith?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seedbed of Insurrection</li> <li>• King of All Creation</li> <li>• The Work of God...Faith</li> </ul>                  | 13                 | <b>Healing the Man Born Blind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whence Evil?</li> <li>• Why Spittle?</li> <li>• I Am the Light of the World</li> </ul>                          |
| 6                  | <b>The Bread of Life</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amen, Amen...</li> <li>• Total Depravity &amp; Irresistible Grace</li> <li>• The Lord’s Supper and John 6</li> </ul> | 14                 | <b>The Dialectic of Unbelief</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logical Processes</li> <li>• The Downward Spiral of Unbelief</li> <li>• The Rise of Faith in the Soul</li> </ul> |
| 7                  | <b>To Whom Shall We Go?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Winnowing Fork</li> <li>• Skandalon</li> <li>• To Whom Shall We Go?</li> </ul>                                    | 15                 | <b>“I See!” Said the Blind Man</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Rabbi Talks With Jesus</li> <li>• Consequential Judgment</li> <li>• Into Deeper Darkness</li> </ul>          |
| 8                  | <b>The Feast of Tabernacles</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus’ Brothers</li> <li>• Jesus’ Time &amp; the World’s Time</li> <li>• Righteous Judgment</li> </ul>        | 16                 | •  |
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**Week 1: The Witness of Works**

**Text Reading:** John 5:1 - 18

*“In the works of Jesus the Jews are confronted with the works of God.”  
(Sir Edwyn Hoskyns)*

When Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of darkness, his opening words reflected the common view among the Jews of that era, *“Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”*<sup>1</sup> The testimony of Jesus’ work bore witness to Nicodemus that this man was no mere rabbi, no student of the rabbis, but a teacher from God. The same impact was made on the multitudes, as John records in chapter 7,

*But many of the multitude believed in Him; and they were saying, ‘When the Christ shall come, He will not perform more signs than those which this man has, will He?’* (John 7:31)

Jesus’ disciples were also influence powerfully by the works that Jesus did, as Peter’s first sermon indicates,

*Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a **Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs** which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know – Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having <sup>lo</sup>loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.* (Acts 2:22-24)

To the Jew of the Second Temple era, the advent of the promised Messiah was not going to be evidenced by a simple announcement, ‘I am the Christ.’ Jesus Himself even warned His disciples about those who would claim the title, and we read both in the book of Acts and in Josephus that there had already been messianic claimants before Jesus. The time was right; many took advantage of the expectation to take upon themselves the mantel of Messiah. But only One was the Christ, and it was crucial that the ‘witness’ to that One be true and clear. This was well attested by the messianic prophecies of the Old

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:2

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Testament, some of which link the advent of the Coming One with the coming of God Himself.

*Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are fearful-hearted, "Be strong, do not fear!  
Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God;  
He will come and save you."*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.  
Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing.  
For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.*

(Isaiah 35:3-6)

*The LORD opens the eyes of the blind;*

*The LORD raises those who are bowed down*

(Psalm 146:8)

Works – signs and wonders, miracles – were not meant to be the only witness; there was also the witness of Scripture and the witness of the forerunner, the Elijah who was to come. But neither can works be diminished in importance; the One who was the Messiah was rightly expected to do messianic works. Therefore, Jesus himself appeals to His own works on several occasions,

*But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish – the very works that I do – bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.* (John 5:36)

*Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch. Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me.*

(John 10:22-25)

The current section in the Gospel of John deals primarily with the witness of Jesus' works. This focus falls in line with the overall purpose the author gives for writing the gospel in the first place, as he notes that 'many other signs therefore Jesus also performed,' John concludes, "but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that all of Jesus' works – or at least all of those that John records – are compressed into the chapters we are

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<sup>2</sup> John 20:31



**Herman Ridderbos (1909-2007)**

studying in this lesson, Chapters 5 through 9. It is merely to say that the *witness* of Jesus' works is the main focal point of this section; the fact that the works that Jesus did, among other things, *bore unmistakable witness* to His being the promised Messiah. But this section also highlights the fact that Jesus' works were not in themselves sufficient for salvation. The overall pericope is bracketed by two similar miracles, though with quite different results. The story in Chapter 5, therefore, "clearly functions...as the counterpart to the story in ch. 9 of the man born blind. The point here is not just the healing but, as in ch. 9, the reaction to the healing."<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter 5 and again in Chapter 9 we read of healings performed by Jesus. The narratives have striking similarities. Each of the men healed had been in his affliction for a long time; in Chapter 5, the man had been a paralytic for thirty-eight years; in Chapter 9 the man was born blind. Both narratives involve a pool: the pool of Bethesda in Chapter 5, of Siloam in Chapter 9. In each case the healed man was immediately interrogated by the religious leaders, and in each case the healed man did not know the full identity of the one who healed him.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in each case Jesus revealed Himself to the healed man as the One responsible for the man's new health; but here the similarities end. It can reasonably be surmised that in only one case did the healing result in faith and salvation.

It is significant that in neither case did Jesus use the common formula, "*Your faith has made you well.*" Each miracle was monergistic; performed by Jesus as an attestation of His identity as the Christ, and not sought out prior by the recipient. Indeed, in the first case Jesus asks the paralytic if he desired to be made well, to which question the man offers a somewhat evasive – certainly not direct – answer. It was, therefore, evidently God's will (and God's work) that these men should each be healed by Jesus; but that does not mean that it was God's will (or Jesus' intention) that each man be saved. "The

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<sup>3</sup> Ridderbos, Herman *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1997); 187.

<sup>4</sup> The blind man knew that his benefactor was named 'Jesus,' but seemed not to know anything more about Him; the paralytic did not even stop to get Jesus' name.

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sovereign initiative is with Jesus; no reason is given for his choice.”<sup>5</sup> This often troubles students and teachers of the Bible, who desire to see in the works of Jesus the effective salvation of those whom He heals. To be sure, the text does not explicitly tell us that the first man was not saved; though it must be noted that in the second account the healed man gives the exultant response, “*Lord, I believe!*” and worshipped Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

An example of the traditional view that, because he was healed by Jesus, the man in Chapter 5 was a believer, is maintained by Charles Simeon, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Anglican commentator of generally strong evangelical doctrine. Simeon writes, “Every man that has received the grace of God in truth, will revolt at the idea of continuing in sin.”<sup>7</sup> Simeon sees Jesus’ admonition to the recently healed paralytic as one



**Charles Simeon (1759-1836)**

that fits the general exhortation to continued obedience that stands before every believer. But the fact of the text is that there is no indication from the healed man himself that he ever displayed faith in the One who healed him. Rather, and as opposed to the man in Chapter 9, the healed paralytic wasted no time in reporting the identity of his healer to the religious authorities who had originally interrogated him after they caught him carrying his mat on the Sabbath.

The narrative of Chapter 5 is meant to coordinate with the similar one in Chapter 9; they form bookends for this particular section of John’s Gospel. They do not, however, serve to show the inevitable salvation of those whom Jesus healed. The healings themselves were never intended to be the means of salvation and were no more effective in producing this blessed result than, say, the feeding of the five thousand, also narrated in this same section of the Gospel. The point of Jesus’ works was, again, to bear witness to His identity as the Son of God, the promised Messiah of Israel. They might lead a sinner to faith, and thus to salvation; but that was not their primary purpose.

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<sup>5</sup> Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; 1991); 243.

<sup>6</sup> John 9:38

<sup>7</sup> Simeon, Charles *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible: Volume XIII* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1955); 323.

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*After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had.*  
(5:1-4)

There are a remarkable number of textual and interpretive difficulties with these opening verses, though thankfully none of these difficulties has any real bearing on the interpretation of the entire narrative, nor on any article of faith. Two such difficulties are worth noting briefly, as they are commonly found in good commentaries. The first is geographical; the second textual. The geographical issue arises primarily from the fact that the Jerusalem in which Jesus walked and worked has long ago passed into archaeological oblivion, and scholars are forced to guess where certain landmarks were. Such is the 'Sheep's Gate' (and there is some



**Mikva'ot**

textual argument as to whether even this is the right translation. The name of the pool by this gate, Bethesda, is only one of a handful of possible spellings for the place; the once most commonly employed by English translators. The name means 'House of Outpouring,' and may relate to an ancient *mikva'ot*, or pool fed by running water. Archaeologists have not yet confirmed the particular pool mentioned in this passage, but that by no means indicates that the pool was not there. *Mikv'ot* were relatively minor architectural features in the city, though there were many of them. They would hardly have survived the destruction of the city by the Romans in AD 70, and searching for a particular *mikva'ot* through the ancient rubble underlying Jerusalem would be seeking the proverbial needle in the haystack.

The Greek of the passage, as noted above, is somewhat indeterminate as to the location of this pool, though the Sheep Gate is as likely a candidate as any other option. This is because we know from prior biblical testimony, that there was a Sheep Gate, and we roughly know where it was located. It is mentioned several times in the book of Nehemiah.

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*Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They built as far as the Tower of the Hundred, and consecrated it, then as far as the Tower of Hananel... And between the upper room at the corner, as far as the Sheep Gate, the goldsmiths and the merchants made repairs.* (Nehemiah 3:1, 32)<sup>8</sup>

The exact location of the story in Chapter 5 is of little significance to the meaning of the story. That it occurred at a *mikva'ot* stands to reason, as these were the central locations for ritual cleansing in Second Temple Jerusalem. As physical affliction was often associated with ritual uncleanness (i.e., leprosy), a place of ritual cleansing would quite naturally become a place of physical healing; or at least that is where the afflicted would most expect to be healed. The Pool of Bethesda was apparently an especially popular spot, as some patron or patrons of the afflicted had erected pavilions under which the sick and the lame could find shade as they waited for the healing phenomenon to take place. It is this phenomenon, recorded in 5:4, that is the second cause of concern from this passage: *For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had.*

This is, to say the least, a quite singular verse in the New Testament and seems out of place with all other records of divine healing. Luthardt, one of many who rejects the authenticity of the verse, writes, "If this passage were genuine, it would find its analogue



**Christoph Luthardt (1823-1902)**

in no other."<sup>9</sup> Textual analysis generally concludes that verse 4, which is not well attested in the ancient manuscripts, was a later gloss derived from verse 7, where the manuscript evidence is quite solid. D. A. Carson writes, "That the waters were disturbed on occasion is clear from v. 7, where the text is firm. Probably the lines in vv. 3b-4 were first introduced as marginal glosses (not every clause was introduced at the same time), reflecting popular belief about the cause of the water's disturbance."<sup>10</sup> A more 'natural' explanation of the disturbing of the water would be that this particular *mikva-ot* was fed by a natural, but not constant,

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Nehemiah 12:39

<sup>9</sup> Luthardt, Christoph *St. John's Gospel* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1877); 95.

<sup>10</sup> Carson; 242.

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spring. The strongest argument against the inclusion of verse 4 in the text is that it assigns the work of healing to an angel, something without precedent or analogy in Scripture.

In any event, something miraculous happened at this *mikva-ot* near the Sheep Gate, for it was frequented by many people who were ‘*sick, lame, blind, paralyzed.*’ If nothing ever happened at this pool, word would quickly spread among the afflicted of the city and there would be no need for the sheltering pavilions. That this pool was so frequently visited is a fact at the heart of the story, for it was because of the many people that the object of Christ’s attention and healing was perennially unable to make it to the water in time.

*Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered Him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me.” (5:5-7)*

There may be honor among thieves, but evidently not among the sick at the Pool of Bethesda near the Sheep Gate in ancient Jerusalem. One can easily envision the madcap mayhem as, at the first sign of the water stirring, everyone dashes for the water with no regard for anyone else. Here is a man who has been coming to this pool for thirty-eight years; one would think that the sheer persistence of the man would elicit *some* consideration among his fellow sufferers. But no, “*while I am coming, another steps down before me.*” There is extreme pathos in this testimony; pure hopelessness and despair, even beyond anger. Luthardt refers to the man’s response as “spoken with a certain tone of resignation.”<sup>11</sup> Ryle elaborates,

This is no doubt mentioned as an intentional proof of the heartlessness and unkindness of human nature. Think of a poor invalid waiting for years by the water, and having not a single friend to help him! The longer we live on earth the more we shall find that it is a selfish world, and that the sick and afflicted have few real friends in time of need. ‘The poor is hated even by his neighbor’ (Prov. xiv. 20) Christ is the only unfailing friend of the friendless and helper of the helpless.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps it is also a manifestation of the man’s utter despair that he really does not answer Jesus’ question. He was *asked* whether he desired to be made well; he *responded*

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<sup>11</sup> Luthardt; 96.

<sup>12</sup> Ryle, J. C. *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John Volume 1* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd.; 1975); 275.

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with a narrative of his helplessness vis-à-vis the stirred waters of the pool. We will soon find out explicitly what is implied in the man's response: he truly had no idea to whom he was talking. For all the invalid knew, his interrogator was a reporter with the *Jerusalem Times*, writing a special-interest piece on the sick at the Pool of Bethesda (perhaps an investigative work on whether the sick people at the well really wanted to be healed, or were just playing the system). Jesus' actual question is itself quite powerful, and certainly not one for which there is an obvious answer. "Jesus' question went home to the heart of the trouble. Did the man really want to be cured? It may seem a strange question, but it was possible that, after so many years in that condition, the man preferred not to face the challenge of a normal healthy life."<sup>13</sup> This assessment may be confirmed by the fact that the man did not answer with the natural and immediate, 'Yes!' but rather gave a lengthy reason why he had not been successful up to that point. After thirty-eight years, it is hard to imagine the man had any hope of being successful in the future.

It has been popular to allegorize this conversation, to link the waters of the pool to the Torah, and to derive from the exchange another proof that salvation (healing) cannot come from the Law, and that those who attempt to find salvation through the Law are like the invalid, hopeless and doomed to failure. The man's thirty-eight years in this predicament has also been allegorized as reflecting Israel's thirty-eight years wandering in the wilderness (*cp.* Deut. 2:14). All such allegorical interpretations lack any substantiation from the text. Furthermore, they misdirect the reader from the real import of the passage – the self-attesting power of the works of Jesus. Rather than continue this fruitless conversation, Jesus takes command of the situation.

*Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath.* (5:8-9)

The command that Jesus gives the invalid – and make no mistake, it was a command – is the Greek word *egeirei*, Rise!, anticipates the powerful monologue later in the chapter, where Jesus speaks of the two resurrections. "Jesus' powerful word heals the man: Get up! Anticipates the powerful voice of the Son of God on the last day (vv. 28-29),

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce, F. F. *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1983); 123.

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even as it exemplifies that powerful voice now (v. 25).<sup>14</sup> Commentators have sought to find faith within the healed man in the fact that he obeyed Jesus and took up his pallet and began walking. But it is perhaps better to hear in the voice of Jesus, the promised Messiah, the Son of God, a command that could not be disobeyed, a voice in which the power to walk was so evident that the man could no more stay on his mat than he could get himself into the stirred pool on time. It is as Augustine famously prayed, “Lord, grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt.” Luthardt simply writes, “Jesus’ words fulfill themselves.”<sup>15</sup> It is as one expects when God speaks.

But it was the Sabbath (and of course Jesus knew that), and it was against the ‘law’ to carry one’s mat on the Sabbath. And so an act of mercy and kindness becomes, again, a cause of controversy and opposition from ‘the Jews.’ We are reminded of John’s use of the phrase *the Jews* as not applying to the entire Jewish nation, but rather and particularly to the religious leaders who increasingly set themselves against Jesus, and begin to plot His demise. “The Jews hear of the wonderful healing and of the formal breach of their code, and are interested only in the latter.”<sup>16</sup>

*The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, “It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed.” He answered them, “He who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your bed and walk.’” Then they asked him, “Who is the Man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk?’” But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in that place.* (5:10-13)

This is where the contrast between the healed paralytic of Chapter 5 and the healed blind man of Chapter 9 begins to become evident. In both cases Jesus withdraws immediately upon healing the man, and only encounters the healed man later, after each has been interrogated by ‘the Jews.’ The unreasoning unbelief of the Jews is also evident in both narratives. Here we read the man explain the credentials of the One who commanded him to carry his pallet – *He who made me well*. But the Jews hear only that this man was commanded by someone to break their sabbatical code, “*Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk?’*” One could imagine the healed man fairly shouting in reply, THE ONE WHO HEALED ME! In fact, as we shall see at the end of this section of John’s Gospel, this is basically the response of the blind man who was healed in Chapter 9,

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<sup>14</sup> Carson; 243.

<sup>15</sup> Luthardt; 96.

<sup>16</sup> Carson; 245.

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He answered and said, “Whether He is a sinner *or not* I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see.”

*Then they said to him again, “What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?” He answered them, “I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?” Then they reviled him and said, “You are His disciple, but we are Moses’ disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from.” The man answered and said to them, “Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from; yet He has opened my eyes! Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him. Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing.”* (John 9:25-33)

It is fairly obvious that the man in Chapter 5 is made of less stern material than the man in Chapter 9. “John’s deft portrait of the invalid throughout this chapter paints him in far more dour hues.”<sup>17</sup> The healed paralytic seems primarily motivated by a desire to stay clear of the Jews; to stay out of trouble with the religious authorities. He defends himself – he is clearly carrying his pallet on the Sabbath, probably on the way home – by saying he was merely doing what he was commanded to do by the One who gave him the strength to carry his bed in the first place. “But in his reply there may be the implication that one who was able to work such a cure must be possessed of peculiar authority, and that to obey such a person’s command seemed a clear duty.”<sup>18</sup>

The sabbatical command that was being violated is not one that is found in Scripture. Israel was command to engage in no work on the Sabbath, but the definition of ‘work’ had evolved over the generations to include a long list of items – and, of course, carrying one’s bed was on the list. Well, it was implied by the list, which reads as follows:

Sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, and baking. Shearing wool, bleaching, hackling, dyeing, spinning, stretching the threads, the making of two meshes, weaving two threads, dividing two threads, tying [knotting] and untying, sewing two stitches, and tearing in order to sew two stitches. Capturing a deer, slaughtering, or flaying, or salting it, curing its hide, scraping it [of its hair], cutting it up, writing two letters, and erasing in order to write two letters [over the erasure]. Building, pulling down, extinguishing, kindling, striking with a hammer, and

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<sup>17</sup> Carson; 243

<sup>18</sup> Bruce; 125.

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**carrying out anything from one domain to another.** These are the forty primary labors less one. (Mishnah Shabbath 7:2)

From this long list of what is prohibited on the Sabbath, the offense of the man carrying his bed must be found couched in a catch-all phrase at the end, *carrying out anything from one domain to another*. The narrative is designed to highlight the growing conflict between the Jews and Jesus, especially as the two parties disagree on the interpretation of Scripture. Note that the man says that Jesus *commanded* him to carry his pallet – he fails to mention that this command was itself part of a more important one, *Get up!* Nonetheless, Jesus gave the man a command that was in direct opposition to the tradition of the Jewish religious leaders, especially the rabbis and Pharisees. “The Old Testament does not prohibit this activity, but rabbinic interpretation of the command not to work on the sabbath did prohibit it (*m. Sabbat* 7:2). Since Jesus explicitly commanded the man the man to carry his mat, we have a conflict between interpretations of God’s will.”<sup>19</sup> Though the basic thrust of this section of John’s Gospel is the testimony of the works of Jesus to His messianic claim, underlying this is the growing opposition of the Jews to Jesus that will culminate in the latter’s arrest, trial, and death.

Thus we may ask why it was that Jesus commanded the man to do that which He undoubtedly knew would offend the Jews. Was Jesus itching for a fight? Other instances in which Jesus withdrew from a region because of the hostility of the Jews would seem to indicate that this was not the case; Jesus was not being belligerent. It might have been more politic to tell the man to go home and to return the next day to get his mat, but Jesus had another purpose in mind. As C. K. Barrett notes, “Just as thirty-eight years prove the gravity of the disease, so the carrying of the bed and the walking prove the completeness of the cure.”<sup>20</sup> Jesus’ actions were not intended to provoke the wrath of the Jews, but rather to show the truth of His claim to have been sent by God. This would, of course, provoke the wrath of the Jews, and Jesus knew this; but that was not His primary purpose. “Jesus intended



**C. K. Barrett (1917-2011)**

<sup>19</sup> Whitacre, Rodney A. *John* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 1999); 121.

<sup>20</sup> Barrett, C. K. *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: The Macmillan Company; 1957); 212.

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both the healing of the man and his carrying the bed on the Sabbath “not as a challenge to the sabbath commandment but as a sign of victory over suffering and death and thus of the glory of God.”<sup>21</sup> This is an important lesson concerning all biblical (and other) miracles; they are never intended solely for the immediate end of the miracle itself, but rather for the testimony of God’s revelation and for His glory.

*Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.” The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.* (5:14-15)

There can be no reasonable doubt that Jesus knew all that was transpiring; His ‘finding’ the man in the Temple is itself purposeful, not happenstance. It is well that the man was found in the Temple, probably offering the appropriate sacrifice from one who was just healed of a long-term affliction. But this in itself does not mean that the man was a believer, and the sequel seems strongly to indicate that he was not. Again, it is useful to compare the dialogue here (sparse as it is) with the one recorded in Chapter 9 involving the healing of the man born blind. He, too, had an exchange with the religious leaders, though he was far more combative than the man before us in Chapter 5. Afterward, Jesus also found the man whom He had healed of blindness. Consider the two interviews:

### **John 5:14-15**

*Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.” The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.*

### **John 9:35-38**

*Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him, He said to him, “Do you believe in the Son of God?” He answered and said, “Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?” And Jesus said to him, “You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you.” Then he said, “Lord, I believe!” And he worshiped Him.*

Jesus challenges each man, but in significantly different ways. To the first he exhorts, “Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.” This is an odd thing to say to a man just recently healed, though it is not without analogy in the Gospels. Jesus essentially says the same thing to the woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no

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<sup>21</sup> Ridderbos; 188.

*more.*"<sup>22</sup> The issue in both cases is that the narrative leaves unstated what condition the healed/forgiven sinner is after their encounter with Jesus. It is convenient to assume that they immediately become disciples, or at least believers, but the contrast between the two men in Chapters 5 and 9 seems to argue against this conclusion. While the healed blind man falls to his knees and worships Jesus, the healed paralytic immediately reports back to those whom he must have known harbored deep animosity toward the Man who had just healed him. At the very least, this was bad form. Most likely it was an alliance willingly made by the healed man with the traditional religious establishment and against Jesus, in spite of the fact that the latter had healed him. Faith does not come by miracles. "But the healed paralytic returns to 'the Jews.' He takes their side, remains in his old world, and does not let himself be led out of it by Jesus, neither by his healing nor by the warning word of farewell."<sup>23</sup> Whitacre summarizes the comparison between the two cases, "This man's betrayal of Jesus is in marked contrast to the blind man's devotion (chap. 9), for the blind man confesses Jesus by standing up to the very opponents this man sides with against Jesus. The man's ingratitude is apparent."<sup>24</sup>

Of that 'warning word of farewell' we need to speak at least a little. Does Jesus' warning to 'sin no more' mean that the man's affliction for thirty-eight years was the direct result of a particular sin? It is commonly, and reasonably, assumed that when Jesus tells the woman caught in adultery to 'sin no more,' He is referring to the specific sin for which she was brought before Him. There is, of course, no indication of any such sin in regard to the paralytic, only that he had been in that condition for thirty-eight years. The question is raised by most commentators, and most conclude the same: We simply do not know.

It is a commonplace in many strands of Jewish and Christian theology that suffering and tragedy are the effluent of the fall, the corollary of life lived in a fallen and rebellious universe. In that sense, all sickness is the result of sin, but not necessarily of some specific, individual sin...But although suffering and illness have this deep, theological connection with sin in general, and although John elsewhere insists that a specific ailment is not *necessarily* the result of a specific sin (9:3, there is nothing in any of this that precludes the

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<sup>22</sup> John 8:11

<sup>23</sup> Ridderbos; 190.

<sup>24</sup> Whitacre; 123.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

possibility that *some* ailments are the *direct* consequences of *specific* sins. And that is the most natural reading of this verse.<sup>25</sup>

We should avoid the view that illness is always connected to some particular sin, almost as if one could work out a precise formula for the connection. We should also reject the idea that there is never such a connection.<sup>26</sup>

*For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. (5:16-18)*

In the Gospels it is evident that the Sabbath was a serious bone of contention between the Jews and Jesus. The former constantly and consistently chastised the latter for violating the Sabbath in various ways, all of which in reality constituted only violations of the rabbinic traditions and ‘hedges’ concerning the Sabbath, and not the biblical commands themselves. Jesus shows on several occasions that works of mercy are not only permissible, but commanded, on the Sabbath. That particular facet of the debate, however, does not seem to be at issue in this passage; the Jews seem primarily upset because Jesus told the healed man to do what was not lawful on the Sabbath. “Inciting others to break the law (as they understood it) was worse than breaking it oneself.”<sup>27</sup> It is significant to this narrative, perhaps even more so than others, that Jesus is not satisfied with leaving the matter as a disagreement between rabbis – He intends for these signs and wonders, and especially those done on the Sabbath, to bear witness to His claim to be the One *sent by the Father* who does the Father’s will. If gasoline had been available at that time, Jesus can be seen pouring it on the fire of the Jews’ wrath.

It was clear from the Scriptures that God had forbidden that work be done on the Sabbath; on this point all were agreed. But the rabbis engaged in constant debate as to what constituted work, and also whether God continued to work even on the Sabbath. On this latter point there was broad agreement that God *did* continue to work His divine work of Providence even on the weekly Sabbath and, that by so doing, He did not become

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<sup>25</sup> Carson; 246.

<sup>26</sup> Whitacre; 122.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce; 126.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Himself a lawbreaker. D. A. Carson summarizes a late 1<sup>st</sup> Century rabbinic opinion on the matter which reflects a longstanding consensus that God does indeed continually work.

About the end of the first century, four eminent rabbis (Rabban Gamaliel II, R. Joshua, R. Eleazar b. Azariah, and R. Akiba) discussed this point, and concluded that although God works constantly, he cannot rightly be charged with violating the Sabbath law, since (1) the entire universe is his domain (Isa. 6:3), and therefore he never carries anything outside it; (2) otherwise put, God fills the whole world (Je. 23:24); and in any case (3) God lifts nothing to a height greater than his own stature.<sup>28</sup>

Contemporaneous with Jesus, the Hellenistic Jewish theologian-philosopher Philo Judaeus wrote, “God never ceases from action. As it is the property of fire to burn and of snow to chill, so action belongs to God; and more than these as He is the source of action in all other beings.”<sup>29</sup> This it can be reasonably concluded that Jewish scholars of all flavors accepted the principle that the Sabbath command did not apply to God, that He continued to work at all times, and that this fact did not constitute God a breaker of His own law. Thus Jesus’ response could hardly have been more incendiary, “*My Father works until now, and I work until now.*” This statement was, as the Jews interpreted it to be, a statement of full equality between Jesus and God. “In the work of Jesus the Jews are confronted by the work of God.”<sup>30</sup>

The theological issue has had to do with the nature of the divine rest on the seventh day, the Sabbath. The introductory text for the Sabbath explains the nature of God’s rest.

*Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.* (Genesis 2:1-3)

The context of the original divine rest is clearly the original divine work of *creation*. The implication of God’s continued Providence, even on subsequent Sabbaths, is that God has a continuing work not related to creation. Luthardt writes, “God did not contrast the Sabbath with his action in general. He contrasted it with, and set it at the end of, his act of creation. At that point began a new activity on the part of God, and its Sabbath has not

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<sup>28</sup> Carson; 247, quoting from *Exodus Rabbah* 30:9. Cf. Barrett; 213.

<sup>29</sup> Hoskyns, Edwyn Clement *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber Limited; 1947); 266.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*; 267.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

come yet...Hence all the action of God since the creation, or rather since the Sabbath of God which concluded the creation, is essentially related only to Christ and his work...Since God the creator rests from creating, God the redeemer works through the Son. The new Sabbath came with the day of the glorification of Christ in his resurrection."<sup>31</sup> This interpretation is seemingly confirmed by the continuing present tenses used by Jesus in His response to the Jews, "*My father **has been working** until now and I **have been working** [until now].*" We cannot miss the crucial importance of this claim; from the perspective of the Jews, it alone explains the inexorable path of Jesus to the cross.

This, therefore, is something much more serious even than the violation of the Sabbath. It is – or appears to be – a direct assault upon the central affirmation of the Old Testament: 'The Lord our God is one Lord,' and upon the command which necessarily follows, 'You shall have no other gods before me.' For a man to 'make himself equal with God' is the ultimate blasphemy, with which there can be no compromise...The words of Jesus – if they mean what they appear to mean – can only be a declaration of war to the death.<sup>32</sup>

Beginning with verse 19, Jesus proceeds to affirm that his words in verse 17 mean exactly what they appear to mean; the battle is fully joined.

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<sup>31</sup> Luthardt; 101-102.

<sup>32</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1982); 65.s

**Week 2: Two Resurrections**

**Text Reading:** John 5:19 - 30

*“The future judgment...  
certainly is only the completion and appearance  
of the essential judgment,  
which at present is already in process.”  
(Christoph Luthardt)*

Anglican theologian Rodney Whitacre speaks of the passage before us in this lesson as Jesus’ “Keynote Address,” referring to the contents as “the Revelation of the Father’s Son.”<sup>33</sup> Whitacre compares this passage with the Prologue of the Gospel of John, pointing out how the current passage recapitulates and intensifies the former, “The prologue began with the relation of the Father and the Son, and now Jesus’ first major public teaching in this Gospel begins with the same topic. It is this relationship that makes sense out of everything Jesus says or does, and so this rich passage requires special attention.”<sup>34</sup> Whitacre is correct in emphasizing this passage as programmatic of all of Jesus’ teaching and action, as in it the Lord not only reiterates the closest possible relationship between Himself and the Father but carries the thought as far as it can possibly be taken: to the *Judgment*. Yet Jesus does not speak only of the future, end-of-the-age judgment; rather, in keeping with the momentous and controversial statement in verse 17 – “*My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working until now*” – He speaks of a judgment that is already taking place as well as one yet to come. Jesus does this through one of the most powerful statements in the Bible, that of the ‘two resurrections’ in John 5:25-29. It is not too much to say that these verses represent the most marvelous presentation of the impact – both present and future – of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be found anywhere in Scripture. The passage indeed deserves “special attention.”



**Rodney A. Whitacre (b. 1949)**

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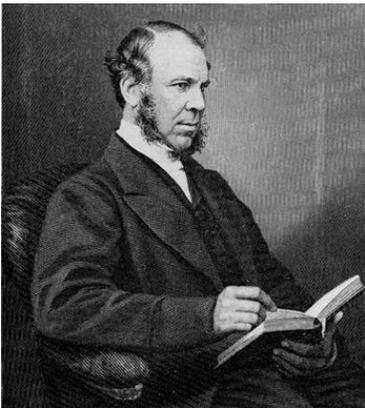
<sup>33</sup> Whitacre; 126.

<sup>34</sup> *Idem*.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

One of the most common questions posed by modern, liberal biblical scholars – and it is a question with an implied negative answer in their view – is whether or not Jesus considered Himself to be God. There is ample evidence that *others* considered that Jesus was God, and worshipped Him accordingly – something that He never forbade. And it is equally obvious that ‘the Jews’ considered that Jesus thought Himself to be equal with God – which to a monotheistic Jew is the same as saying that Jesus thought Himself to be God – and they took up stones to stone Him. But we lack any explicit passage where Jesus declares, ‘I am God’ (though saying, “*I and the Father are one*” is about as close as one can come to it). The lack of such an explicit statement, coupled with the liberal belief that the New Testament writings were generated *ex post facto* to support the ‘Christian’ faith, allows the modern liberal to deny that Jesus believed Himself to be divine. He was but a humble Galilean rabbi; and a man so honorable as Jesus was would never have aspired to deity – or so the general gist of liberal unbelief.

As with commentators both conservative and liberal, the question of Jesus’ self-awareness is often posed with the answer already concluded. But if we listen to the conversation (and, of course, accept that it accurately reflects the historical event), we cannot escape the conclusion that both those who worshipped Him, and those who took up stones to stone Him, came to the conclusion that Jesus intended: that He was indeed the Son of God, God come in the flesh. The former, of course, came by way of faith; the latter, in unbelief. The passage before us in this lesson is one of the more powerful in this



J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)

regard, as Jesus refuses to evade the unique identity between Himself and the Father. Simeon writes, “Instead of intimating that they had misunderstood his meaning, our Lord acknowledged that he did claim an equality with God; and, in confirmation of that claim, he asserted that a Divine authority belonged to him, both essentially, as God, and officially, as Mediator.”<sup>35</sup> J. C. Ryle adds, “Nowhere else in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, sys-

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<sup>35</sup> Simeon; 330.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

tematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His Divine commission and authority, and the proofs of His Messiahship, as we find in this discourse.”<sup>36</sup>

The key to Jesus’ response with respect to His relationship to the Father is a twofold claim that embraces the totality of a man’s existence: *life* and *judgment*. In the Jewish mind, correctly, these two concepts are inseparably and uniquely connected to the one God, who alone gives life, and who alone will judge all men. Many Jews of Jesus’ day also believed that the point at which these two concepts come together is the *resurrection*, when God will judge the righteous by giving them new and eternal life, and the wicked through everlasting damnation. It is, therefore, of no small account that the resurrection – actually, the *resurrections* – are central to Jesus’ Keynote Address.

*Then Jesus answered and said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel. (5:19-20)*

Jesus is making it crystal clear that to reject the witness of the works which He did was to reject the activity of God in the midst of Israel. “In the work of Jesus the Jews are confronted by the work of God.”<sup>37</sup> The essence of what Jesus is saying in this passage is that His ministry differs from that of the prophets in that, while the latter said what the LORD told them to say – “*Thus says the LORD*” – Jesus did what He saw the Father doing. The connection is greater than that between a deity and an oracle; it is the relationship of a Father and a Son. “But that which in the case of the prophets was a temporary influence and excitement is here a continuing essential relation, and that of communion.”<sup>38</sup> The true son represents his father; and the perfect son represents his father perfectly, and seeks only the honor of his father. This is a concept that would have been clear as a bell to the Jews who heard Jesus, though such a relationship between sons and fathers has fallen out of vogue in our day. “*A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a Father,*

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<sup>36</sup> Ryle, J. C. *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John Volume 1* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co; 1975); 285.

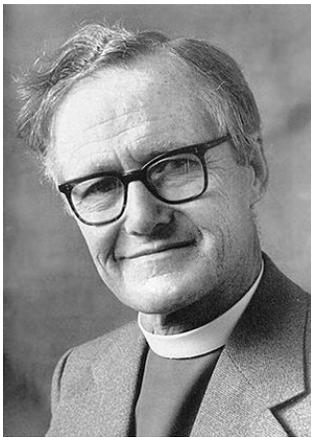
<sup>37</sup> Hoskyns, 267.

<sup>38</sup> Luthardt; 104.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*where is My honor?*"<sup>39</sup> It would have been sacrilege for Jesus *not* to do what He saw the Father do, for in that case He would have robbed the Father of the honor due Him.

The role that Jesus has been given is that of *embassy*: He is, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, "*the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.*"<sup>40</sup> As such, therefore, it is critical to Jesus, and to His ministry, that the embassy that He brings to Israel be identical in word and deed to what the Father says and does. Newbigin makes the excellent point that what Jesus is claiming here is not *equality* with God, but *unity*. "The unique intimacy which is conveyed by Jesus' constantly repeated phrase 'my Father' implies a perfect unity with is not equality."<sup>41</sup> This statement goes a long way toward ex-



Lesslie Newbigin (1909-98)

plaining why Jesus never claimed equality with God, for as the Son He is 'subordinate' to the Father in perfect honor and obedience. This is not the heresy of subordinationism, in which the Son is considered as a lesser god than the Father, for what it is that Jesus does maintain strenuously is the *unity* between Himself and the Father. "The ideal of equality (which our culture has espoused from the rationalist elements in our pagan heritage) leads to independence. Those who are in all respects equal do not need to depend on each other but can stand on their own feet. In spite of the fact that paternity appears to be a fact of life, paternalism is condemned as a violation of human dignity because it rests on inequality and involved dependence."<sup>42</sup> We can acknowledge that this is a difficult concept when applied to the one God, yet recognize that this must be the meaning of the relationship between the First and Second Persons of the Godhead as Father and Son. That we struggle with the concept is more indicative of our deficient views of the father-son relationship than any deficiency in the biblical record or theology. Newbigin, indeed, sources our understanding of this relationship – and the concept of 'equality' within it – properly, "Our ideal of human dignity is in fact the very ancient one advocated by the Serpent (Gen. 3:5), needing nothing

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<sup>39</sup> Malachi 1:6

<sup>40</sup> Hebrews 1:3

<sup>41</sup> Newbigin; 66.

<sup>42</sup> *Idem.*

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

and independent of any judgment of good and evil other than our own.”<sup>43</sup> This was, however, decidedly *not* Jesus’ view. His dependency on the Father could not be more total.

*For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.* (5:21-23)

The fact of the Son’s dependence upon the Father does not, however, mean that the Son has no dignity of His own. That is the fallacy of human thoughts of equality: that one must be independent in order to have personal dignity. The opposite is true, and Jesus both teaches and lives that truth: *By His honoring of the Father, He become worthy of honor Himself.* Just as an ambassador receives the honor due his monarch or president – and to dishonor an ambassador is to dishonor the one who sent him – so also the perfect representative and ‘sent One’ of the Father, Jesus the Son, is deserving of the full honor due to the Father – and to deny Him that is to dishonor the Father who sent Him. This is nothing less than what the psalmist writes in Psalm 2,

*Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth.*

*Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.*

*Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way,*

*When His wrath is kindled but a little.*

*Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.*

(Psalm 2:10-12)

Here is where Jesus brings Himself together with the Father in the two areas of human existence that were most unmistakably divine: *life* and *judgment*. Giving life and passing judgment are, in the ultimate sense, the prerogatives of God alone. Man cannot give life, though through judgment he is permitted (in the magistrate) to take life away. In this the king represents God, which is why injustice and oppression are so offensive to God and so roundly condemned by His prophets. But no king can *give* life; and no king can give life to one who has died. This only God can do, and Jesus claims that right for Himself as God’s only and true Son. Indeed, this is not just something that Jesus possesses with the Father *in the future*, but rather, as the verb tenses clearly indicate, this is

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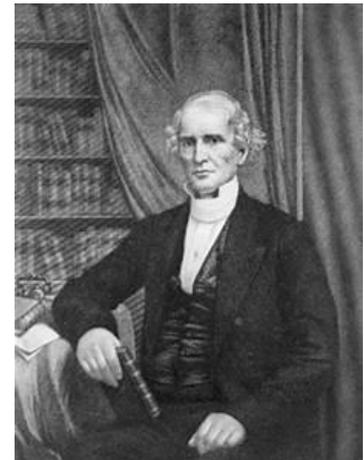
<sup>43</sup> *Idem.*

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

something that Jesus' possesses now, something that is reflected in the works that Jesus is doing that bear witness to His claim and embassy.

Jesus is saying nothing less in this statement than that the promised judgment of God upon Israel, and upon the world, has come to the world in Himself. Just as the honoring of the Son is to be done *in this age*, so also the giving of life and the passing of judgment belong *to this age*. Theologically, this is often referred to as *Realized* or *Inaugurated* Eschatology, or more colloquially as the 'Now and Not Yet' of God's redemptive calendar. The point of these phrases is to capture the biblical fact (and historical reality) that God has begun the process of the end-time judgment with the Advent of His Son, Jesus Christ. George R. Beasley-Murray writes, "With the advent of the Son of God, the new age has come; hence he brings to men the life of the new age in the present one."<sup>44</sup> This invasion of the age to come into the present age is even more powerfully elaborated in the sequel, as Jesus speaks of two resurrections.

The ongoing liberal debate regarding the self-awareness of Jesus as to His deity, and the fact of that deity, cannot withstand verse 23, which is one of the reasons John's Gospel is so often considered either late or spurious. Ryle quotes the famous biblical annotator Albert Barnes, "If our Saviour here did not intend to teach that He ought to be worshipped and esteemed equal with God, it would be difficult to teach it by any language."<sup>45</sup> The unity of the Son and the Father, and the absolute divine authority of the Son with respect to both life and judgment, are taught here in no uncertain words. It is on this Rock that all modern interfaith attempts to diminish the dignity of Jesus in order to preserve an ecumenical relationship with other monotheistic faiths – in particular Judaism and Islam – are broken to pieces. "This Gospel encourages monotheists to understand their truth in Light of what has now been revealed by the Son of God about himself...This Gospel, however, offers no encouragement to Christians who wish to say that Jesus is not the unique Son of God with exclusive and ultimate authority over every person on earth. *All*



Albert Barnes (1798-1870)

<sup>44</sup> Beasley-Murray, George R. *Word Biblical Commentary: John* (Waco: Word Books; 1987)

<sup>45</sup> Ryle; 290.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

judgment has been given to him, and *all* are to honor the Son just as they honor the Father. John allows for no syncretism, for that would deny the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus.”<sup>46</sup>

Jesus now proceeds to what is one of the most profound statements in all of Scripture, in which He links life and judgment at the point of ultimate culmination: the resurrection. “To give life and to judge are interrelated, for to have life is to escape condemnation.”<sup>47</sup>

*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. (5:24)*

A continuation of the *Amen, Amen* statements of John’s Gospel, each indicating an important theological and soteriological point in Jesus’ teaching.

*And He said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” (1:51)*

*Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”... Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (3:3,5)*

It seems that when Jesus introduces His statement with the *Amen, Amen* - translated ‘most assuredly,’ or ‘truly, truly,’ or ‘verily, verily’ in various English versions - He follows either with some truth concerning Himself, or man’s salvation, the two concepts never being separated in Jesus’ mind. Here in 5:24 they are fully united - Jesus’ words and the sinner’s faith unite to bring the sinner out of death and into life. Again the present tense: “With hearing and believing, having is also given. The impartation and the possession of life begin from this time forth, and perfect themselves in the future.”<sup>48</sup> This statement undergirds the entire Christian evangelistic message; there truly is no other.

*But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture*

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<sup>46</sup> Whitacre; 130.

<sup>47</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>48</sup> Luthardt; 112.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."... So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* (Romans 10:8-11, 17)

This 'hearing of faith' is truly and immediately life giving; there is no partial salvation that must be subsequently worked out through the effort of the 'believer.' "If the man takes this word and its contents essentially into himself in belief, he is by that very fact in possession of life itself."<sup>49</sup> Jesus makes it clear in the following verses that what transpires when the sinner believes the words of Jesus to be the very words of the Father is fully complete and permanent. "The promise becomes immediately effective; the hearer-believer *has* eternal life *now*. He has the judgment behind him, not before him, since judgment is for unbelief, and he has crossed over from the realm of death into the sphere of the divine sovereignty, the characteristic of which is life for all who enter it."<sup>50</sup> Again, this is the realized or inaugurated eschatology of which we just spoke – the fullness of the new life is given at the moment of belief, though the fullness of the experience of that new life awaits the consummation of the age. The key clause from a soteriological perspective is at the end of verse 24, "*but has passed out of death into life.*" Hoskyns writes, "In the perspective of Christian thought the passage from death to life is the passing from sin to righteousness and the remission of sins, and from unbelief to faith."<sup>51</sup>

*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.* (Ephesians 2:1-6)

*And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being **alive from the dead**, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.* (Romans 6:13)

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has **begotten us again** to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ **from the dead**, to an*

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<sup>49</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>50</sup> Beasley-Murray; 76.

<sup>51</sup> Hoskyns; 270.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

(I Peter 1:3-5)

This gracious act of God is theologically termed ‘regeneration,’ being ‘born again.’ But the phrase, full of powerful truth, in itself is incomplete because it does not indicate from what state the sinner is ‘born again.’ We should not on that account cease to use the term ‘regeneration,’ but rather should amplify it, as Jesus does here in John 5, with the additional term ‘resurrection.’ In this way the theological/soteriological truth of the ‘perseverance’ or ‘preservation’ of the saints is firmly established, not on the subsequent



**F. F. Bruce (1910-90)**

‘good works’ of the saved sinner, but solely on the omnipotent, life-giving act of God in Jesus Christ. One might conceivably, though wrongly, think that regeneration is reversible, and the sinner might thereby lose his salvation. But resurrection is not reversible, and thus the sinner’s salvation is forever secure in Jesus. “The sinner does not need to wait for the last day to hear the judge’s favorable verdict; it has been pronounced already. Nor do believers need to wait for the last day to experience the essence of resurrection; here and now they have ‘passed out of death into life.’”<sup>52</sup> Spurgeon adds,

It is, then, if you are a believer, absolutely certain that you shall never be condemned, but have passed from death unto life: the Lord puts it so positively that we may be right positive about it. Why are you not, as a believer, absolutely certain of your possession of eternal life? The Master, who knew our unbelief, has put the matter so straight and plain that nobody can get over it without rejecting his word...We need not be afraid to believe this with great confidence, and to rejoice because of it.<sup>53</sup>

*Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.*

(5:25-27)

The essence of the resurrection is found in the two words that Jesus repeatedly uses in this passage: *life* and *judgment*. The resurrection is the Great Assize, when all mankind

<sup>52</sup> Bruce; 131.

<sup>53</sup> Spurgeon, Charles H. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 28* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust; 1971); 69-70.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

will be brought again to life in order that judgment may be passed upon each and every one. This is the meaning of Jesus' combination of these two concepts: *the Father...has granted the Son to have life in Himself; the Father...has given Him authority to execute judgment.* In that great day it will be the Son who sits upon the judgment throne, for this right and authority has been granted to Him by the Father. But Jesus will not allow His hearers (His *true* hearers, who hear in faith), simply wait for that Day as if nothing has or will happen before it. No, the resurrection of verse 25 is *now*; it *now is* that 'the dead' will hear the voice of the Son of God and will live. This is the contrast that Jesus is making in this passage: between an hour *that is coming and now is* (v. 25) and an hour *that is coming* (v. 28). "The eschatological future which has come into the present bursts on the world through the lifting up of the Christ and embraces the resurrection hour of vv. 28-29, for the Christ event divides and determines all ages."<sup>54</sup>

The 'hearing' of verse 25 must be taken as the same as that in verse 24, and the life that is gained in verse 25 the same as the '*passing from death to life*' of verse 24. This interpretation is necessitated by Jesus' statement that this event *now is*. This judgment and life *now is* in the person of Jesus Christ, who is both the Son of Man who has been given the authority to pass judgment (v. 27) and the Son of God, who has the power to give life (v. 21). This is solid Christology, to understand that Jesus, as the eternal **Son of God**, "is the source of life and not just an agent of God's power of life."<sup>55</sup> But it is as the **Son of Man** that authority is given to Jesus to execute judgment, not only on mankind but on all Creation. "The Son's authority to judge, which also comes from the Father, is bound up with his identity as the Son of Man."<sup>56</sup> Luthardt writes, "He bears life in himself because he is from God; judgment is entrusted to him because he became man."<sup>57</sup>

*I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the **Son of Man**,  
Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days,  
And they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,  
That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away,  
And His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.* (Daniel 7:13-14)

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<sup>54</sup> Beasley-Murray; 77.

<sup>55</sup> Whitacre; 131.

<sup>56</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>57</sup> Luthardt; 116.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.* (Matthew 28:18)

With this statement in John 5, Jesus ties together the entirety of redemptive history going back to Genesis 3 and the divine promise of a Redeemer, who would be the 'Seed of Woman' – another phrase for the 'Son of Man.' The ultimate judgment – both in salvation and in condemnation – would come upon man by the Son of Man, who receives the authority to judge by virtue of His own perfectly obedient life and vicarious death. And this authority and this work of judgment will not wait for the end of the age, but begins even as Jesus lived and taught in Judea, and even more powerfully as He lives and continues to speak by His Holy Spirit in the Church. "For while Jesus manifestly has in view the vision of the one like a son of man in Daniel 7, he goes far beyond it in subsuming the whole eschatological process of mediating the kingdom of God and the judgment in the present and future under the function of the Son of Man."<sup>58</sup>

Thus it is important for believers, and for the Church, to avoid the error of pushing the judgment (and the resurrection) entirely into the future. Hoskyns comments, "the Evangelist judges the heart of Christian eschatology to lie less in the expectation of a second coming on the clouds of heaven than in the historical fact of Jesus, in His words and actions; there the final distinction is made between life and death."<sup>59</sup> This was Paul's understanding of the matter of the Gospel, the *power of God unto salvation*, for he knew that its proclamation placed before its audience *life and death* at that very moment, and not merely at the end of the age.

*Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, as <sup>l</sup>so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.* (II Corinthians 2:14-17)

But we may not, as some in Corinth did, thereby assume that the resurrection has fully come, that there would be no future resurrection. Realized or inaugurated

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<sup>58</sup> Beasley-Murray; 77.

<sup>59</sup> Hoskyns; 268.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

eschatology does not mean full eschatology, and Jesus makes that clear in this Keynote Address of John 5. That there is *now* a resurrection for those who hear Jesus' voice with faith, *and live*, is both powerfully and undeniable the teaching of Jesus and His apostles. That this is the *only* resurrection, is not. It is, however, the resurrection that matters soteriologically, for if a sinner does not participate in this 'first' resurrection, his status in the 'second' is already fixed.

*Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.* (5:28-29)

It is important to note the distinctions Jesus makes between these two 'resurrection' passages. In the first, there is only one group – those who hear the voice of the Son of God and live.<sup>60</sup> In the second, there are two – those who rise to the resurrection of life and those who rise to the resurrection of condemnation. In the former resurrection, it is the 'dead' who hear the voice of the Son of God, and live. In the latter resurrection, it is those who are in the tombs, and it is *all* who are in the tombs, who will hear that voice and come forth. These are two resurrections, and the former is determinative of the latter. Newbigin writes,

This future hope is not eliminated by the element of 'realized eschatology' in the Fourth Gospel. Because the one who is both life-giver and judge is present in person, there is already given to believers here and now ('the hour is coming *and now is*) an actual experience of life from the dead and deliverance from judgment in the present time. But there is also a real future ('the hour is coming') when the life-giver and judge will have his final word in respect of all that has been, is, and will be. And this is none other than Jesus who is speaking to these hearers.<sup>61</sup>

Whitacre points out the sad irony of 'the Jews' passing judgment on Jesus; they were actually passing judgment on themselves, for as the Son of Man He possessed the authority of judgment, yet they refused to hear His voice.

So Jesus is saying that if they recognized him as the eschatological Son of Man and if they understood this identity aright, they would know that they were facing their judge. In

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<sup>60</sup> Granted, there is the implication that those who do not hear the voice of the Son of God will not live; but this is not stated explicitly in verse 25.

<sup>61</sup> Newbigin; 68.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

passing judgment on Jesus they were condemning their ultimate judge and thus passing judgment on themselves. The irony of this situation comes up over and over in the story.<sup>62</sup>

This understanding of the role of the Son of Man in judgment might seem to modern, Gentile readers to be a sublime mystery, and we might be inclined to go easy on the Jews for not seeing the connection. But in historical reality the connection between judgment and the Son of Man was already an integral part of Second Temple eschatology, and Jesus' hearers would have already been familiar, and have largely accepted, His line of argument (of course, His claim *to be* the Son of Man was a point of intense disagreement with 'the Jews'). The apocryphal book of I Enoch reflects Second Temple understanding – at least among many – regarding the judgment role of the Son of Man.

For from the beginning that Son of Man was hidden, and the Most High kept him in the presence of His power, and revealed him only to the chosen. And the community of the Holy and the chosen will be sown and all the chosen will stand before him on that day. And all the mighty kings, and the exalted, and those who rule the dry ground, will fall down before him, on their faces, and worship; and they will set their hopes on that Son of Man, and will entreat him, and will petition for mercy from him. But the Lord of Spirits will then so press them that they will hasten to go out from before Him, and their faces will be filled with shame, and the darkness will grow deeper on their faces. And the Angels of Punishment will take them so that they may repay them for the wrong that they did to His children and to His chosen ones. And they will become a spectacle to the righteous and to His chosen ones; they will rejoice over them, for the anger of the Lord of Spirits will rest upon them, and the sword of the Lord of Spirits will be drunk with them. And the righteous and the chosen will be saved on that Day and they will never see the faces of the sinners and the lawless from then on. And the Lord of Spirits will remain over them and with that Son of Man they will dwell, and eat, and lie down, and rise up, forever and ever. And the righteous and chosen will have risen from the earth, and will have ceased to cast down their faces, and will have put on the Garment of Life. And this will be a Garment of Life from the Lord of Spirits; and your garments will not wear out, and your glory will not fail, in front of the Lord of Spirits. (I Enoch 62:7-16)<sup>63</sup>

And he sat on the Throne of His Glory and the whole judgment was given to the Son of Man and he will cause the sinners to pass away and be destroyed from the face of the Earth. And those who led astray the world will be bound in chains and will be shut up in the assembly-place of their destruction, and all their works will pass away from the face of the earth. And from then on there will be nothing corruptible. For that Son of Man has appeared, and has sat on the Throne of His Glory, and everything evil will pass away and

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<sup>62</sup> Whitacre; 132.

<sup>63</sup> [CHAPTER 62 | The book of Enoch \(wordpress.com\)](#); accessed 06April2021.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

go from in front of Him; and the word of that Son of Man will be strong in front of the Lord of Spirits. This is the Third Parable of Enoch. (I Enoch 69:27-29)<sup>64</sup>

This basic understanding of the coming judgment is perhaps why Jesus opens His statement on the future resurrection and final judgment with ‘Marvel not.’ The fact of a future and ultimate judgment fairly demands an intermediate judgment in this life, for without the intermediate, present judgment the status of all mankind in the future and final judgment would be that of condemnation. He appeals to the future judgment – that which ‘the Jews’ believed and taught would separate themselves from the pagans – to show that the same Son of Man possesses the authority to pass that judgment *now*. The logic is inexorable: if Jesus is who He claims to be, the Son of Man, then one’s response to Him *now* must determine one’s judgment before Him *later*. “The future judgment, however, certainly is only the completion and appearance of the essential judgment, which at present is already in process.”<sup>65</sup>

This is the essence of the gospel message in every age; as the writer of the Hebrews reminds us, “*It is appointed to man once to die, and then comes judgment.*”<sup>66</sup> What Jesus is teaching in John 5 under the rubric of resurrection is that only those who participate in the first resurrection will experience the second resurrection to life; all others will experience only the second resurrection, that unto condemnation. “It accordingly is a consequence of belief and unbelief, that the resurrection is at once a resurrection of life or of judgment.”<sup>67</sup> Beasley-Murray adds,

The spiritually dead who ‘hear’ the voice of the Son of God in the days of their flesh and are raised by him to life will hear that voice again, calling them to enter upon the fullness of resurrection life for the kingdom of glory. Similarly those who are deaf to the voice of the Son of God in life must in the end respond to that voice, and rise to hear the word of condemnation pronounced upon them. The resurrection of the last day reveals the decision that each has made in life.<sup>68</sup>

The reality of the two resurrections – or more accurately, two resurrections for those who believe, and only one resurrection for those who continue in unbelief – is the clear

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<sup>64</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>65</sup> Luthardt, 120.

<sup>66</sup> Hebrews 9:27

<sup>67</sup> Luthardt; 120.

<sup>68</sup> Beasley-Murray; 77.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

teaching of this passage in John 5. Hence it must be the benchmark by which we understand a less clear apocalyptic writing, also by the Apostle John, found in Revelation.

*And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for <sup>[a]</sup>a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. **This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.***

(Revelation 20:4-6)

The Dispensational interpretation of this passage (and others in Revelation), adding resurrections to resurrections, fails to recognize the import of Jesus' teaching in John 5, and fails to recognize the life-giving, resurrection power of the gospel *today* which alone guarantees the sinner's redemption in the resurrection on the Last Day. It is as if Jesus is echoing the words of Moses in this passage before us, "*See, I set before you this day life and good, and death and evil.*"<sup>69</sup>

*I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.*

(Deuteronomy 30:19)

***I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.*** (5:30)

With this statement Jesus closes the inner loop of His Keynote Address, for verse 30 connects directly back to verse 19,

*Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, **the Son can do nothing of Himself**, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. (5:19)*

***I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me. (5:30)***

Verse 30, however, takes the thought of this section one step farther, though it is a step already anticipated by the entire trajectory of Jesus' discourse. In verse 19 Jesus speaks of the Son; in verse 30 He speaks of Himself – leaving no doubt as to His self-

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<sup>69</sup> Deuteronomy 30:15

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

awareness as the Son of God. The words that Jesus presents to the Jews – and not just the religious leaders, the ‘Jews’ in John’s parlance, but the entire nation of Israel – will prove very hard for many to accept. In John 6 we will see many ceasing to follow Jesus because of His words, His teaching. But Jesus lays the firmest foundation for the veracity of His words: they are the words of the Father. His acts are the acts of the Father. His judgment is the judgment of the Father. “His judgment therefore is always just, for it reveals the truth about everyman and fulfills the Father’s will in relation to every man.”<sup>70</sup> It is, therefore, the gravest of errors – a truly fatal error – to ‘not hear’ His voice.

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<sup>70</sup> Beasley-Murray; 77.

**Week 3: Call the Witnesses!**

**Text Reading:** John 5:31 - 47

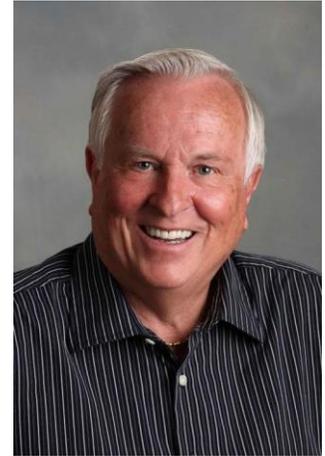
*"It is true they have the words of Scripture  
in their bookrolls and in the schools,  
but it is not living and dwelling in them."  
(Christoph Luthardt)*

It is largely agreed by both believers and unbelievers that the Bible is a remarkable piece of ancient literature (of course, even among believers, there is great disagreement on just *how* ancient it is). Its inner coherence, its variety of literary genre, and its undeniable impact on much of human history, coupled with its antiquity, confirms the Bible's place among the great books of the ages. It stands as the single most referenced or alluded-to book in Western literature, with over a thousand biblical references to be found in Shakespeare alone. Biblical tropes and explicit quotes form a consistent fabric of reference in authors as diverse as Matthew Arnold and Mark Twain, with poets such as Milton, Wordsworth, and Dickenson all exhibiting ready familiarity with the Holy Scriptures. Biblical phrases remain commonplace even in a world that has all but abandoned the book as anything more than a quaint collection of ancient religious mythology: "*Am I my brother's keeper?*"; "*The salt of the earth*"; "*The powers that be*"; and "*Fight the good fight*" are just a few of many, many biblical references that have become common vernacular (in at least the English language; one assumes that similar phrases are just as common in other, Western cultures).

The historical unity and integrity of the Bible has come under severe attack over the past two hundred or so years; it was a popular pastime during and after the Enlightenment to dissect the Scriptures to 'prove' that it was not worthy of adherence. Conservative evangelical Christianity responded with a vigorous defense of the Bible, attempting to 'prove' that it was undoubtedly the Word of God "*inspired and without error in the autographs,*" as many documents of ecclesiastic faith put it. The extent of manuscript evidence – and the remarkable consistency of manuscripts – is a leading argument in defense of Christianity's claims concerning the Bible in *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, the

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

popular apologetic work of Josh McDowell. McDowell explains the purpose for his more recent (2015) book, *God-Breathed: The Undeniable Power and Reliability of Scripture* in the following quote: “The main purpose of the book is twofold. For the believer, that they might know him better and be more committed to their savior because they walk away with a greater conviction of the truth of His Word. I’m convinced that the greater knowledge we have of the truth of the Scriptures, the greater convictions we have and courage in our faith. For the non-believer, the main purpose of the book is so that he/she will see there’s evidence that God *did* breath out his Scripture, and that Scripture is accurate and true. Ultimately, I wanted to bridge the gap between the mind and the heart. I wanted to write a book that would take all this evidence with the manuscripts, scrolls, etc. and intellectually bridge it down to how it should impact our lives.”<sup>71</sup>



Josh McDowell (b. 1939)

McDowell’s ongoing work in defense of the authenticity of the Bible is matched by other evangelicals who research the latest manuscripts of the ancient Scriptures, comparing version with version, attempting to arrive at a more ‘accurate’ Bible. But, assuming that such work – laudable and necessary in itself – were able to attain to a perfect representation of the original *autographs* – a result no one considers possible – would such an achievement *prove* that the Bible was the inspired Word of God? Lesslie Newbigin addresses this conundrum in his commentary on John, “This is the problem of divine revelation. How can God reveal himself to man in such a way that the revelation is accepted as true in mind and conscience?”<sup>72</sup> All attempts to ‘prove’ that the Bible is the inspired Word of God suffer from the same fallacy: to prove a document is historical and authentic is not the same as proving it to be divine. The former exercise is undoubtedly beneficial – in degree – to the believer’s faith in the Bible held in one’s hands, but it is not a firm foundation for the conviction that this Bible is ‘God-breathed.’ Newbigin continues,

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<sup>71</sup> [The Undeniable Reliability of Scripture: An Interview with Josh McDowell - Bible Gateway Blog](#); accessed 12 April 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Newbigin; 69.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

The ultimate answer to the problem can only be given in terms of a trinitarian doctrine of God – of the Father who is the source of all being and of all truth, of the Son by whose perfect obedience the being and truth are present in a human life as part of public history, and of the Spirit of the Father and the Son by whose sovereign and gracious action my reason and conscience are enabled to acknowledge the Son and through him to join in glorifying the Father.<sup>73</sup>

Thus the Bible is self-attesting through faith, and cannot be ‘proven’ divine by any measure of human research or reasoning. This is as Jesus himself said to Peter upon the latter’s momentous confession of Jesus as the Christ, *“Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”*<sup>74</sup> The same attitude is found in the Apostle Paul as he reflects on the faith of the believers at Thessalonica,

*For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.* (I Thessalonians 2:13)

The final arbiter of the divine source of Scripture is the same as the final and true witness of the Messiahship (and deity) of Jesus Christ. In this section of John 5, Jesus presents His ‘case’ as if He were on trial, which indeed He was. “According to the law there had to be at least two or three witnesses, and it was later specified that ‘no one can bear witness for himself.’”<sup>75</sup> But Jesus’ case is unlike any other in history: He *is* the Son of God, and as such cannot be ‘validated’ by any man, nor before any human tribunal. “Only the Father, the Spirit, and he himself really knew who he was.”<sup>76</sup> And so Jesus’ calling of witnesses constitutes somewhat of an accommodation by Him to the rational weakness of His audience. But even more so, it constitutes a turning of the tables on His accusers, for in claiming the Father as His prime witness, Jesus places the Jews in a difficult position. “In doing so he goes on the offensive, since ‘it was as dangerous to disbelieve a statement made on oath as to make a statement on oath that was not true.’”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 16:17

<sup>75</sup> Whitacre; 134. The internal quote is from Mishah Ketuboth 2:9.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*; 135.

<sup>77</sup> *Idem.*

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In this passage, therefore, we see Jesus not so much defending himself as going on the offensive in terms of the unbelief of ‘the Jews.’ This is vintage Jewish legal process, in which the line between the accused and the accuser is not firmly drawn, and the false accuser penalized by the same consequence he sought to exact from the accused.

*One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established. If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, then both men in the controversy shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you.* (Deuteronomy 19:15-19)

Proof that Jesus moves progressively from accused to accuser is found at the end of the passage, where Jesus charges the Jews with gross malfeasance in their unbelief, though He states that He will not be the one condemning them; that will be done by Moses, to whom they constantly appeal as their authority. “The informal nature of Jewish legal procedure in such settings and the focus on witnesses means it was not always clear who was judging whom. So it was not unusual for the accused to turn the tables, as Jesus does here with increasing clarity.”<sup>78</sup> It is noteworthy that at no time does Jesus submit himself to the Jews as to a valid, authoritative tribunal, nor does He accept the validity of any human witness, even that of His own forerunner, John the Baptist. Jesus adheres strictly to the Law with regard to the validity of testimony, without yielding His unique position and authority as the Son of God; indeed, the Lawgiver. In the end He is not acquitted by any *human* witness; yet the Jews are indicted and condemned by their failure to hear and obey those same witnesses. It is a verbal masterpiece by Jesus.

*If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true.* (5:31-32)

The paragraph divisions in most English versions are a bit misleading here, in that this verse flows immediately into Jesus’ reference to John the Baptist. This leaves the reader thinking that the *another who bears witness*, whose witness Jesus knows to be true, is the forerunner. Most English translations realize that John is not the referent, and indicate

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<sup>78</sup> Whitacre; 135.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

this by putting 'He' – referring to the *another who bears witness of Me* – as capitalized, referring therefore to the Father and not to the Baptist. It might have been better to link verse 32 with verse 31 in one paragraph, and to start a new paragraph with verse 33. That this division of the sentences is correct is confirmed in verse 34, where Jesus denies the validity of the (true) witness of men – including, contextually, John the Baptist – as having any impact on His own being and His own self-awareness. The entire array of 'witnesses' that Jesus brings to bear in this passage have validity only to His accusers, though they refuse to hear and believe their testimony. Only One, the Father, is valid to Jesus and should be supremely valid to 'the Jews.'

Jesus' comment in verse 31 with regard to His bearing witness to Himself is to be interpreted in view of the Mosaic Law concerning judicial testimony. He is accommodating Himself to the proper judicial framework that the Law sets down: even if a singular testimony is true, it is on account of its singularity inadmissible. "Jesus certainly does not mean that if he says anything about himself it must be false...but that if the burden of evidence to support the tremendous claims he has been making exclusively depends on his own self-attestation, his witness must be false."<sup>79</sup> In full accord with the Law, Jesus will not rest His case on His own testimony, though that testimony is fully true and trustworthy. "The witness of Jesus to Himself is, therefore, not a witness *of himself*; it does not originate from Himself. If it did, it would be untrue. The law of evidence requires another witness. That Other is God; and His witness is true and sufficient both for Jesus Himself and for those who believe in Him."<sup>80</sup>

*You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.* (5:33-35)

Jesus is here alluding to the event recorded in John 1:19ff when "*the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'*" John made it clear then, as he always did, that he was not the Messiah but rather "*I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the LORD.'*" John knew himself to be the forerunner just as he knew Jesus to be the "*Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*" This was

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<sup>79</sup> Carson; 259.

<sup>80</sup> Hoskyns; 271.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

John's consistent witness, but even the delegation sent from 'the Jews' refused to believe that witness and failed to recognize the One to whom the forerunner pointed.

Jesus, however, did not hang His hat on John's testimony, though it was the truth and though John was "*Elijah who is to come.*" Verse 34 confirms the conclusion that what Jesus is doing in this section is not defending Himself, nor building a case that might convince the unbelieving Jews; rather He is slowly turning the judicial tables on His accusers, setting up the *coup de grace* by which He will indict them rather than they Him. Elsewhere, in a similar exchange with 'the Jews,' Jesus again refers to John as one to whom the Jews should have listened, whose proclamation they should have obeyed.

*Then they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him. And they said to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?" But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John – was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me." And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men' " – they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed. So they answered and said to Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus answered and said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (Mark 11:27-34)*

John was a classic prophet – he checked all the boxes in the manner of an Elijah or an Elisha. As such, and given the expectation of the age, John was well received by the masses, and even, for a time, well received by the Jewish leaders, "*you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.*" (5:35). Jesus refers to John as "*a light,*" a *luxnos* or lamp that burned brightly for a short time. This statement in no way contradicts what we read earlier in John, speaking also of John the Baptist, "*He was not that light, but came that he might bear witness of the light.*"<sup>81</sup> The 'light' in this verse is *phōs*, a source of light; John himself was a light-bearer, whose light came from the Light to which he bore witness. That John had a tremendous impact on his contemporary audience is recorded in the New Testament, but also by the Jewish historian Josephus. Speaking of a military defeat suffered by Herod, who had killed John, Josephus writes,

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<sup>81</sup> John 1:8

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the *Baptist*; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now, when many others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause...<sup>82</sup>

Jesus Himself paid high tribute to John; He had no cause to denigrate John in order to elevate Himself.

*As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written:*

*'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,  
Who will prepare Your way before You.'*

*Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

(Matthew 11:7-11)

Yet for all the praise directed toward and deserved by John, even his testimony is of no intrinsic value to Jesus, *"But the witness I receive is not from man..."* (5:34) At the end of the day, John was but a man, even though he was a man sent from God. The testimony of John was true, but it was for the Jews, not for Jesus, *"that you may be saved."* Whitacre summarizes this first 'testimony' that Jesus sets before 'the Jews.'

John the Baptist, like Jesus, spoke what he heard from the Father. What he heard concerned Jesus, and so he bore witness to the truth; the truth is Christ. Not that Jesus had need of John's testimony. Jesus is one with the Father, so he has no need of human testimony for confirmation or help in knowing who he is. But the rest of us do have need of witnesses if we are to recognize him, so for our benefit he points out authentic witnesses...and so Jesus

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<sup>82</sup> Josephus, *Antiquity of the Jews: 18.5.2* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers; 1987); 484

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

affirms the testimony of one whom the Jews themselves highly honored. John the Baptist was not the light, but he was at least a lamp. They rejoiced in his light but did not heed his teaching concerning Jesus. They failed to benefit from John.<sup>83</sup>

That last statement fully captures Jesus' indictment against the Jews throughout this section: they failed to benefit; they completely missed the point, not only of John the Baptist, but of Scripture in general and, most damning, of Moses in particular.

***But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me. (5:36)***

John was recognized as a prophet, but he did no miracles (at least none recorded). He was sent to prepare the way for the Promised One, the Messiah, of whom it was prophesied that He would do great 'works.' This Jesus did in the sight of all Israel; there was no denying that many signs and wonders and miracles were being done by Jesus, all of which bore witness that He was who the Baptist said He was, the Christ. Jesus will appeal again to the works that He did as infallible witness to His messianic claim, this time to one of His own disciples.

*If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him. Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.*

(John 14:7-11)

***And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. (5:37-38)***

At this point the Jews were probably feeling the tables turn and themselves as the ones on trial instead of Jesus. With this passage the indictment begins and Jesus is full-on prosecutor against the Jews. Jesus' bold claim that the Father has borne witness of Him probably references His own baptism, after which the Voice spoke, "This is My beloved Son,

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<sup>83</sup> Whitacre; 136.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*in whom I am well pleased.*"<sup>84</sup> This event occurred at the height of John's ministry, in a very public place, and was undoubtedly witnessed by some of the very same Jews to whom Jesus is speaking in John 5, "*you have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.*" Jesus here makes a powerful and unmistakable distinction between Himself and 'the Jews,' alluding to Moses, whom He will reference directly in just a few moments. It was with Moses that God spoke '*face to face*'; Moses heard God's voice. But even Moses did not behold God's form, but was granted only a passing glance at the divine glory. It is recorded in Genesis 30 that Jacob did see God '*face to face*' (rendered in the LXX by the same word translated here as 'form'), so 'the Jews' fail to follow either in the heritage of their lawgiver Moses, or their patriarch and namesake, Israel. Carson writes, "*First, You have never heard His voice* – unlike Moses, who heard God's voice. Since Jesus speaks the words of God, and the Jews do not hear God's voice in Jesus, it follows that they are not true followers of Moses...*Second, You have never...seen his form* – unlike Jacob (Israel), who saw God's form. Since Jesus is the very manifestation of God, and the Jews do not see God in Jesus, it follows that they are not true Israelites."<sup>85</sup> One can imagine the Jews getting quite red and hot under their tunics by this point.



D. A. Carson (b. 1946)

Though Jesus' allusions are most likely to Moses and Israel, His indictment is far more general and comprehensive, as will be seen immediately. To fail to *hear His voice* or to *see His form* means ultimately to completely miss the message of God's self-revelation through the Scriptures. Luthardt writes, "The point is that God's call is issued to Israel, and that his shape reveals itself to his people in the word of the Old Testament Scriptures. Israel, however, has remained deaf and blind to it."<sup>86</sup> This charge would be leveled in no uncertain terms again by Jesus in Chapter 9, the other bookend miracle corresponding to Chapter 5,

*Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him, He said to him, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" He answered and said, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" And*

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<sup>84</sup> Matthew 3:17

<sup>85</sup> Carson; 262

<sup>86</sup> Luthardt; 129.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you." Then he said, "Lord, I believe!" And he worshiped Him. And Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind." Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, "Are we blind also?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains." (John 9:35-41)*

"Jesus is the fulfilment of all the antecedent revelation. Failure to believe in Jesus is therefore compelling evidence that, however exacting the scholarship that was studying that revelation, the revelation itself had not been absorbed, understood, obeyed."<sup>87</sup> Luthardt adds, "It is true they have the words of Scripture in their bookrolls and in the schools, but it is not living and dwelling in them."<sup>88</sup> This is indeed Jesus' damning indictment against the Jews, "And you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent." (5:38) It all comes down to this, for 'the Jews' and for every man, Jew or gentile, since: "This is the work of God: that you believe on Him whom He has sent."<sup>89</sup>

*You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. (5:39-40)*

The opening clause of verse 39 may also be read as an imperative, "Search the Scriptures!" as some versions translate it. However, the indicative is more in keeping with the tenor of indictment that Jesus is establishing here. He is not commanding them to search the Scriptures; that is what they did 'religiously.' "The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day were undoubtedly diligent students of the Scriptures; they needed no exhortation along these lines."<sup>90</sup> This is the substance of the indictment against them, continued: they claimed to follow Moses, but have not heard God's voice; they claimed to be true Israelites, but had not seen God's form. Both the divine voice and divine form were standing in front of them; again, they were both deaf and blind.

*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom*

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<sup>87</sup> Carson; 263.

<sup>88</sup> Luthardt; 129.

<sup>89</sup> John 6:29

<sup>90</sup> Carson; 263.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person...*  
(Hebrews 1:1-3a)

The Jews believed that by searching the Scriptures they would achieve life; the more they searched the Scriptures, the more life they would have. Rabbi Hillel, whose school was one of the two dominant rabbinic movements in Second Temple Judaism, is quoted as advocating the study of Torah over all other life pursuits,

He [Hillel] used to say, “The more flesh, the more works; the more property, the more anxiety; the more women, the more witchcraft; the more maid–servants, the more lewdness; the more men–servants, the more robbery; **the more Torah, the more life**; the more schooling, the more wisdom; the more counsel, the more understanding; the more charity, the more peace. He who has acquired a good name has acquired it for himself; **he who has acquired for himself words of Torah has acquired for himself life in the world to come.**”<sup>91</sup>

From the same source,

Rabbi Tafron...also used to say, “It is not thy duty to complete the work, but neither art thou free to desist from it; if thou hast studied much Torah, much reward will be given thee; and faithful is thy Employer to pay thee the reward of thy labor; and know that the grant of reward unto the righteous will be in the time to come”<sup>92</sup>

Herein lies the tragedy of the Jews: they studied the Scriptures, and completely missed the point. “What is at stake is a comprehensive hermeneutical key. By predictive prophecy, by type, by revelatory event and by anticipatory statute, what we call the Old Testament is understood to point to Christ, his ministry, his teaching, his death and resurrection.”<sup>93</sup> But those who studied these Scriptures most assiduously, expecting by such study to attain to eternal life, would be the ones who would completely miss and reject the One who is Life Himself (*cp.* 5:21). “*And you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life.*” “For despite their scrupulous examination of and boasting in the Scriptures, it escaped them that precisely those Scriptures could provide them with the evidence that they demanded from Jesus and could show them the way to eternal life.”<sup>94</sup> Hoskyns

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<sup>91</sup> Pirke Aboth 2:8 [Pirke Avot, Traditional Text \(anijudaism.com\)](http://anijudaism.com) Accessed 13 April 2021.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*; 2:21.

<sup>93</sup> Carson; 263.

<sup>94</sup> Ridderbos; 205.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

comments, “Being the witness of God to His Son, the Scriptures are prophetic, not life-giving. Those who properly read and understand the words of the prophets of Israel are thereby led to believe in Jesus. Not to believe in Him, not to come to Him and follow Him, is to abandon life and to misunderstand the Scriptures altogether.”<sup>95</sup>

Now the judgment will be rendered against ‘the Jews.’ They are unwilling to come to Jesus. “Vers. 40-47 develop the not willing. This takes place in three parts. Vers. 40-43 present their unwillingness itself, ver. 44 presents their moral incapacity to believe, and vers. 45-47 present the judgment upon their unbelief.”<sup>96</sup>

*I do not receive honor from men. But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.*  
(5:41-43)

Listen to the intensifying indictment, “*I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you...*” This statement, quite shocking in itself, could be taken to mean that these were men whom God did not love, or that they did not love God – either interpretation would be grammatically correct.<sup>97</sup> Theologically it would also be difficult to distinguish between the two meanings, for God does not love those who do not love Him; “*we love, because He first loved us.*”<sup>98</sup> It is, however, the latter interpretation – that the Jews do not love God – that seems to make best sense in the context. “...they are people who love the darkness rather than the light...Jesus does not accept praise from men, for his single-eyed vision is to do what pleases his Father as his expression of filial love for the Father; *but*, by contrast with Jesus, his interlocutors do not love God.”<sup>99</sup>

Furthermore, these Jews are quite satisfied to honor one another and to receive honor from one another. So much are they like this that Jesus would not receive honor from them even if they gave it – their hearts are far from Him. “If he stooped to become the kind of Messiah they wanted, doubtless he could attract their praise. But his entire commitment is to please his Father, receiving the honour that only the Father can bestow,

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<sup>95</sup> Hoskyns; 273.

<sup>96</sup> Luthardt; 132.

<sup>97</sup> Carson; 264,

<sup>98</sup> I John 4:19

<sup>99</sup> Carson; 264.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

enjoying the 'glory' of the one and only Son from the Father."<sup>100</sup> That the Jews have and would follow after false messiahs who exalted themselves and '*come in their own name*' is well attested both in the Book of Acts and, again, in Josephus' history.

*Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, **claiming to be somebody**. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and **drew away many people after him**. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.* (Acts 5:34-37)<sup>101</sup>

Moreover, there came out of Egypt about this time to Jerusalem, one that said he was a prophet, and advised the multitude of the common people to go along with him to the Mount of Olives, as it was called, which lay over against the city, and at the distance of five furlongs. He said farther, that he would show them from hence, how, at his command, the walls of Jerusalem would fall down.<sup>102</sup>

These two are merely examples of a consistent trend within Second Temple Judaism, one that continued even after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, culminating in the proclamation by Rabbi Akiba of Simon bar Kochba as the Messiah during the Second Jewish Revolt in AD 132-136. Numerous would-be messiahs exalted themselves, and multitudes of the Jews followed after, including from among the Jewish leaders. Each one represented the type of messiah the unbelieving Jews wanted. "Such a one they will receive and cleave to, because he will not demand love to God, but will satisfy their self-love, flatter their national vanity, and establish the kingdom of God in outward might and glory."<sup>103</sup>

Jesus indictment here is proverbial; it stands against all who seek their own honor or who receive honor from other men. Jesus embodied the true humility that marks one who sincerely loves God, in whom '*the love of God*' is found. This, of course, will never be fully realized in any fallen man; it is only in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God become

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<sup>100</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>101</sup> *Cp. Josephus Antiquities 20.1*

<sup>102</sup> *Josephus Antiquities 20.6 (cp. Acts 21:38).*

<sup>103</sup> Luthardt; 135.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

the Son of Man, that we find the absolute selfless love of the Father that is perhaps the supreme validation of His Person and ministry.

*How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?* (5:44)

Jesus is charging ‘the Jews’ with gross negligence of their covenant duty, “*to love the LORD with all their heart, their soul, their mind, and their strength.*” This Israel failed to do, and the Jews in Jesus’ day were the culmination of centuries of failure. But we cannot stand in judgment of the Jews, for what they did was follow that which is endemic to all fallen humanity – they sought human honor and human glory. Mankind in his sin refuses to seek the glory of God; he seeks the glory that comes from his fellow, fallen human, which is no glory at all. To be called ‘great’ – Alexander *the Great*, Charles *the Great* – is the fundamental human desire (even if the title ‘the Great’ is not appended to one’s name). But God is the only glorious One, the only One deserving of all honor. Therefore He is the only One whose honor man should seek, and the only One who can ultimately and eternally glorify man. “But this is such a total subversion of all human ideas of greatness, of divinity, that it is rejected, and so the gift of life is refused.”<sup>104</sup>

This may be the core of the doctrine of Total Depravity. We know that the doctrine does not teach that each and every man is as outwardly bad as he could be, for by God’s common grace that has not been true historically. But the doctrine ought not be interpreted at all concerning what man *does* in outward deed; rather, it refers to what man *thinks* and *desires* in his inmost being: *and this is not the glory of God.* It is for this underlying, foundation sin that all human righteousness is as filthy rags; the best that man can do is defiled by impure, unholy, self-seeking motive. This condition is so deep, so *total*, that it renders every sinner utterly incapable of believing in Jesus Christ, for that is the ultimate act of humiliation (of man) and exaltation of God. Jesus’ “*How can you believe?*” is true biblical anthropology: Man cannot believe because his sin has rendered him apathetic, and even hostile, to the honor that is solely due unto God.

Jesus sets the indictment before the Jews; their condition is seemingly hopeless (this becomes even more apparent at the end of Chapter 9, where Jesus declares that because

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<sup>104</sup> Newbigin; 71.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

the Jews claim to see, their blindness remains, a truly hopeless condition). What is occurring here, progressively throughout these chapters, is the judicial hardening of ‘the Jews.’ With few exceptions, the religious leadership of Israel will line up across theological and political lines in vehement and violent opposition to Jesus. But Jesus does not thereby condemn ‘the Jews.’ Their prosecutor will be the one in whom they had placed their hope: Moses.

*Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?* (5:45-47)

Jesus’ reference to Moses having written about Him can be broadly interpreted as covering the entirety of the Old Testament Scriptures, or more narrowly as referring to the ‘Prophet’ prophecy in Deuteronomy 18.

*I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.* (Deuteronomy 18:18-19)

Ridderbos comments, “Jesus can trace their unbelief in him to unbelief in Moses and can refer to Moses, on whom they placed their hope as intercessor and advocate, as their accuser.”<sup>105</sup> The progression of condemnation of the Jews is quite stunningly recorded in this section of John’s Gospel. Here Jesus undoubtedly astounds and infuriates them by declaring that Moses himself will be their prosecutor before the Great Tribunal, the same Moses that they claim to follow ardently. Later, in Chapter 9, the Jews will confirm their adherence to Moses in opposition to Jesus, when they declare to the blind man healed by Jesus, “*You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.*”<sup>106</sup> In spite of Jesus’ words, and Moses’ prophecy, the Jews will blindly claim to be Moses’ disciples. Luthardt writes, “Jesus had just denied them the future. He now denies them the present. They are by no means Moses’ disciples. They boast themselves in him, but they do not belong to him, because they lack the religious posture of belief on his word.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ridderbos; 207.

<sup>106</sup> John 9:28

<sup>107</sup> Luthardt; 138.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

We need not envision Moses in person standing as the prosecuting attorney before the throne of God, though it may be that this is how the final condemnation of ‘the Jews’ will play out. It is more likely, however, that we have here in these words of Jesus the acorn which will grow into the full oak tree of Paul’s doctrine concerning the role of the Law as condemning all those who seek life through it. This presents us with the death, in a manner of speaking, of the ancient Jewish religion (not to be confused with the true, biblical Jewish faith). Starting with Moses as lawgiver, it ends with Moses as accuser. Those who refuse to believe Moses’ words, by refusing to believe that Jesus is the Promised Prophet, the Messiah, thereby fully depart from the faith of Moses. Their ‘religion’ is no longer Judaism in anything more than name. “We are dealing not just with a divergence of roads within one and the same Israelite faith, but with the now-visible break in the essence of this faith itself.”<sup>108</sup> Luthardt adds, “They are not Israel, they are not Moses’ disciples, or they would become Jesus’ disciples and Christ’s church.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ridderbos; 208.

<sup>109</sup> Luthardt; 139.

**Week 4: Manna in the Wilderness**

**Text Reading:** John 6:1 - 14

*"We must feed on Christ crucified,  
and the atonement made by His death,  
or we shall die in our sins."  
(J. C. Ryle)*

With John Chapter 6 we encounter the only miracle during Jesus' earthly ministry that is recorded by all four Gospel writers. This in itself is sufficient cause to pay special attention to the narrative – though not that any other narrative should be diminished simply because it is not recorded by all four evangelists. But the fact that something occurs in two or more of the Gospels generally gives rise in modern scholarly work to the fruitless attempt to determine who borrowed from whom, or which common-but-no-longer-extant source (read, Q) informed each writer. Each narrative is 'harmonized,' though often with the goal of pointing out discrepancies and inconsistencies between them. This is an unworthy and unbelieving hermeneutic, subjecting the Scriptures to a higher standard than one applies to general news reports of the modern era. There is no allowance for *perspective*, and each Gospel writer is expected to repeat the story essentially verbatim for it to be credible. This also goes for *where* the narrative is located within each Gospel relative to its location in each of the others. This, of course, leaves the Gospel of John as the odd man out – John's placement of the *Feeding of the Five Thousand* narrative is located in a different context than the Synoptics. A brief summary of the four is worth the effort in setting the context for John's treatment of the event.

Mark's Gospel is generally considered to be the original, though for reasons that are somewhat untenable and circular. Nevertheless, in a bow to scholarly consensus (for what that's worth), we will look at the miracle in the Gospel of Mark, first.

Mark spends several chapters relating the Galilean ministry of Jesus, with the Kingdom Parables of chapter 4 and the rejection of His teaching in His home town of Nazareth. News of John the Baptist's death seems to be the reason for Jesus' withdrawal with His disciples into the wilderness region along the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and this is where the event of the feeding of the five thousand takes place (6:33-44). In

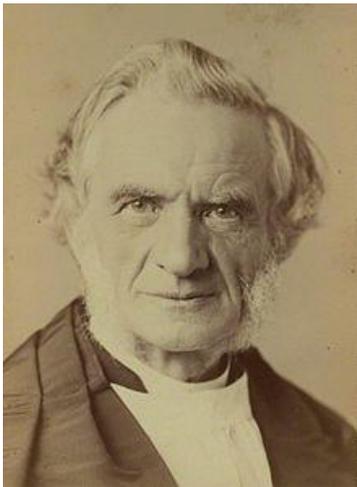
## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Mark's Gospel there is no explanation as to the meaning of the miracle. That the event is the same as the one recorded in John's Gospel seems evident, as both are immediately followed by the story of Jesus walking on the water.

Matthew's account (14:13-21) is found in a similar context to Mark's: the Kingdom Parables of Chapter 13 followed by Jesus' visit to Nazareth and the sad news of John's death at the hand of Herod. As with Mark, the narrative of the miraculous feeding is immediately followed by Jesus walking on the water.

Luke (9:10-17) makes only passing reference to John's demise (and in the words of Herod, as the tetrarch ponders who this Jesus might be). The placement of the feeding of the five thousand in Luke follows an initial sending of Jesus' twelve disciples into the villages, theoretically of Galilee but that is not specified. It is perhaps in order to give His disciples some rest that Jesus directs them to retire to the quiet region around Bethsaida after their return from this mini mission trip.

John places his narrative in a very indeterminate and yet quite specific place within his chronology of Jesus' ministry. Indeterminate in that his introductory phrase, "*After these things,*" is a very general statement indicating the passing of time, with no specificity as to just how much time has passed. We can surmise that between John 5:47 and 6:1 Jesus



**Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1901)**

and His disciples have removed from Jerusalem back to Galilee, for *going to the other side of the Sea of Galilee* was something that one did from the western shore of the large lake and not from Jerusalem. "Generally it may be said that the Synoptic narratives are given in broad outline, as part of a prolonged ministry. St John's narrative is part of an isolated episode, but at the same time individual in detail."<sup>110</sup> Unlike the Synoptics, for instance, John specifically states that "*the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.*" This does not mean that the event of the miraculous feeding took place *on the Passover*, but rather that it was the Passover season, and normally the crowds that gathered to Jesus in the wilderness would have been heading south to Jerusalem for the feast. In

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<sup>110</sup> Westcott, Brooke Foss *The Gospel According to St John* (London: John Murray; 1882); 94.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

John's Gospel, significantly, there is no mention of John the Baptist's death, no reference to Jesus' teaching and rejection in Nazareth, and no Kingdom Parables. But again, we have the narrative of Jesus walking on the water immediately following the miraculous feeding to assure us that this is the same event spoken of by Mark, Matthew, and Luke. John, also significantly, takes great pains to *explain* the event, something the other three writers do not do.

It is this explanation that explains the setting in which we find the narrative in the Fourth Gospel. John's interest was not in setting the piece chronologically but theologically, showing how the miracle of the feeding constituted one of the 'works' that bore witness to the teaching and identity of Jesus. More even than this, by placing the narrative of the feeding immediately after the 'calling of witnesses' in (our) Chapter 5, John makes another powerful connection (and contrast) between Himself and Moses. Indeed, John 6 is a thorough elaboration on John 5:46, "*For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me.*" This connection between Israel's first prophet and the One of whom he prophesied is manifested both by the season - *Passover* - and the location - *Wilderness* - of the miraculous feeding. Luthardt writes concerning the location, "Moreover, the place at which Jesus worked the miracle, and the very form of the miracle, both of which recalled the experience of Israel on its march through the desert, give the point of departure for the discourse."<sup>111</sup> Jesus, as will be made clear in His own explanation of the miracle later in Chapter 6, reenacts the miracle of the manna that Moses provided (God, of course, provided) the children of Israel in the Wilderness. "He fulfills the role of Moses and utterly transcends it."<sup>112</sup>

*After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. (6:1-3)*

The transition from Chapter 5 into Chapter 6 is abrupt. The phrase "*after these things*" is the Greek *meta tauta*, a very vague reference to the passing of some time; it is characteristics of John's writing. We have two calendar reference points to work with: the first from John 5:1, *After these things there was a feast of the Jews...* and John 6:4, "*Now the*

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<sup>111</sup> Luthardt; 142.

<sup>112</sup> Whitacre; 142.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.*" Passover is considered *the* feast of the Jews, and appropriately the word in 6:4 has the article – *the* feast – whereas the article is missing in 5:1. This probably indicates that the feast in Chapter 5 was not Passover, but rather one of the other annual pilgrimage feasts – Pentecost or Booths.<sup>113</sup> As the second of the annual festivals – Pentecost or *Shavuōt* – is more connected with Pentecost on the calendar (i.e., Pentecost is seven weeks after Passover), it is generally considered that the feast of 5:1 is Booths (*Sukkot*).<sup>114</sup> This would mean the passage of five or six months between the events of Chapter 5 and the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. This would be sufficient time for Jesus to move back to Galilee and to perform the teachings and miracles recorded in the Synoptics ahead of this commonly-recorded event. These other aspects of Jesus' Galilean ministry are not relevant to John's overall purpose, which is less of a chronological diary of Jesus' ministry and more of a thorough defense of Jesus' identity as the Christ, the Son of God.

John makes particular note that Jesus *went away*, a phrase that indicates a retirement for purpose, not merely a changing of location. There are numerous indicators from the Synoptics as to why Jesus might seek out a retiring place of solitude with His disciples. The twelve had just returned from their 'first missionary journey,' as it were, and Mark records Jesus admonishing them to "*Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while.*"<sup>115</sup> All three Synoptic authors record the death of John the Baptist, an event that once again highlighted the animosity that existed in Judea and Galilee in regard to all that surrounded Jesus and His ministry. Luke tells us that Herod was in a quandary as to the identity of Jesus, thinking that He might be a resurrected John, whom he had murdered, and that Herod "*kept trying to see Jesus.*"<sup>116</sup> In addition to this, there was the constant ministry to the multitudes who followed after Him, not that they may find eternal life, but that they might be healed. It is a manifest testimony to Jesus' human nature that the Gospels record His work as arduous and exhausting, as it was without interruption or break. These circumstances would each justify a retirement on the part of Jesus; together

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<sup>113</sup> It is, of course, possible that the feast referenced in 5:1 is one of the lesser feasts of the Jewish calendar, but it is unusual for the term 'feast' to be used in reference to any other than the three festival feasts to be celebrated by all make Israelites in Jerusalem.

<sup>114</sup> *Cp.* Westcott; 95.

<sup>115</sup> Mark 6:31

<sup>116</sup> Luke 9:9; *cp.* Matt. 14:13

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they presented a compelling reason for Jesus' to 'get away for a while.' But, of course, solitude was not to be. The multitudes followed and, as the Synoptics record, Jesus had compassion on them, seeing that they were "*as sheep without a shepherd.*"

*And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick.* (Matthew 14:14)

*And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things.* (Mark 6:34)

The location of this event is generalized to the area near Bethsaida, located at the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (*cp.* Luke 9:10). It is evident that Bethsaida is merely the nearest sizable town to where Jesus retired; the land south of the city along the eastern shore of the sea was somewhat uninhabited at the time - a wilderness. We read that Jesus and His disciples "*went up on the mountain*" in that region, and the geography of the territory would probably indicate that the Lord was in the region now known as the Golan Heights, an area of impressive mountains in contrast to the shoreline of Galilee.<sup>117</sup>



**Golan Heights**

*Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near.* (6:4)

In a sense, John's Gospel is the most chronological of the four. This is not to say that the material in the Fourth Gospel is arranged in a strictly chronological manner; rather it is to note that John, unlike the Synoptic authors, provides periodic calendar markers in the form of the annual Jewish festival feasts. These markers show up at John 2:13, 5:1, 6:4, 7:2, 10:22, and 11:55. Three of these - 2:13, 6:4, and 11:55 - refer specifically to the Passover Feast and, as such, serve as a general outline of Jesus' earthly ministry lasting roughly three years. Thus this reference in 6:4 is in the middle - a year from the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Cana of Galilee and a year from the end of that ministry in Jerusalem and

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<sup>117</sup> The Golan Heights are today a disputed region between Israel and Syria, having been occupied by Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War and held by the Israeli Defense Force since.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Golgotha. “Although this is the second of three Passovers mentioned by John, his reason for including this aside is not so much chronological as theological.”<sup>118</sup>

| <u>Reference</u> | <u>Feast</u>              |
|------------------|---------------------------|
| 2:13             | Passover                  |
| 5:1              | Booths(?)                 |
| 6:4              | Passover                  |
| 7:2              | Booths                    |
| 10:22            | Dedication <sup>119</sup> |
| 11:55            | Passover                  |

John’s references to the Jewish festival feasts, however, should not be viewed as mere calendar markers, though they do serve that purpose. Passover is a central theme to



**Beasley-Murray (1916-2000)**

his recording of Jesus’ ministry, and the three mentioned provide the framework for that ministry. The narrative of the feeding of the five thousand is linked by John to Jesus’ reference to Moses as one of the key witnesses to His ministry; the feeding itself is recognized by the multitude as powerful proof that Jesus was the Prophet promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18. The mention of the Passover, therefore, is part of the whole context; along with the wilderness location, the entire event is reminiscent of the children of Israel in the Wilderness under Moses. Beasley-Murray writes, “The statement about the nearness of the Passover in v. 4 is more than a mere date. Linked with the identification of Jesus as the prophet who would come as the eschatological successor to Moses (Deut. 18:15), and coupled with the comparison of the manna in the wilderness with the bread from heaven that Jesus gives (John 6:31-33), the whole scene becomes associated with the thought of the second Exodus.”<sup>120</sup>

Of the three annual feasts, Passover was perhaps the one that looked most powerfully toward the future even as it commemorated the past. “The Passover was the most characteristic *feast of the Jews*, because, though primarily the commemoration of a past

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<sup>118</sup> Carson; 268.

<sup>119</sup> Hanukkah

<sup>120</sup> Beasley-Murray, George R. *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers; 1991); 40.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

event, it also provided the ground of hope for a present deliverance and for the arrival of a present deliverer. Men thought of the promised prophet *like unto Moses* (Deut. xviii. 15) and of the messiah who would be their king."<sup>121</sup> In this light, it is not surprising to discover that the multitudes wanted to take Jesus and make him king (6:15).

*Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do. Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little. One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?"* (5:5-9)

Miraculous feedings are somewhat of a trademark of divine revelation. Moses encountered a similar situation with the children of Israel in the wilderness, and he was as flummoxed as Philip.

*And Moses said, "The people whom I am among are six hundred thousand men on foot; yet You have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month.' Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to provide enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to provide enough for them?"* (Numbers 11:21-22)

Another remarkable parallel is found in II Kings 4, with several words found in each passage (John 6 and II Kings 4) that strongly indicate that the evangelist intended the connection be made between the two,

*Then a man came from Baal Shalisha, and brought the man of God bread of the firstfruits, twenty loaves of barley bread, and newly ripened grain in his knapsack. And he said, "Give it to the people, that they may eat." But his servant said, "What? Shall I set this before one hundred men?" He said again, "Give it to the people, that they may eat; for thus says the LORD: 'They shall eat and have some left over.'" So he set it before them; and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the LORD.* (II Kings 4:42-44)

The circumstances are so similar between the earlier miracle (by the prophet Elisha) and Jesus' recorded here in John 6 – the paucity of food for the number of people (even starker in Jesus' case), the questioning servant, the fact that the bread was *barley*, the abundance of food with *some left over* – that Jesus' miracle would naturally be seen as a parallel to the miracle of Elisha. Indeed, the term used in John 6:9, translated *little boy* in

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<sup>121</sup> Hoskyns; 281.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

most English Bibles, refers only to a servant, and is used several times in the Greek translation (LXX) of II Kings 4 in reference to Elisha's servant. It is the magnitude of contrast between Elisha's miracle and that of Jesus that stands out. Twenty small loaves of barley bread could hardly feed one hundred hungry men, how much less will five small loaves and two tiny fishes provide sustenance for five thousand men, as well as the women and children that were undoubtedly present? "Jesus is a prophet greater than Elijah or Elisha."<sup>122</sup>

*Then Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. (6:10)*

The reason for this detail is not evident. Certainly, it provides an opportunity to count the men in attendance, showing just how great a miracle Jesus was about to do. It also, perhaps, provides the orderly and visible distribution of the food so that (1) no one goes without, and (2) there can be no doubt that a visible miracle has taken place. Five thousand men, plus women and children, milling about would be quite chaotic and would mask the distribution of the meager portions put into Jesus' hands. By seating everyone down (we may assume that the women were not forced to stand) Jesus brings order to the proceeding, and guarantees that the distribution of the food would be apparent to all, as it was.

*And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted. (6:11)*

The New King James Version quoted adds an explanatory note from the Synoptics that is probably not in the original of John's Gospel – *the agency of the disciples in distributing the food*. This is the consistent testimony of the Synoptics: that Jesus handed to the food to the twelve who then distributed the food to the multitude. We may assume that this is exactly how it happened, and John's omission of the disciples in the process is meant entirely to focus the reader's attention on Jesus, who is working the miracle. It is unlikely that Jesus Himself handed the bread and fish to each of the five thousand men there; the omission by John is one of emphasis, not historical inaccuracy. The agency of the disciples

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<sup>122</sup> Carson; 270.

in handing out the food plays no part in the miracle of the multiplication of the bread and fish.

And this was a miracle. A fact somewhat proven by the remarkable attempts by modern scholars to explain it away. Some have attempted to interpret the miracle (as with the wine at Cana) as an acceleration of a natural process or a magnification of the nourishing power of the meager portions of bread and fish. Others pretend that the emotional state of the multitude, having been with Jesus all day, was such that they convinced themselves that the morsels given to them were fully satisfying, that they were fully sated. One of the most ridiculous has us believe that the example of the little boy sharing his scarcely adequate meal challenged the rest of the crowd into sharing their own lunches, so that all had enough to eat. "There is no question that the feeding, according to the representation of the evangelist, is to be regarded as a miracle in the most exact sense. And if we do not intend to make a myth of the narrative, we must let it stand as it reads...The idea of a myth is opposed by the fact that this very event maintained its position in the consciousness of the early Christianity, as we perceive by the four evangelical accounts; compare also the frequent representation in the catacombs."<sup>123</sup> That such a powerful attempt has been made to 'demythologize' the feeding miracle can only be explained by the modern liberal aversion to anything that presents Jesus as divine, for this was without question a divine miracle. Ryle concludes, "None but a person *determined* to disbelieve all miracles, and cast them out of the sacred narrative, would ever try to make out (as some actually have tried) that the four times repeated story of the miraculous feeding which we have considered, only meant that the multitude brought out the hidden stores of provisions which they had carried with them, and shared them with one another!"<sup>124</sup>

How did the miracle work? This may seem like an academic question of no theological value, but it may also go to the heart of the meaning of the entire episode, the entire miracle. From the narrative itself – as well as the record of the Synoptics – we have no way to answer the question; we are not told just *how* the miracle worked. Jesus 'gave thanks' – the word used is *eucharistasas*, from which the Eucharist is named. "If Jesus used

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<sup>123</sup> Luthardt; 148-149.

<sup>124</sup> Ryle; 336.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

the common form of Jewish thanksgiving, he said something like this: ‘Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth.’”<sup>125</sup> Having blessed the meager parcel of food, Jesus distributed a bountiful meal to the multitude. How did this happen?

We have an indication of the ‘method’ of the miracle if we compare Jesus’ miracle with a familiar parallel in the life of the prophet Elijah.

*So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, indeed a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Please bring me a little water in a cup, that I may drink.” And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” So she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar; and see, I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth.’ So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke by Elijah.* (I Kings 17:11-16)

The miracle in the widow’s home occurred each time she went to the larder for flour and oil. We do not read that the flour bin filled up or the jar filled to the rim with oil, but rather that, it would seem, the *handful of flour and little oil* never depleted throughout the time of their need, until the rains came and food was again plentiful. We may not be dogmatic in comparison, but it seems reasonable that Jesus’ miracle worked the same way: He did not immediately produce sufficient bread and fish to feed five thousand men, but rather every time a disciple came back for another serving to distribute, the five loaves and two fishes had not depleted. Charles Spurgeon writes, “He multiplied as soon as ever the disciples began to distribute; and when the distribution ended, the multiplication ended.”<sup>126</sup> Ryle adds, “As fast as He broke the loaves and the disciples



**Charles Spurgeon (1834-92)**

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<sup>125</sup> Carson; 270.

<sup>126</sup> Spurgeon, Charles H. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 37* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust; 1970); 416.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

carried them away to distribute them, so fast did the loaves multiply under His hands. It was in the act of breaking and distributing to the disciples that the miraculous multiplication took place.”<sup>127</sup>

If this analysis of the miracle is correct, then the vent is a physical manifestation of what we read in the opening chapter of the Fourth Gospel, “*For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace.*”<sup>128</sup> Divine grace flows from Jesus Christ, but not in a reservoir; rather, as the phrase *and grace for grace* means, fresh grace is provided to meet each fresh need, just as new bread and fish were provided for each round of distribution in the wilderness of Galilee.

*So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, “Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost.” Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. (6:12-13)*

Jesus did not merely provide what the multitude needed to be filled and satisfied; He provided an abundance. Andreas Köstenberger notes, “Here we see a parallel between



**Andreas Köstenberger (b. 1957)**

Jesus’ first sign (at the wedding of Cana) and this one: as he provided abundant wine there, so he here provides abundant bread. Bread and wine, in turn, symbolize the eschatological messianic banquet.”<sup>129</sup> Leon Morris adds, “What the manna in the wilderness foreshadowed is perfectly given to men in Jesus. He is the Messiah who gives men the richest banquets to enjoy.”<sup>130</sup> This is the connection

we are meant to make, between Jesus’ miraculous feeding of The five thousand in the wilderness south of Bethsaida, and the miraculous provision of manna in the Wilderness of the Exodus. John’s narrative will recite the expectation of the Jews concerning the Promised One, the Messiah, and Jesus’ answer:

*Therefore they said to Him, “What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give*

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<sup>127</sup> Ryle; 334.

<sup>128</sup> John 1:16

<sup>129</sup> Köstenberger, Andreas *Encountering John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; 2013); 83.

<sup>130</sup> Morris, Leon *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; 1977); 340.

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*you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”* (6:30-33)

At this point in the narrative, most commentators cannot help making application of the extra food and its collection to the admonition to “waste not, want not.” Bruce writes, “His directions to the disciples convey an important practical lesson. To waste food which we do not need, when so many live at starvation level, is an insult to the divine giver.”<sup>131</sup> Carson notes, “Collecting what was left over at the end of the meal was a Jewish custom. Nevertheless in this injunction there is doubtless an ethical note of social responsibility that is patient of many applications.”<sup>132</sup> Is this so? Can we envision Jesus reminding His disciples of the ‘starving children in Africa’ as He admonishes them not to waste the food? While the ethical admonition not to waste what we have been given is true enough in itself, it is not to be found in this narrative. What stands out starkly against the overarching parallel with the manna in the Wilderness is that *there were leftovers*. This is contrasted with the ‘law’ of the manna,

*So when they measured it by omers, he who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack. Every man had gathered according to each one’s need.*

(Exodus 16:18)

The message here is the abundance that comes with Jesus. The comparison with Moses, and Elijah, and Elisha are all patent, but in all things Jesus far excels any and all of the ‘holy men’ of the Old Covenant. That there were twelve baskets of leftovers gathered cannot but have significance, referring no doubt to the twelve tribes as representative of Israel. “That there were *twelve* baskets is almost certainly significant: the Lord has enough to supply the needs of the twelve tribes of Israel.”<sup>133</sup> The fundamental point, it seems, is to show just how far Jesus excels Moses; the abundance of Jesus’ gift far surpasses the adequacy of Moses’ provision (which, as Jesus will point out, was not Moses’ but God’s provision).

Perhaps this last lesson was directed solely to the disciples – and not a lesson of ‘waste not, want not.’ Rather, a lesson of the all-sufficiency and abundance of divine grace

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<sup>131</sup> Bruce; 145.

<sup>132</sup> Carson; 271.

<sup>133</sup> *Idem*.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

- *grace for grace* - to be found in Jesus Christ. "At the end, that which remains is gathered up; - it was left over, not because Jesus gives above what is needed, but to carry a special meaning. The twelve apostles gather each a basket, not merely for their own needs, nor as a memento, nor merely to point out the fulness of his grace, but to indicate that they should gather from his fulness, in order themselves to possess something they can give. This aims at the future of their mission to the world."<sup>134</sup>

*Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world."* (6:14)

This verse reflects on the close of Jesus' discourse with the Jews in Jerusalem, "*For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me.*"<sup>135</sup> Unfortunately, this acknowledgement of Jesus' true identity is not one that is in truth; the people really do not know what they are saying. In a moment (verse 15) they will try to take Jesus and make Him their king, proving again that even their rudimentary understanding of the promise of God is faulty at the core. "This is not faith but unbelief. They have not understood who Jesus is."<sup>136</sup> The rest of the chapter will elaborate on this unbelief that marvels at Jesus' miracles, and sees dimly that He must be the One promised but cannot grasp what that means in truth. By the end of the chapter, only the twelve remain with Jesus.

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<sup>134</sup> Luthardt; 149.

<sup>135</sup> John 5:46

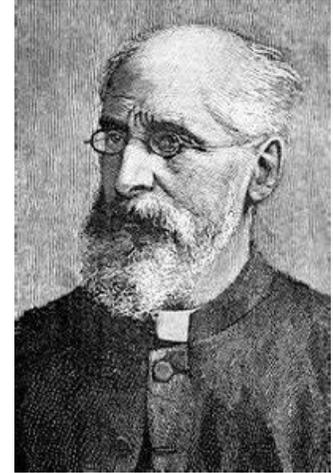
<sup>136</sup> Newbigin; 76.

**Week 5: Works or Faith?**

**Text Reading:** John 6:15 - 40

*"All true morality is only  
the development of faith."  
(Christoph Luthardt)*

When we think of the events that led to the First Jewish Revolt of AD 66 – 70, the tendency is to focus on Jerusalem, where the conflict catastrophically ended with the Roman breach of the city. But in the decades leading up to that event, including the decade in which our Lord ministered, Jerusalem was actually a center of Roman support and obsequiousness, primarily due to the political dominance of the Sadducees and the Herodians. The real seedbed of revolution was Galilee, where we find Jesus ministering during the majority of His time



**Alfred Edersheim (1825-89)**

on earth, and here in John 6. Numerous would-be messiahs arose in Galilee - one of which is mentioned by the Rabbi Gamaliel in Acts 5:37 - as well as numerous rebellions against various overlords from the Greek occupation to the Roman. Edersheim writes of the Galileans, "That their hot blood made them rather quarrelsome, and that they lived in a chronic state of rebellion against Rome, we gather not only from Josephus, but even from the New Testament (Luke 13:2; Acts 5:37)."<sup>137</sup>

Jewish resistance to Herodian and Roman rule is extremely complex but it seems clear that Galilee was a critical focal point of this resistance from 4 BC to AD 66. In fact, Josephus traces the origins of the zealot movement or Fourth Philosophy in AD 6 to Saddok the Pharisee and Judas the Galilean, a man from Gamla They called for armed revolt, saying that such heavy tax assessments amounted to slavery and that only God was master of the Jewish people... In 52 a conflict erupted between Galileans and Samaritans, when Galileans were murdered in Samaria while on their way to a festival in Jerusalem. When the Roman governor Cumanus failed to take action, Galilean instigators promoted a punitive expedition into Samaritan territory by appealing to the Zealot watchwords of 'freedom from foreign control.' Hostility broke out and spread to Jerusalem; it was resolved by Claudius.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Edersheim, Alfred *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers; 1994); 40.

<sup>138</sup> Skinner, Andrew C. *A Historical Sketch of Galilee* [A Historical Sketch of Galilee \(byu.edu\)](http://www.byu.edu); last accessed

The insurrectionist nature of the Galileans was perhaps due to several factors. First, the region was much poorer than Judea and more ethnically mixed, with Jews and Samaritans, Syrians, and other Gentiles living in the region. This made for a daily confrontation between the religious Jews and their pagan neighbors, something far more rare in Jerusalem. Second, the Jews of Galilee were patronized by their brethren in Judea (and especially in Jerusalem), which would have been an infuriating phenomenon for faithful Jews and was perhaps a motivation for the Galilean Jews to ‘prove their pedigree.’ Finally, the direct presence of Roman troops was not as powerful as it was in Judea. Judea was ruled directly by Rome through a *procurator*, whereas Galilee was ruled by the client ‘king,’ the tetrarch Herod Antipas, the murderer of John the Baptist. This relative lack of Roman legionary presence encouraged zealot bands to start minor conflagrations in the north that they hoped would set fire to the whole nation – though they only brought the Roman legions ever closer until, after the death of Herod Agrippa, Galilee was made a Roman province along with Judea.

If the Galilaeans did not live directly under Roman control, as their brethren in Judaea did, their ruler Herod Antipas was a creature of Rome, and they experienced no feelings of patriotic pride as they contemplated the Herodian dynasty. The Herods stood or fell with the Romans: to oppose the one was to oppose the other.<sup>139</sup>

The point of all of this is, of course, the backdrop to John 6:14, “*When Jesus knew that they were going to take Him by force, to make Him king...*” Jesus was undoubtedly aware of the incendiary tendencies of the northern Jewish people, and probably expected such a move on their part (in addition to the infallible knowledge He possessed of men’s hearts). The Synoptics inform us that Jesus *compelled* His disciples to get into the boat and set sail for the western shore – quite possibly so that they would not get caught up in the revolutionary foment brewing among the hotheads of Galilee. “It may well have been in the hope that Jesus would lead the cause of liberation that the crowd came to him on this

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<sup>139</sup> Bruce; 146.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

occasion: his feeding them there in the wilderness confirmed their assurance that he was indeed the man of the hour.”<sup>140</sup>

That Jesus spent the majority of His time in the midst of this seething cauldron of rebellion is quite interesting, given that He had no intention of providing *that type* of leadership for the Israelite nation. If He desired a popular acceptance of His message, He might have had better success among the Sadducees and Herodians in Jerusalem than among the zealots of Jewish Galilee. Yet it was *the Kingdom* that Jesus announced and brought into being by His advent and preaching. So it was that He brought that kingdom message to the place within Second Temple Judaism where talk of a Jewish kingdom was most prevalent and most virulent, Galilee. It was here in Galilee, then, that the starkest contrast would arise between what the Jews *expected* of their king and his kingdom, and what it was Jesus was bringing as the true King. “And hence the more the contradiction between the claim of the Jews and the claim of Jesus was revealed, just so much more decidedly must the relation of the nation to its Messiah become a hostile relation.”<sup>141</sup>

It is noteworthy that this materialistic and political expectation of the Galileans has been repeated *ad nauseum* throughout the history of the Church. Time and time again believers have expected a political, and even militaristic, progression of the Gospel and the Kingdom, and time and time again they have been both wrong and sorely disappointed.

“To have assumed that the promise of the prophets is fulfilled, and the desire of the Jews and, indeed, of all men satisfied, by a rearrangement of human affairs undertaken by the force of human initiative, was the fundamental and persistent misunderstanding of the Galilean crowd...This means in the end that what depends upon the energy of men is regarded as the realization of the goal and aim and purpose of God.”<sup>142</sup> This is a misunderstanding that the Church has seemingly never been able to get clear of. Leon Morris quotes another author to the



Leon Morris (1914-2006)

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<sup>140</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>141</sup> Luthardt; 151.

<sup>142</sup> Hoskyns; 282-283.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

point that “there is much of S. John’s irony in the passage: He who is already King has come to open His kingdom to men; but in their blindness men try to force Him to be the kind of king they want; thus they fail to get the king they want, and also lose the kingdom He offers.”<sup>143</sup>

*Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.* (6:15)

John’s narrative of the events again differs with those of the Synoptics; he focuses again on the fact that Jesus knew the ‘thoughts and intentions’ of men’s hearts and responded accordingly. It may be that the crowd did not actually make the move that Jesus knew they were contemplating, as there is no mention of this in the Synoptic narratives. These other records, however, do indicate that Jesus *instructed* and even *compelled* His disciples to leave the scene, a phenomenon that John’s narrative quite possibly explains.

*Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.* (Matthew 14:22-23)

*Immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while He sent the multitude away. And when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray.* (Mark 6:45-46)<sup>144</sup>

Several, if not most, of Jesus’ disciples were from Galilee; one was acknowledged as a zealot. Thus this smaller circle of followers likely shared the political leanings of their territory: they were looking for the sort of king who would ride roughshod over the Romans and reestablish Jewish sovereignty in Judea and Galilee. Some commentator surmise that Jesus, not wanting His disciples to be caught up in a popular effort to take and make Him king, forcibly sent them away (the Greek term ‘*made*’ in the Matthean and Marcan passages is a forceful word, ‘*compel*’) while He dealt with the multitude and defused the situation. It is interesting to note that the Synoptic description of the crowd as “*sheep without a shepherd*” (Mark 6:34) has an Old Testament background that fits hand-in-

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<sup>143</sup> Morris; 346-347.

<sup>144</sup> Luke does not record the ‘walking on the water’ event.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

glove with the political and military considerations of the Galileans. When the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, and the king of Israel were taking counsel together as to whether they should take up arms against Ramoth Gilead, the prophet Micaiah was called to give his word from the Lord. After goading the king of Israel with platitudes, God's prophet finally gives the king the true word from Jehovah, and it refers to military destruction. It is not hard to imagine that this passage was on the Lord's mind as He surveyed the Galileans as they came to meet Him in the wilderness:

*Then he said, "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, 'These have no master. Let each return to his house in peace.'*

(I Kings 22:17)

*Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, got into the boat, and went over the sea toward Capernaum. And it was already dark, and Jesus had not come to them. Then the sea arose because a great wind was blowing. So when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near the boat; and they were afraid. But He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they willingly received Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land where they were going. (6:16-21)*

This passage is a very popular text from which to preach, and many have likened the 'storm-tossed' disciples to the Church, in need of Jesus to come calmly walking to her that she might invite Him into their midst. The result is always the same: the Church immediately reaches her safe haven, her shore. Ryle notes, for example, "The simple circumstances of the disciples being alone in the boat, on the sea, and in darkness, has been felt in every age to be an instructive emblem of the position of the Church of Christ between the first and second advents."<sup>145</sup> Such moralizing makes for a hearty sermon, though a horrible exegesis of the passage. For one thing, none of the accounts indicate that the disciples were in any danger – they were *straining at the oars* because they were rowing into a strong headwind, a common occurrence on the Sea of Galilee. It is apparent that they ought to have made the opposite shore by this time but were still in the middle of the lake, sails furled and oars out. Yet we should remember that at least four of these men *were fishermen from this very region of Galilee*; one may surmise that they were well aware of what the lake could throw at them, and for the most part, knew how to handle it. What has happened is that two similar stories have become conflated in some readers' minds:

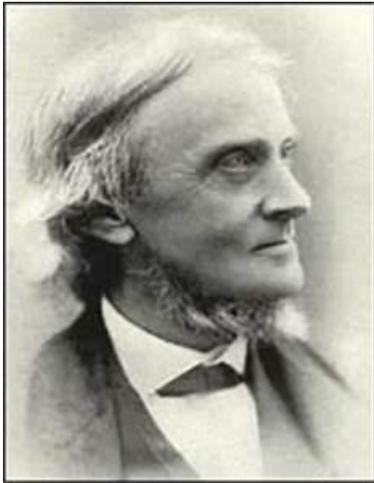
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<sup>145</sup> Ryle; 342.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

the story of the storm (Jesus asleep in the boat) and this story of the contrary wind. Both stories have a strong flavor of Jesus as the King of the Universe, but this one displays it even more powerfully in His being the Son of Man.

Worse than bad exegesis, a moralizing hermeneutic is liable to completely miss the point of the narrative: it was not that Jesus ‘saved’ the disciples from imminent catastrophe, nor even that He calmed their anxious hearts when they thought He was a ghost. Mark records that, though He saw them straining at the oars against the strong wind, He “*intended to pass them by*” and make for Capernaum ahead of them! No, what is important about this passage is what it shows us concerning *who Jesus is* – that all-important question that the Lord puts before His disciples, and all who hear the Gospel.



Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910)

The Jews of Galilee thought that He might be the king they had been waiting and hoping for, and had it in their minds to take and make Him so. Jesus is without doubt a king – He is *the King* – and this event records just how powerful a King He is, and just what His realm is: the whole of creation. Alexander Maclaren writes, “we have a revelation here of Christ as the Lord of the material universe, a kingdom wider in its range and profounder in its authority than that which that shouting crowd had sought to force

upon Him.”<sup>146</sup> Morris quotes with approval another commentator,

So He gave them a demonstration of His present Kingship, and that in the realm of Nature. It was as though He had said, I have refused to be crowned King upon the basis of bread, but make no mistake, I am King in every realm; King in the realm of Nature, contrary winds cannot hinder Me; the tossing sea cannot overwhelm Me. I am King.<sup>147</sup>

The narrative of Jesus walking on the water is often considered the second miracle of this overall section – John 6. But it is arguable whether this was intended as a miracle, *per se*, or whether it was a manifestation of Jesus’ inherent power as the sinless Son of Man. The reason the event is considered a miracle, of course, is that walking on water is

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<sup>146</sup> Maclaren, Alexander *Expositions of Holy Scripture: St. John Chaps I to VIII* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton; nd); 274.

<sup>147</sup> Morris; 348

something man cannot do.<sup>148</sup> Given that the miracles that Jesus performed were invariably meant as signs to be observed, and given that Jesus intended to walk past the disciples (perhaps even unseen), it may be that what the Holy Spirit has caused to be both witnessed and recorded is nothing less than the power of sinless Man over God's Creation, the ability to 'suspend' natural laws at will. Whitacre summarizes a minority view interpretation along this line, "Alternatively, it could be that Jesus is drawing upon forces in nature to which most of us do not have access but which are part of the created order."<sup>149</sup> This interpretation opens a small crack of accessibility to the power that Man as created was to possess over the Creation he was to rule; that power and that rule belongs to the Son of Man, Jesus Christ.

*On the following day, when the people who were standing on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other boat there, except that one which His disciples had entered, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with His disciples, but His disciples had gone away alone— however, other boats came from Tiberias, near the place where they ate bread after the Lord had given thanks— when the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they also got into boats and came to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. And when they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You come here?"* (6:22-25)

Having been so well fed, the multitude apparently stayed by the mountain – or returned there early in the morning – to seek out Jesus first thing. But two things soon became apparent: first, that Jesus was no longer there and, second, that He had not departed with His disciples the evening before. At any event, once the crowd realized that Jesus had departed, they scrambled on to whatever boats were available and crossed over to Capernaum, Jesus' 'home base,' as it were. They did indeed find Him there but were perplexed as to "when" He had arrived. It seems evident, however, that the *when* implies a deeper *how*. Jesus had arrived before they did, though He had not left the eastern shore with His disciples in the only boat that was available at the time. There was no possible way that Jesus could have walked the distance between the wilderness south of Bethsaida and Capernaum in the intervening hours, so the fact of His presence in the latter town indicated something unusual. Luthardt summarizes the multitudes train of thought,

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<sup>148</sup> Unless, of course, empowered by faith in Jesus Christ; *cp* Matthew 14:28-31 for the account in this context of Peter walking out to Jesus from the boat.

<sup>149</sup> Whitacre; 147.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

The time [*i.e.*, of Jesus' arrival in Capernaum] is inexplicable to them because the 'how' is. If he had taken the way by land, he could hardly have reached there yet; and he had not sailed across the sea – that they knew. Therefore the one question is not to be separated from the other, and they must have hoped, in the answer to the expressed question, to have the unspoken question likewise answered. This shows, moreover, that they expected to hear something wonderful. They did not know how to explain Jesus' arrival in an ordinary way.<sup>150</sup>

*Jesus answered them and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled."* (6:26)

As was His custom, Jesus does not answer the question – *either* the expressed or implied one – at all. The tone of His response is quite harsh, actually; it is a rebuke. "Jesus' reply, as is often the case, is neither polite nor seemingly directed to the question asked. He responds as a holy man would, revealing their own state of heart."<sup>151</sup> The multitude was excited by what they had experienced the previous day; it is hard for well-fed modern Westerners to appreciate the gravity of what these poor, Galilean Jews had seen on that mountain. No doubt the thought of Jesus being their 'king' was still in the minds of many of them, and the evident miracle of His having arrived in Capernaum *sans* boat probably stimulated that fervor even more. "Had he told them the nature of his crossing, doubtless they would have been impressed; but what follows shows that mere miracles can be corrosive of genuine faith."<sup>152</sup> They witnessed the sign of the miraculous feeding, but they failed totally to comprehend what the sign signified. That Jesus will now set before them.

*Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.* (6:27)

The parallel between this passage and Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar is quite striking. Here the subject is bread, there water. Here Jesus admonishes the crowd not to seek after that which perishes, but after that which endures to eternal life. There Jesus says to the woman, "*Everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst...*"<sup>153</sup> The water in chapter 4 was from Jacob's well; the bread was an allusion to the manna in the wilderness.

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<sup>150</sup> Luthardt; 159.

<sup>151</sup> Whitacre; 152.

<sup>152</sup> Carson; 283.

<sup>153</sup> John 4:13-14

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

In both cases Jesus is confronting Judaism at its core, its heritage, and showing it to be insufficient for the needs of men and women, even within the covenant. But just as with the woman of Samaria, the crowd here in Capernaum is dull of understanding and continues to hear Jesus' words in a literal sense – even their response to His offer of *the bread of God* is almost identical to her response to the *living water*.

*They said therefore to Him, 'Lord, evermore give us this bread.'* (6:34)

*The woman said to Him, 'Lord, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty, nor come all the way here to draw.'* (4:15)

Jesus in this discourse is making the transition from the physical miracle of the feeding to the spiritual truth that lies behind it. "In John the physical and the spiritual are interconnected, for the physical is spirit-bearing: the Word became flesh."<sup>154</sup> So as Jesus continues to talk about bread, He clearly does not mean the bread that the multitude ate on the previous evening, though for a good part of the dialogue physical nourishment is all the crowd hears, and all the crowd wants. Soon, however, Jesus will become more explicit "*I am the bread of life.*" (6:35)

Jesus' comment regarding the Son of Man in verse 27 connects back to the discourse on witnesses in Chapter 5, "*for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal.*" The 'seal' was a visible indication of authority and ownership, marking the thing sealed as being in all respects the authentic communication or messenger of the one who sealed. In this case we may consider that the 'seal' given to authenticate and authorize Jesus' person and ministry was that of the Holy Spirit, whom we read elsewhere was given to Jesus *without measure*. This statement, then, alludes most likely to Jesus' baptism and to the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Him immediately after this event. This places Jesus on a higher plane than Moses, anticipating the comparison that is about to be made. "The Son of Man, he says, is the one whom God has 'sealed' – that is to say, the one whom God has appointed as his certified and authorized agent for the bestowal of this life-giving food."<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Whitacre; 152.

<sup>155</sup> Bruce; 150.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*Then they said to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." (6:28-29)*

The connection between the Jews' question in verse 28 is the reference to 'work' or 'labor' in verse 27. The crowd is beginning to see that Jesus – a rabbi, after all – was trying to shift their minds away from the physical food they enjoyed in the wilderness the day before, to the real nourishment that they needed from God. Up to this point it may be accurate to say of the multitude what Paul would later say regarding other 'enemies of Christ,' "*their god is their belly.*"<sup>156</sup> And even as they slowly begin to comprehend the underlying meaning of Jesus' discussion about bread, and His miraculous reproduction of the bread, they still fail to see in Him the answer to their deepest need and longing. Rather, as was typical of Second Temple Judaism, they asked the rabbi *what works* must we do. "They looked, as the natural man always looks, for salvation as a result of their own effort."<sup>157</sup> This is reminiscent of the rich young ruler, "*Good teacher, what good thing must I do that I may have eternal life?*"<sup>158</sup> Paul speaks of this attitude as being both characteristic and condemning of his fellow countrymen, especially the sect of the Pharisees.

*For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. (Romans 10:2-3)*

Jesus' answer to them has been a point of controversy in the Church ever since: *Is faith a work?* It was the British monk Pelagius who surmised that if God demands faith, then man must be capable of faith – thus making faith a meritorious work before God. Is that what Jesus means? If it is, then we have a serious problem between the soteriology of Jesus and that of Paul (and this is exactly what many liberal scholars maintain that we do have), since Paul makes it clear that *faith* is not a work at all.

*Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. (Romans 4:4-5)*

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<sup>156</sup> Philippians 3:19

<sup>157</sup> Morris; 360.

<sup>158</sup> Matthew 19:16

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Jesus Himself will make it clear in this very same discourse, that the ‘work’ of faith is not something that man can do of himself. *“No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.”* (6:44). So in what sense does Jesus use the term ‘work’ in verse 35? Perhaps it is best to view the term as ironical: *You ask what work we must do to ‘work the works of God,’ or the works that God approves? I tell you the work, to not work but to believe.* Newbiggin agrees,

The answer is that it is not a ‘work’ at all. No works can achieve what we know we desire above all else. It can only be a gift received in trust. This is the ‘work of God’ – not only in the sense that it is the work God desires but in the sense...that it is the work which God does. For to receive in trust God’s gift of himself in the man Jesus is not something which I can of myself accomplish. It is strictly ‘a work of God’ that I believe in him whom he has sent.<sup>159</sup>

Yet in another sense faith is a work, a work not only that God does in us but one that He continues to do and to improve *“until the day of Jesus Christ.”*<sup>160</sup> Faith in this sense is an ongoing work that God does in us through His Holy Spirit, but also one that continues to work out of us through sanctification. *“It is his work also, not merely because he alone can work it in us, but because it is that which he requires of every living man.”*<sup>161</sup> Hence, while faith can never be viewed as a meritorious act derived from within the sinner, it must also not be viewed as a one-time act that does not, or need not, continue throughout the believer’s life. *“Jesus opposes, to the variety of conduct, one in itself simple and united. It is ever a doing, but one which comprehends the whole man and determines the whole shape of his life.”*<sup>162</sup> This will become an issue of discussion through the balance of the New Testament (*i.e.*, the alleged controversy between Paul and James) and throughout Church history. But good works are never pitted against faith in the New Testament, so long as it is understood that all ‘good’ that a believer does springs from faith alone and not from anything good that dwells within him. *“All true morality is only the development of belief. In all action agreeable to God, it is belief which exercises itself.”*<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Newbiggin; 79.

<sup>160</sup> Philippians 1:6

<sup>161</sup> Simeon; 377.

<sup>162</sup> Luthardt; 161.

<sup>163</sup> Luthardt; 162.

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*Therefore they said to Him, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"* (6:30-31)

This verse makes one think of Paul's general assessment of the Jews in contrast to the Greeks, in which the apostle is as unwilling to accommodate the Jews (and the Gentiles) as Jesus is here in John 6.

*For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* (I Corinthians 1:22-24)

Outwardly it may appear that the Jews in Capernaum were coming around to Jesus' perspective; they merely needed a little confirmation via a miraculous sign from Him. Some scholars consider this statement out of place, considering the miracle that Jesus had performed the evening before and that many of those present here had witnessed. But it is rather the case that this prior miracle motivated the current request, for that was a one-off meal, whereas Moses *gave them bread from heaven to eat* every day of their wilderness journey. The demand placed upon Jesus here is evidence of the truly carnal nature of the Jewish religion at this time; the Jews wanted a complete reenactment of what had gone before, in spite of the fact that the prior history of Israel did not result in the Kingdom of God in their midst. "The Jews and the Galileans are religious, but they are religious in the sense that they make of the gift of God an observable and even edible thing, like the bread that Moses gave to their fathers; and so they expect the fulfilment of the purpose of God to be a future event, a repetition of what Moses did."<sup>164</sup>

The 'prophecy' quoted here seems to be an amalgamation of several Old Testament passages and not a direct quote from any single passage.

*Yet He had commanded the clouds above, and opened the doors of heaven,  
Had rained down manna on them to eat, and given them of the bread of heaven.*

(Psalm 78:23-24)

*You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, and brought them water out of the rock for their thirst, and told them to go in to possess the land which You had sworn to give them.*

(Nehemiah 9:15)

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<sup>164</sup> Hoskyns; 283.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*The people asked, and He brought quail, and satisfied them with the bread of heaven.  
He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it ran in the dry places like a river.*

(Psalm 105:40-41)

Each of these verses (and we might add Exodus 16:4, 15) speak of the manna as an event that occurred in the wilderness. Yet it was the consistent hermeneutic of Second Temple Israel to anticipate in the future *exactly* that which God had done in the past. Thus the Jews failed to comprehend the symbolic nature of the historic event; looking for a repetition of the event, they failed to recognize its fulfillment. Note that this is not unlike the modern Dispensational hermeneutic.

*Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* (6:32-33)

Jesus corrects both their understanding of the past of the future. First of all, it was not Moses who gave Israel the manna; it was God. But Jesus blends two thoughts together here in a manner designed to drive the hearer's mind to consider not the *giving* of the manna, but the *meaning* of the manna given. The subtle shift that Jesus makes is found in the tenses of the same verb: *give*. With reference to the historic event in the wilderness, Jesus corrects their faulty memory: *It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven*. But then He leaves the past and returns immediately to the present (leaving the implied, *It was My Father who gave you the manna*, unspoken): *but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven*. God's *gave* of the manna in the wilderness become My Father's *give* today of the true bread from heaven. This shift is essential, since Jesus is not interested in arguing the past with these Jews; His emphasis is on the present fulfillment in Him of the past event under Moses. "Jesus is far more than the giver of bread like Moses was; he is the bread itself, as he is about to make clear."<sup>165</sup> Carson adds, 'Jesus is not only saying that his Father has been ignored while Moses has gained centre stage in the thought of his opponents, but that the *true* bread is in any case not the manna in the wilderness but what the Father is *now giving*."<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Whitacre; 157.

<sup>166</sup> Carson; 286.

*Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always." And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.*  
(6:34-35)

There is some progression in the perspective of the multitude; in verse 25 they refer to Jesus as 'Rabbi'; here it is 'Lord' to whom they address their plea. We should not read too much into this, for the Greek term *kurios* often meant nothing more than a respectful 'Sir' (as the New American Standard translated the same word from the lips of the Samaritan woman in 4:15). Still, from Rabbi to *Kurios* should be considered an advancement, and Jesus seems to take them as they come by moving from the metaphorical and indirect to the direct form of speech, *I am the bread of life*. "They are busied with this thing as they imagine it to themselves and not with the person of Jesus. Therefore Jesus turns them from the moral to the spiritual, and from the thing to his person."<sup>167</sup> However, His abandonment of figurative for direct speech will not meet with the faith that the multitude needs to 'work the work of God.' No doubt Jesus knew this. "The crowd wants an unending supply of this bread, perhaps like the Samaritan woman wanted a continuous supply of water so she would not have to go to the well again. Once the crowd realizes he is referring to himself, however, they become far less receptive."<sup>168</sup>

*I am the Bread of Life*. This is the first of seven 'I am' statements that are unique to the Gospel of John and extremely significant in the self-disclosure (as well as the self-awareness) of Jesus. The phrase translated *I am* is the emphatic *ego eimi*, or "I Myself am" and is the same as the Greek translation of the Hebrew YHWH, *I AM*. Thus many properly see in these statements Jesus' claim to deity, especially in the one that is without a predicate, "Before Abraham was born, I AM."<sup>169</sup> The other such phrases are all accompanied by a predicate that gives depth of understanding to the nature of Jesus' person and His work.

|                                    |          |
|------------------------------------|----------|
| <i>I am the Bread of Life</i>      | (6:35)   |
| <i>I am the Light of the World</i> | (8:12)   |
| <i>I am the Gate</i>               | (10:7,9) |

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<sup>167</sup> Luthardt; 165.

<sup>168</sup> Whitacre; 158

<sup>169</sup> John 8:58

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <i>I am the Good Shepherd</i>                | (10:11,14) |
| <i>I am the Resurrection and the Life</i>    | (11:25)    |
| <i>I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life</i> | (14:6)     |
| <i>I am the True Vine</i>                    | (15:1, 5)  |

Commentators are divided as to the divine significance of the phrase *I am* in these passages. With the predicate – *the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd*, for instance – these statements seem to be more of the order of messianic self-disclosure than direct claims of deity. Where the emphatic *ego eimi* – “I Myself am” – is perhaps most clearly to be understood as the divine name is in John 8:58, where Jesus uses the phrase without predicate, “*Before Abraham was, I am.*” Yet while these ‘I am’ declarations may not at all times be direct self-attribution of the divine name, there is undoubtedly a strong sense of the deity involved in each one. They establish the singularity of Jesus Christ in terms of all that matters for eternal life; together they remove all doubt as to the source of redemption and eternal life: it is Jesus, and Him alone.

In this discourse with the Jews at Capernaum, Jesus is attempting to teach them that even the manna in the wilderness was not meant merely to feed the people. It was meant to teach them a lesson concerning what truly mattered, and from Whom to seek that which truly mattered. Moses himself tried to explain this to the ancestors of these Jews who are demanding more bread from Jesus. “*So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.*”<sup>170</sup> But these Jews of Jesus’ day were as hard of heart, as deaf of hearing, as those who first heard these words from Moses. Now a greater than Moses has come, and the Jews of Capernaum are seeing Him, but they are not believing. That fact, tragic as it was, did not alter or defeat God’s redemptive plan; it did not conquer Jesus’ work, for “*The Lord knows those who are His.*”<sup>171</sup> Jesus undoubtedly knows where this conversation is heading – toward a massive rejection of Himself as being what He claimed to be, and an almost universal ‘falling away’ of those who, up to this point, have claimed to be His disciples (*cp.* 6:60). Having announced with crystal clarity what He had been alluding to all along – that

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<sup>170</sup> Deuteronomy 8:3

<sup>171</sup> II Timothy 2:19

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*He alone* is that bread which comes down from the Father in heaven – Jesus now moves on to explain both the fact and, amazingly, the inconsequence of their unbelief.

***But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe.*** (6:36)

As in Chapter 5, Jesus again indicts the multitude for their unbelief. His comment here, *you have seen Me*, may be a reference to the fact that Jesus spent most of His ministry in Galilee, and Capernaum was His center of operations. Or it might simply refer to what many of these Jews had witnessed the day before – the miraculous feeding of the five thousand that was so powerfully reminiscent of the manna in the wilderness. Whether specific to this one event, or more generally covering the time Jesus has been with them, their ‘sight’ of Him has not led them to believe. Luthardt writes, “‘Beholding,’ betokens the beholding of that which is essential in Christ, with the eye of the soul; and then ‘believing,’ that is, the uniting with him.”<sup>172</sup> “Seeing” is frequently used as a metaphor for believing and the fact that the Jews both of Jerusalem and of Galilee saw Jesus but did not believe will become the expression of judgment against them in Chapter 9,

*And Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind.” Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, “Are we blind also?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, ‘We see.’ Therefore your sin remains.* (9:39-41)

***All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.*** (6:37-40)

In spite of vigorous attempts to downplay the clear implications of this passage, what we have here is one of the most explicit biblical statements of the dual doctrines of *Predestination* and *Preservation* to be found in Scripture. For ‘Five Point Calvinists,’ these are the ‘U’ and the ‘P’ of TULIP – *Unconditional Election* and *Perseverance* (or *Preservation*) of *the Saints*. As to the first of these, Jesus makes clear that those who will believe in Him are those who were given to Him by the Father. The order is unmistakable: those who were

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<sup>172</sup> Luthardt; 169.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

given to Jesus by the Father – and only those who were given to the Son by the Father – will come to Jesus. This, of course, means that they will believe. It all originates with the Father and, therefore, it originates in eternity and not in the time of human life. “The Father is the God who wills salvation, and Jesus is the agent of that will.”<sup>173</sup> Every attempt to get around this in order to somehow preserve autonomy within the fallen human soul is a detraction from the divine glory, a slander against the divine will. And as it is clear that Jesus nowhere acquits the sinner for unbelief on the basis that he or she was not chosen by the Father, it is a fallacious argument to say that divine predestination in any way minimizes human responsibility. Both stand together, but the primacy in salvation must go to God alone. “Again the Father is seen to be the source of all. In one sense believers come to the Father through the Son (cf. 14:6), but in another sense they were already the Father’s before they became disciples of Jesus. At this point we are at the edge of a great mystery, peering into the ineffable realms of eternity.”<sup>174</sup>

Standing alongside – perhaps it is better to say, standing on this foundation – is the doctrine of the *Preservation of the Saints*. Twice Jesus mentions that those who come to Him are only those whom the Father has given to Him; and twice He mentions that of those so given and so come, He will lose not a single one. Jesus oscillates between the plural and the singular here, speaking both of the collective whole of the Church and of each individual member thereof. “The community as a whole, and each member of the community, having been given by the Father to the Son, will be safely kept by the Son until the consummation of the resurrection life ‘at the last day.’”<sup>175</sup>

These two coordinate truths – *Divine Predestination* and *Preservation* – are of immense and incalculable encouragement to the believer, the one who has ‘seen’ the Son, Jesus Christ, and seeing, has believed that in Him alone is eternal life. Such a one need not trust in his own discernment, his own ‘vision,’ for that would indeed be blindness. Rather there is unshakable confidence that “In their perfect unity of will and purpose the Father and the Son stand engaged for the salvation of all believers.”<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Whitacre; 161.

<sup>174</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>175</sup> Bruce; 154.

<sup>176</sup> *Idem*.

**Week 6: The Bread of Life**

**Text Reading:** John 6:41 - 58

*“Without the Son men have no life;  
for in men themselves there is no spring of life.”  
(Brooke Foss Westcott)*

*“Truly, truly I say unto you...”* The word translated ‘truly’ is the Greek *amān*, from which we get ‘Amen.’ “It is the participle of the verb meaning ‘to confirm,’ and it was used to give one’s assent.”<sup>177</sup> In it’s doubled form it is used by Jesus exclusively recorded in the Fourth Gospel and is clearly an emphatic introduction to what follows. In the current discourse, the couplet is used four time – 6:26, 32, 47, and 53. This fact is exegetically significant as these *Amen, Amen* statements are definite markers in Jesus’ monologue that both rise to a crescendo and form a logical loop. That is to say, each successive *Amen, Amen* statement is an intensification of the overall argument that Jesus is presenting, and the fourth couplet (6:53) loops back logically to the first (6:26). Observe:

**6:26** *Jesus answered them and said, “**Most assuredly**, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.”*

**6:32** *Then Jesus said to them, “**Most assuredly**, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven.”*

**6:47** ***Most assuredly**, I say to you, he who believes <sup>in</sup> Me has everlasting life.*

**6:53** *Then Jesus said to them, “**Most assuredly**, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.”*

Jesus moves from the crowd eating of the loaves and being filled (6:26f) to the necessity of their eating of ‘*the flesh of the Son of Man*’ in order that they may have life. This intensification is stepwise and follows the *Amen, Amen* markers. It is remarkable that, as the argument progresses in intensity, the confusion and simmering opposition of the Jews also intensifies, yet Jesus does nothing to ‘defuse’ the situation. The crowd is not

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<sup>177</sup> Morris; 169.

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understanding Him, but He perceives this lack of understanding to be willful and therefore does not retreat from the scandal of what He is saying; rather He ratchets up the heat on the Jews, “*For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.*” (6:55)

This phenomenon places Jesus’ discourse recorded in John 6 among the most important in all Scripture, and undoubtedly among the most controversial. Ryle comments, “Truths of the weightiest importance follow each other in rapid succession in the chapter we are now reading. There are probably very few parts of the Bible which contain so many ‘deep things’ at the sixth chapter of St. John.”<sup>178</sup> From a Reformed theological perspective, we have already encountered the doctrines of Unconditional Election (Predestination) and the Perseverance (Preservation) of the Saints – ‘U’ and ‘P’ of TULIP. In the current section we will find the doctrines of Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace – ‘T’ and ‘I.’ That leaves the ‘L’ to get our theological flower, and there are many who would rather we not search for that letter (Limited Atonement). Unfortunately for them, it is readily found; unfortunately for this study, it is primarily in John 10. Therefore, lest it seem that John 6 leaves us only as ‘Four Point Calvinists,’ we can peak ahead a bit,

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and **I lay down My life for the sheep.** And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd... But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.*

(John 10:11-16, 26-27)

Returning, however, to the passage at hand, we see the chasm widening between Jesus and the Jews. It is instructive to note how Jesus refuses to downplay the significance of what He is saying – the truth of His identity and His ministry – in order to calm the waters, as it were, with the Jews. A modern preacher might be found reasoning with the Jews, ‘No, you misunderstand me; I don’t mean my literal flesh and blood...’ but Jesus will have none of that. The power of the Gospel is not found in rendering theological arguments reasonable and rational to an unbelieving audience. Rather it is in *first*

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<sup>178</sup> Ryle; 381-382.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

reconstituting the unbeliever as a believer, after which miracle of regeneration the words of Jesus appear eminently reasonable and rational. The believer knows intuitively (by the intuition of the indwelling Spirit), that Jesus is not advocating cannibalism in this passage, for “*the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.*” (6:63)

This is not to say that the modern preacher, apologist, or evangelist cannot reason with unbelievers. It is, however, to say that the Gospel cannot be reduced to reason; it cannot be apprehended through rational syllogisms but is apprehended (and thus comprehended) by faith. Faith has supreme priority, as Augustine famously noted in reference to this very passage: *Crede, et manducasti* – “Believe, and you have eaten.”<sup>179</sup>

*The Jews then complained about Him, because He said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven.” And they said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”* (6:41-42)

John intends another correlation between the events recorded here and the time when Israel was in the wilderness with Moses. The word translated *complained* in 6:41 is the same root as found in Exodus 16, where Israel was found murmuring against Moses, notably in the context of the first giving of manna.

*And they journeyed from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they departed from the land of Egypt. Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel **complained** against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the children of Israel said to them, “Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”* (Exodus 16:1-3)

Thus “The murmuring of the Jews corresponds with the murmuring of their fathers in the desert. They preserve the genuine succession of unbelief.”<sup>180</sup> Ryle notes a comment by Cyril of Alexandria, that “a readiness to murmur seemed to be hereditary with the Jews. From the days when they murmured in the wilderness, it was always the same.”<sup>181</sup> This fact points out a startling irony in the line of argument that the Jews take in John 6. They basically demand that Jesus prove His messiahship by repeating the miracle of the

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<sup>179</sup> Augustine, *Gospel of John; Tract 26*.

<sup>180</sup> Hoskyns; 295.

<sup>181</sup> Ryle; 386.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

manns in the wilderness right there and then, before their eyes. The irony is that their forefathers *hated* the manna and frequently complained to Moses about it.

*Now when the people **complained**, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp... Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!"*

(Numbers 11:1, 4-6)

The issue is not, of course, directly the manna or bread; the issue is Jesus: Who does this man think he is? Jesus' family was apparently well known in Capernaum; it may have been that Joseph had a lot of business there through his carpentry trade, or that the family would travel from the relatively small village of Nazareth to the 'big city' of Capernaum on a regular basis for either commerce or family. The point of the Jews' comment is that knowing one's (apparent) biological heritage automatically precludes *having come down out of heaven*. "It seems they believe that a being who has come from heaven would not have earthly parents."<sup>182</sup> This statement by the Jews does point out that Jesus' birth from the *virgin* Mary was apparently not a fact disseminated among the Jews, not even among the disciples. Other than the historical account of the birth of Jesus, there is no mention of His miraculous conception in any of His own teachings. One might reason that the Jews present Jesus with an excellent opportunity to explain the doctrine of the Virgin Birth to them; He does not do so.

As a side note, the way the passage is worded seems to indicate that Jesus' 'father' Joseph was still alive. This is not a necessary conclusion, and Joseph's prior death is fairly well established on other points in the Gospels. "The word *know* expresses simply acquaintance with the fact that Joseph was in popular esteem the father of Jesus, and not personal acquaintance with him as still living."<sup>183</sup> Carson adds, "The crowd's point is simpler. They say, in effect, 'We know who Jesus' parent are. What right then does he have to claim nobler, even divine, heritage?'"<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Whitacre; 163.

<sup>183</sup> Westcott; 104.

<sup>184</sup> Carson; 292.

*Jesus therefore answered and said to them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. (6:43-44)*

At first glance this statement does not seem to address the content of the Jews' complaint. A closer look, however, leads to that which is indispensable in the acceptance and knowledge of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God: *faith*. Reason will always find obstacles to belief; faith clarifies reason and removes all apparent difficulties. Jesus does not deny that He is apparently the son of Joseph and Mary; until the time of His ministry He conducted Himself as their obedience and submissive son and this is how He was 'known' by the folks in the region. However, "He replies that a spiritual influence is necessary before his true Nature can be discerned."<sup>185</sup> Without this spiritual, divine influence, *no man* can come to know Jesus as He truly is. In this brief statement, Jesus encapsulates the doctrines of *Total Depravity* and *Irresistible Grace*.

The Reformed doctrine of *Total Depravity*, as has been noted before, does not teach that all men are as wicked as they could be, but rather that no man has within himself the ability to reconcile himself to God. *Total Depravity* is probably better termed *Total Inability*, and that inability with reference to man's own salvation. Westcott comments, "This divine impossibility is the expression of a moral law. It is not anything arbitrary, but inherent in the very nature of things; it does not limit but it defines the nature of human power."<sup>186</sup> Man's inability to come to God through Jesus Christ, moreover, is *willful*; it is not something that was wired into his original nature but has been irradicably set within his *fallen* nature. He cannot come because he will not come. "Now, the reason why man cannot come to Christ, is not because he cannot come, so far as his body or his mere power of mind is concerned, but because his nature is so corrupt that he has neither the will nor the power to come to Christ unless drawn by the Spirit."<sup>187</sup> Ryle adds,

His inability is not physical, but moral. It would not be true to say that a man has a real wish and desire to come to Christ, but no power to come. It would be far more true to say that a man has no power to come because he has no desire or wish. – It is not true that he

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<sup>185</sup> Westcott; 104.

<sup>186</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>187</sup> Spurgeon, C. H. *The Park Street Pulpit: Volume 4* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1990); 138.

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would come if he could. It is true that he could come if he would...The power that we want is a new will.<sup>188</sup>

At the heart of Arminian soteriology is the philosophical argument that if God commands men to repent, then man must be capable of repentance. It does not follow. The command to repent is bound up in the holy nature of God, not in the inherent ability of man to fulfill the command. God's right to command holiness is in no way limited by man's inability to obey. Indeed, the command to repent exacerbates the sin of unbelief, because man is aware in his mind of both the need to repent and his inability to do so. Sin does not render man insensate to sin, otherwise this world would truly be a living hell. "The nature of man since the fall is so corrupt and depraved, that even when Christ is made known and preached to him, he will not come to Him and believe in Him, without the special grace of God inclining his will and giving him a disposition to come."<sup>189</sup> The psalmist puts it this way, "*Your people shall be made willing in the day of Your power.*"<sup>190</sup>

The favourite notion of man is that he can do what he likes, - repent or not repent, believe or not believe, come to Christ or not come, entirely at his own discretion...Such notions are flatly contradictory to the text before us. The words of our Lord are clear and unmistakable, and cannot be explained away. This doctrine of human impotence, whether man likes it or not, is the uniform teaching of the Bible. The natural man is dead, and must be born again, and brought to life. He has neither knowledge, nor faith, nor inclination toward Christ, until grace comes into his heart. Man never of himself begins with God. God must first begin with man.<sup>191</sup>

How does God draw a man to Christ? Can man resist the divine pull? These are questions upon which the ongoing debate between Arminians and Calvinists seems to hinge. It is a popular caricature of the Reformed doctrine that 'God drags the sinner kicking and screaming into heaven.' - in other words, against his will. If the Arminian admits the true Reformed doctrine, that God does not act against man's will but rather changes that will through the gracious power of regeneration, he then calls this 'divine rape.' One Arminian apologist writes with deeply disturbing language,

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<sup>188</sup> Ryle; 383-384.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*; 388.

<sup>190</sup> Psalm 110:3

<sup>191</sup> Ryle; 388-389.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Though hidden underneath lengthy explanations concerning Original Sin, Total Depravity, Inability and the like, in its bare essence Calvinism posits a Divine rape rather than a Divine romance. The chosen victim ‘freely’ comes to God only after an irresistible, life-transforming action has been mystically[sic] worked upon them, wholly[sic] without their desire or consent. Under Calvinism, the forceful Deity mystically changes the unwilling victim into a cooperative party, inflicting the Divine date rape drug of ‘Regeneration’ to overcome their former unwillingness. Calvinists will cry foul, but they undeniably insist that the unregenerated ‘victim’ is dead to God, does not desire to serve him and would never come in response to his call. Until and unless he/she received – unasked – the date-rape drug which irresistibly causes them to ‘desire’ God.<sup>192</sup>

It is essential to Arminian soteriology that man be capable of responding ‘freely’ – in other words, without any change within him wrought by God – to the offer of the Gospel; otherwise, man’s love toward God is not truly ‘free,’ and therefore is not truly love. This entire system, however, is built upon a false and dangerous view of grace, a grace that assists but does not accomplish. It is also based on an unbiblical anthropology, viewing sin as a hindrance rather than an incapacitation. Finally, the Arminian argument is largely based on a straw man: that the Calvinistic doctrine of Election precludes the necessity of faith on the part of the sinner. Spurgeon encountered this sort of argument throughout his ministry (as an unashamed Calvinist), “Now, for your help, I desire to say that these two doctrines of salvation by faith and the inward drawing of the Spirit of God are equally true; and unless they are proclaimed in due proportion, mischief may come from the preaching of either the one or the other.”<sup>193</sup> To all of this vain philosophy in favor of sinful man, Jesus simply says, *No one*; no one can come to Him unless the Father draw him.

That drawing, as we find out in greater detail later from the Apostle Paul, is through the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and by the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel works, we might say, upon the mind; the Spirit upon the will. “Teaching is a working upon the consciousness, drawing is a working upon the will.”<sup>194</sup> The former is a necessary but not sufficient cause for a sinner to come to salvation in Christ Jesus; the latter is *sine qua none* of biblical soteriology: *You must be born again.*<sup>195</sup> Since the

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<sup>192</sup> [Tim Keller: “3 Objections to the \[Calvinistic\] Doctrine of Election” – SOTERIOLOGY 101](#); Accessed 03May2021.

<sup>193</sup> Spurgeon, *MTP: Volume 40*; 530.

<sup>194</sup> Luthardt; 171.

<sup>195</sup> John 3:3, 7

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only saving result is that the sinner does come to Jesus in faith, we may say that the ‘drawing’ that brings a sinner to Christ is the Spirit-empower confluence of the preaching of the Gospel and the regenerating work of new birth. When these two forces are at work, we are dealing with the Reformed doctrine of *Irresistible Grace*. This is the point of the next verses.

*It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father. Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.* (6:45-46)

Regeneration is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of the New Covenant. The quote seems to be somewhat of an amalgam of Old Testament passages, particularly Isaiah 54:13,

*All your children shall be taught by the LORD,  
And great shall be the peace of your children.* (Isaiah 54:13)

But the idea is essentially the promise of the New Covenant, that God would write His Law upon the hearts of His people and they would have no need of any to teach them.

*But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.* (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Jesus’ allusion here to the New Covenant is meant as a rebuke to the ‘rationalistic’ approach of the Jews – ‘we know where this man came from, hence he cannot be the Messiah’ – and as the biblical proof that the true knowledge of God’s Sent One can only come from God Himself, what Jesus had just said. Jesus is unequivocally stating His case that the fulfillment of the Old Covenant promise of the New Covenant has come in His person, the only One who has seen God the Father. “By applying this text [*i.e.*, Isa. 54:13] to his own ministry, Jesus is claiming that the eschatological blessings of the last day are

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already being experienced in his ministry; God's promise to Jerusalem is being fulfilled now."<sup>196</sup>

The unique aspect to Jesus' claim, and one that the Jews might not have quickly recognized, is that this 'being taught of God' must come from One who has seen God, and only the Son can truthfully claim that.<sup>197</sup> Westcott writes, "He alone who is truly God can naturally see God."<sup>198</sup> That Jesus is alone the One who now teaches men the true way – which is Jesus Himself – is a clear thread throughout the Fourth Gospel. "A man must have perceived God's voice in Jesus' word, and have accepted his testimony, in order to join himself to Jesus in belief...All saving relation to God is conditioned upon him, and accordingly we must cleave to him in belief."<sup>199</sup> Newbigin goes so far to say (accurately) that a man's knowledge of God – his *true* knowledge of God – begins by coming to Jesus through faith.

One has to begin to learn the meaning of the word 'God' by 'coming to Jesus' and learning from him of the one he calls 'my Father.' From this point of view it is clear that a knowledge of God could not come by induction from the religious experience of the race, but could only come by the presence, in flesh and blood in the world of ordinary human secular experience, of one who confronts us in the concrete particularity of a man with a known name and address.<sup>200</sup>

Ridderbos concludes, "No one comes to the Son unless drawn by the Father. But, along with that, no one hears the vivifying voice of God except in the Son, and those who hear *his* voice will live and be raised up on the last day."<sup>201</sup> The exclusive claims of Jesus not only continue, they intensify.

*I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die.* (6:48-50)

Jesus returns to the controversy that started in Capernaum – the demand of the Jews that He basically duplicate the manna miracle in the wilderness in order to prove that

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<sup>196</sup> Whitacre; 164.

<sup>197</sup> It is interesting to note that so many would be prophets, messiahs, and religious leaders in all religions establish their claim on 'visions' of God. There seems to be an innate understanding with the human mind that the one who sees god can be the only one who speaks for god.

<sup>198</sup> Westcott; 105.

<sup>199</sup> Luthardt; 172.

<sup>200</sup> Newbigin; 83.

<sup>201</sup> Ridderbos; 234.

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He is the Messiah. Jesus thus reiterates what He said in verse 35, *I am the bread of life*, which can also be rendered *I am the living bread*. This time, however, Jesus points out that those who ate the manna in the wilderness still died. In fact, most of that generation was condemned to die in the wilderness because of their unbelief. It is typical of the hypocrisy of human religion – even the Jewish religion – that it creates a fond memory out of what was in the first place a rebuke on account of the murmuring of the Israelites, in the second place was something the ancient Jews frequently continued to complain about, and in the third place did not provide abiding life. Those who ate the manna, died. “Against death the gift of Moses provided no security, but the gift of the Son is eternal life for those who eat the living Bread that descended from heaven. This Bread is the Flesh of the Son of God offered for the salvation of the world and consumed by the faithful.”<sup>202</sup>

Whitacre notes an interesting parallel between the challenges of the Jews and the responses of Jesus as recorded in John’s Gospel. “Earlier the Jews had asked for a sign to legitimate Jesus’ actions in the temple, and he had spoken of the temple of his body and of his death and resurrection. Now this crowd has received teaching about the manna of his flesh and about how the divine gift of eternal life will be given through the Messiah’s death.”<sup>203</sup> The point of this observation is that every aspect of the Jewish religious life was fulfilled in Jesus Christ; indeed, every point within the Jewish religious ritual pointed ultimately to Jesus.

*I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.*  
(6:51)

Here we arrive at the crux of Jesus’ teaching, and the point of ultimate controversy with the Jews (and with many of His ‘disciples’ as well): *the bread that I give is My flesh*. This passage has continued to be a source of contention within the Church, as several branches of Christianity have seen here a distinct formula for the Lord’s Supper, and the Roman Catholic Church has used this verse to defend its untenable doctrine of transubstantiation. We will have occasion to summarize the relationship between John 6 and the institution of the Lord’s Supper in the epilogue to this lesson, but it is sufficient to the current view to

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<sup>202</sup> Hoskyns; 296.

<sup>203</sup> Whitacre; 166.

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quote Luthardt, “Jesus does not speak of the Lord’s supper, but of the personal communion with the incarnate One in belief, which communion forms the presupposition of the Lord’s supper.”<sup>204</sup> Spurgeon chastises the natural inclination of man to take a literal, carnal interpretation of the words and thus fail to grasp the true meaning of the text.

How necessary it is to have a spiritual understanding of the Scriptures! These metaphors have a sort of cannibal meaning about them to a man who goes no further than the letter; but the spiritual man knows that the soul feeds upon the doctrine of Christ’s incarnation, and drinks in the truth of Christ’s atonement. This is feeding, this is drinking, this is being nourished upon Christ’s flesh and Christ’s blood.<sup>205</sup>

There is considerable debate as to what exactly Jesus means by ‘giving His flesh.’ The clause is emphatic, with the first person pronoun included, *I Myself will give for the life of the world*. “The pronoun is emphatic, and brings out the contrast between Christ and Moses.”<sup>206</sup> Commentators seem to be divided as to which aspect of the passage they focus on; some on the tense of the verb – *will give*, future – and others on the typical biblical meaning of ‘flesh.’ For the latter, Westcott comments, “‘Flesh’ describes human nature in its totality regard from its earthly side.”<sup>207</sup> Luthardt agrees, “He is not speaking of his death, but only of his flesh, that is, of his human nature.”<sup>208</sup>

But in general, commentators tend to view Jesus’ reference to His impending death. That this bread of His flesh is something that He *gives* is classic Johannine language for Christ’s self-sacrifice, His death. “To give one’s flesh can scarcely mean anything other than death, and the wording here points to a death which is both voluntary (‘I will give’) and vicarious (‘for the life of the world’).”<sup>209</sup> Ryle adds, “It is our Lord’s death that is specially meant. It is not merely His human nature, His incarnation, that feeds souls. It is His death as our substitute, bearing our sins and carrying our transgressions.”<sup>210</sup> This view seems more in keeping with the overall thrust of the Gospel, and John’s standard usage of terms. Carson notes, “The second clause must be taken in a sacrificial sense, the more so

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<sup>204</sup> Luthardt; 178.

<sup>205</sup> Spurgeon, *MTP: Volume 40*; 539.

<sup>206</sup> Westcott; 106.

<sup>207</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>208</sup> Luthardt; 176.

<sup>209</sup> Bruce; 158.

<sup>210</sup> Ryle; 394.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

since, if the bread of life is Jesus, what Jesus is giving is himself. The preposition ‘for the life of the world’ (*hyper*) is repeatedly found in a sacrificial context in the Fourth Gospel.”<sup>211</sup> But the two perspectives need not be exclusive, for in giving His life for His sheep Jesus gives to them His entire being – *His* humanity, as it were, for *theirs*. Paul seems to have this sort of transfer in view when he writes,

*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*  
(Galatians 2:20)

But all of this theological wrangling must not be allowed to dull the sharp edge of what it is that Jesus is saying: He is telling the Jews that they must *eat His flesh* (he will shortly add that they must also *drink His blood*). “‘Flesh’ is a striking word. In distinction from ‘body’ or ‘myself’ it puts marked emphasis on the physical side of life. It is a strong word and one bound to attract attention. Its almost crude forcefulness rivets attention on the historical fact that Christ did give Himself for man.”<sup>212</sup> It is interesting that Morris qualifies his statement: the *almost* crude forcefulness. Frankly, Jesus’ language in this section is not *almost* crude; it is crude, and vivid, and startling. And it was meant to be. There is nothing ‘almost’ in what Jesus is saying here, and the base manner in which He puts things was calculated – *is* calculated – to shock. And shocked the Jews most certainly were.

*The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?”*  
(6:52)

The Jews go from ‘murmuring’ to ‘quarrelling.’ This is not indicative of two parties among the Jews – one side agreeing with Jesus and the other disagreeing – for we will see toward the end of the discourse that essentially *all* abandoned Jesus on account of this teaching. Their quarreling *among themselves* “probably means that they began to reason and argue among themselves in an angry, violent, and excited manner.”<sup>213</sup> The point is obvious, though; Jesus’ words have not calmed the waters of Jewish opposition; indeed, to switch metaphors, He is pouring oil on the fire of their contention. He has more oil to add.

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<sup>211</sup> Carson; 295.

<sup>212</sup> Morris; 374.

<sup>213</sup> Ryle; 400.

*Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed."* (6:53-55)

Jesus adds to the shocking requirement that His flesh must be eaten if anyone is to have life, that they must also must drink His blood. This in itself is a violation of clear biblical/Levitical statutes such as the prohibition against 'eating blood' in Leviticus 17,

*And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.' Therefore I said to the children of Israel, 'No one among you shall eat blood, nor shall any stranger who dwells among you eat blood.'* (Leviticus 17:10-12)

Jesus is driving a wedge between Himself and those who will not believe in Him; He is frankly making it impossible for them to come to Him on the basis of their own rational judgment. "Jesus is not inclined to remove the difficulty for the Jews as to make their believing obedience unnecessary. On the contrary, he increases the assumption. And indeed, he heightens not only the necessity of appropriation, but also the expression for the reality of the appropriation and of the one to be appropriated...Indeed, he increases the offense by adding to the eating of his flesh the drinking of his blood."<sup>214</sup> The language is more graphic even than that of the institution of the Lord's Supper, where Jesus speaks only of the drinking of wine, which represents His blood. The phrase here, *drink My blood*, "is unique in the New Testament. To Jewish ears it could not but be full of startling mystery."<sup>215</sup> Whitacre adds, "It is a very scandalous image for a Jew since drinking any blood, let alone human blood, was forbidden by the law."<sup>216</sup>

The legal prohibition notwithstanding, we must afford full weight to what Jesus says, as He in no way qualifies His statement. "In a word, He lays down the principle that eating His flesh and drinking His blood is a thing not only possible but absolutely

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<sup>214</sup> Luthardt; 179-180.-

<sup>215</sup> Westcott; 107.

<sup>216</sup> Whitacre; 168.

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*necessary* to salvation – it is a thing without which no man can go to heaven.”<sup>217</sup> We must not miss the fact that verse 53 is the final *Amen, Amen* statement of the discourse here in John 6; this intensifies the fact that what Jesus is saying is *crucial* to our understanding and apprehension of salvation in Him. He is being that which it was prophesied the Messiah would be: *a stumbling block* to those who would not believe. “Jesus intends to speak offensively for those who do not believe, and does not purpose to facilitate or dispense with belief by removing the offense.”<sup>218</sup> Indeed, Jesus even changes the word for ‘eat’ in verse 54 from what He had been using earlier. Instead of the more generic term for ‘eat’ found in verse 53 (*phagete*), verse 54 has *trōgōn*, which literally means ‘to munch or crunch.’ “It probably applies to somewhat noisy feeding. There is often the notion of eating with enjoyment. It is a startling word in this context, and stresses the actuality of the partaking of Christ that is spoken of.”<sup>219</sup>

To the Jews’ arguing among themselves, Jesus “takes over their own words in all their offensiveness, making them his own with all the authority at his disposal and posing what they repudiate among themselves as utterly offensive and foolish as the absolute and exclusive condition...for receiving eternal life.”<sup>220</sup> He speaks of His flesh as *true* food and His blood as *true* drink, probably a reference back to verse 49 where He reminds the Jews that the fathers who ate the manna (which they considered to be the *true* heavenly bread) still died in the wilderness. Jesus will eventually offer an explanation (6:63), but by that time the unbelieving Jews were confirmed in their unbelief; they were no longer listening to Him.

### Excursus: The Lord’s Supper and John 6

As soon as Jesus mentions His blood, all begins to look a lot like the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist, at least to the patristic commentators through to the Roman Catholic Church. To compound the confusion, John does not include a narrative of the actual institution of the Lord’s Supper at the last Passover; all three Synoptics have the event in their Gospels. This has led many to conclude that Chapter 6 *is* John’s narrative of the Lord’s Supper and,

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<sup>217</sup> Ryle; 401.

<sup>218</sup> Luthardt; 181.

<sup>219</sup> Morris; 379.

<sup>220</sup> Ridderbos; 239.

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unfortunately, the terminology used in this chapter has also been employed to support the Roman Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation* – that the bread and wine of the Eucharist literally becomes (in substance, though not in accident) the flesh and blood of Jesus. The confusion of interpretation is broken into three basic categories by J. C. Ryle, which are useful in understanding, to some extent, the history of the controversy.

First, there is the opinion of almost all of the ‘Fathers’ – the writers of the immediate post-apostolic era up to the Constantinian era. This view holds that “our Lord meant a literal ‘eating and drinking’ with the mouth of our bodies, and that the ‘flesh and blood’ mean the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>221</sup> The main problem with this view – and there are several – is that Jesus does not speak of His ‘flesh’ in any of the three institutional passages in the Synoptic Gospels, but rather refers to His body. In each of those accounts, as well, it is the bread that the disciples eat, and the wine that they drink, not the flesh and blood of Jesus.

*And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.* (Matthew 26:26-28)

*And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.* (Mark 14:22-24)

*Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”* (Luke 22:17-19)

To take John 6 as equivalent to the Lord’s Supper is not only to confuse the terms Jesus uses, and the manner in which He uses those terms, it is to elevate a sacrament to the position of life-giving. Indeed, if a direct connection be made between eating Jesus’ ‘flesh and blood’ in John 6, and the symbolic ‘bread and wine’ of the Lord’s Supper, then the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper itself becomes life-giving. This is exactly what the Roman

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<sup>221</sup> Ryle; 401.

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Catholic Church teaches (as well as some Protestant denominations; the Church of Christ, for instance). To name just one unfortunate soul who would be left out of the kingdom, we can look to the thief on the cross whom Jesus promised would be with Him that day in Paradise. As many an error is uncovered by tracing its line of thinking to its logical conclusion, we can see that there cannot be a direct link between the Lord's Supper and Jesus' teaching in John 6.

The second view, popular among the Reformers, concludes that "eating and drinking here mean the eating and drinking of heart and soul by faith, not of the body, and that the 'flesh and blood' mean Christ's vicarious sacrifice of His body on the cross."<sup>222</sup> This view has the advantage of recognizing Jesus' words in John 6 as "*spirit and life*" as Jesus Himself declares in 6:63. The terminology that Jesus employs in this discourse was intended to offend the unbelieving minds of the Jews; it was not intended to be taken literally. Still, the truth that undergirds the eating and drinking of Christ's 'flesh and blood' is evident even within the passage (verses 56-58): that intimate communion with Jesus Christ is essential to eternal life; without this communion there can be no life at all. "Eating and drinking thus appear to be a very graphic way of saying that men must take Christ into their innermost being."<sup>223</sup> This is the view Ryle himself holds.

The third view that Ryle summarizes is that "our Lord did not mean any literal eating and drinking, and that He did not refer directly to the Lord's supper when He spake of His flesh and blood."<sup>224</sup> This view holds that what was discussed in John 6 is the *significance* of what the later-instituted Lord's Supper was to signify. The later institution of the Lord's Supper was, therefore, meant to be the means by which this 'eating and drinking' was to take place. This view differs very little in its result from the first interpretation in that it elevates the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to a saving act, and an ongoing one at that. This last point is the Achilles heel of both the first and the last view, and any other view that seeks to put 'flesh and blood' significance upon the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper: the Lord's Supper was intended to be repeated often by every believer and every congregation, whereas eternal life is granted once for all through faith

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<sup>222</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>223</sup> Morris; 378.

<sup>224</sup> Ryle; 402.

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in Jesus Christ. While it is true that the believer is continually nourished by Jesus through His Word and Spirit, the uniqueness of the initial faith-event of every sinner brought by grace into the salvation of Jesus Christ must be defended against every attempt to make that an ongoing process that must be repeated over and over again.

*He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.* (6:56-58)

Jesus here introduces a theme that will be picked up again in His High Priestly prayer in John 17 – the communion of the believer with Jesus as being the same in intimacy as the communion of the Father and the Son. The conclusion of this current discourse flows logically from what we have read in both Chapter 6 and Chapter 5 – that Jesus has life in Himself just as the Father has life in Himself. The point being, that Life is in God alone and therefore anyone who would have Life must be ‘in God.’ But being ‘in God’ – being in the Father – is not possible for a human being; man can only be ‘in Christ’ as the God-Man. So what Jesus is saying is that He is the only Life-bridge between Man and God; only in Him can a man have Life in the true and eternal sense of the word, rather than the mere physical sense. Thus “The union of Jesus with His faithful disciples is a participation in the divine life which the Son receives from the Father.”<sup>225</sup>

This union between the believer and Christ, as between the Father and the Son, a union of Life, is what Jesus has meant all along about eating and drinking His flesh and blood. “The eating and the drinking has to do with shared life, mutual indwelling.”<sup>226</sup> The graphic nature of Jesus’ words drives home the point that only in Him is Life to be found; and that partaking of Him is even more important than partaking of bread, even manna, for those who eat only bread will still die. Those who eat Christ’s flesh and drink Christ’s blood – those who by faith incorporate their lives into His – will live forever. “To say that Jesus is the life-giving bread is not only to say that to hear and believe his teaching is to

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<sup>225</sup> Hoskyns; 299.

<sup>226</sup> Whitacre; 167.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

have life. It is to say that Jesus in his concrete humanity (flesh and blood) is the actual presence of the life of God in the midst of the contingent happenings of human history.”<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Newbigin; 86.

**Week 7: To Whom Shall We Go?**

**Text Reading:** John 6:59 - 71

*“What they wanted, he would not give;  
what he offered, they would not receive.”*  
(F. F. Bruce)

The modern tendency within professing Christianity to reduce the Gospel message to one of mutual love and tolerance among mankind would perhaps not have gotten such a foothold if the Church had paid a little less attention to John 3:16, and a little more to the message of Christ’s forerunner, John the Baptist. John was the one raised up by God to announce the coming of Israel’s Messiah, and on several occasions that are recorded – and no doubt many more that went unrecorded – the Baptist gives us a clear description of what the ministry of the Coming One would entail. As with the Gospel message ever since, it was not good news to everyone. Luke’s account is perhaps the most detailed and graphic, and most pertinent to what we are encountering in John 6.

*Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” ...“His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”* (Luke 3:7-9, 17)

This picture of Jesus with His ax laid at the root of unfaithful trees, ready to chop them down and throw them into the fire, is not a popular one in the modern Church, certainly not one to be found among the colorful cartoons of so much children’s Sunday School material. Nor the antiquated (and therefore often misunderstood) image of Jesus standing on His threshing floor with His winnowing fork already moving through the grain, separating out the chaff, also to be burned with fire. “Jesus loves me, this I know...” does not quite capture these images of divine judgment mediated through the Person, and the Message, of Jesus Christ. But the chopping off and the threshing is exactly what we are encountering in John 6: Jesus fulfilling an integral part of His mission, which is judgment upon unbelief.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

It is a wonderful truth that Jesus *brings together* so many different and divided segments of the human race – Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, etc. The great ‘bringing together’ passage of Ephesians 2 comes to mind,

*Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh – who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands – that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.*

(Ephesians 2:11-18)

But before Christ could unite Jew and Gentile into Himself, He first had to divide Israel within itself, separating the wheat from the chaff. And from the narrative in John 6, if extrapolated, we might conclude that there was far more chaff than wheat in Second Temple Israel. It is certainly enough to remind us that the Promised One would be a *skandalon* – the word used in John 6:61 where Jesus asks His alleged disciples, “*Does this cause you to stumble?*” The stone that would form the corner is also the stone of stumbling and rock of offense, and a biblical view of the Gospel recognizes both aspects, emphasizing both and neglecting neither. A true preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be expected, at least at times, to generate the same reaction as we read here in John 6, and even among those who have confessed themselves to be ‘disciples’ of Jesus. “The revelation of the ultimate verities of Christian faith and worship leads to an outburst of unbelief among the disciples of Jesus.”<sup>228</sup> Consider that last phrase again, “an outburst of *unbelief among the disciples of Jesus.*” How can these things be?

It seems reasonable to conclude that the biblical usage of the term disciple, *mathates*, varies in degree from one to another, and does not at all times mean someone who is ‘saved.’ The alternative, of course, is that all disciples are ‘saved,’ but they can lose their salvation through unbelief. Since Jesus equates those whom He will save with those

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<sup>228</sup> Hoskyns; 299.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

whom the Father has given Him, and assures us that of those He will lose not one, this alternative is not biblically tenable. So we are brought to the understanding that a ‘disciple’ is not necessarily a regenerate, saved, person. Whitacre comments on the majority of such disciples in Capernaum, “They were disciples in the sense of having come to Jesus and heard his teaching. But this level of discipleship would not count for much in the end. The soil in their hearts was not such that Jesus’ seed could take root and produce fruit.”<sup>229</sup> Jesus Himself establishes the criteria between a ‘disciple’ and a ‘true disciple’ in John 8, “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine.”<sup>230</sup>

It is the word of Jesus that is the winnowing fork by which He separates the wheat from the chaff. “Truth is like the fan which drives away the chaff, and leaves the wheat the more pure.”<sup>231</sup> We are not speaking here of the unbelieving Jews – ‘the Jews,’ as John is now accustomed to call them. They are not the focus of Jesus’ attention anymore; He is now winnowing His ‘disciples.’ But it is the same word that the unbelieving Jew strives against, that the shallow-soil disciple cannot receive, thus proving that, for all his or her show of ‘following Jesus,’ His word does not abide in them, either. These disciples share unbelief with the Jews, only they have thus far cloaked their unbelief in the garb of a ‘disciple,’ to all outward appearances, a ‘believer.’ But this charade cannot continue, and Jesus endeavors here to bring the play-acting to an end. “Unbelief cannot remain permanently hidden. It issues eventually in open apostasy. The faithful explosion of scripture has led not to ‘church growth’ but to its opposite.”<sup>232</sup>

Spurgeon notes that even in their ‘falling back’ these folks are still called ‘disciples.’ Clearly they are no longer disciples; they do not intend to walk with Jesus any longer. But the name sticks to them and doing so increases their shame.

Disciples? Yes, not merely camp-followers; not the mob that hung upon his skirts for the sake of the loaves and fishes; but some of his disciples went back. Those of nobler spirit, who had listened to his words, and for awhile had professed to call him ‘Master and Lord;’ even some of these deserted the standard. Their name remains; they are called ‘disciples’ still, though they have gone back. And this sets forth the grievous guilt of such men and women as enter into the church, and then after a while turn aside to false doctrine or to sin;

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<sup>229</sup> Whitacre; 172.

<sup>230</sup> John 8:31

<sup>231</sup> Spurgeon; MTP 40.540.

<sup>232</sup> Newbiggin; 90.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

they depart with their prince's regimentals upon their backs, and carry the livery of Christ into the service of Satan. The stamp of a disciple is upon each of them still, though they are renegades and perverts. They will be judged as having been what they professed to be; and heavy will be their sentence as apostates.<sup>233</sup>

Jesus' interrogation continues in this passage from the Jews to the 'disciples' to the twelve. "The testing goes on relentlessly until it touches the central core of Jesus' company – 'the twelve.'"<sup>234</sup> Finally there are found those who pass muster, at least eleven who do so; who hang upon Jesus' word, whether they fully (or even partially) understand it or not. "A true disciple sits at the feet of his Master, and believes what he is told even when he cannot quite comprehend the meaning, or see the reasons for what his Master utters."<sup>235</sup> Yet even in this inner circle there is a devil.

*These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum.* (6:59)

This statement is an unusual place-setter for John and commentators are in no agreement as to why it is here. Perhaps the most convincing explanation is that, during the Passover season, the morning synagogue reading would traditionally been from Exodus 16: 4-36, the narrative of the provision of manna in the wilderness. Westcott therefore notes, "It may be added that the history of the manna is appointed to be read in the Synagogues at morning service."<sup>236</sup> It may also be that John records the place of this discourse in order to show that the context was a 'worship' service and not just a public debate. This would fit well with the morning reading from Exodus, Jesus explaining fully and finally what the manna narrative pointed to: Himself. Furthermore, if the discourse were part of a Jewish worship service, then it stands as a reminder to preachers throughout the ages to resist the temptation to make the Gospel 'user friendly,' and to stand firm on what the Bible says rather than on what people want to hear, regardless of the outcome. "Preachers must not be astonished if they stagger their hearers when they proclaim the truth; they must not retract what they have said, nor tone it down, because so-and-so is offended by it. Truth is hard, especially to hard hearts."<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 28*; 111.

<sup>234</sup> Newbiggin; 90.

<sup>235</sup> MTP 28.111.

<sup>236</sup> Westcott; 108.

<sup>237</sup> Spurgeon; MTP 40:539.

*Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?"* (6:60)

Literally these disciples, upon hearing what Jesus was teaching, asked *"Who can hear it?"* The difficulty undoubtedly was found in Jesus' repeated teaching regarding eating His flesh and drinking His blood; this was more than many could bear to hear. "What is meant is the inexorableness with which Jesus ever returned to the eating and drinking of his flesh and blood, and connected the true, eternal life, with that partaking of his sensible corporality. That was what they found offensive and unbearable."<sup>238</sup> But the problem was not that Jesus' statements were unclear in themselves; rather it was the clarity with which He said these things that was most offensive to these shallow-soil disciples, as Westcott notes, "The idea is not that of obscurity. The discourse was offensive, and not unintelligible."<sup>239</sup>

But Jesus has already informed them all that no one can come to Him unless drawn by the Father (and He will remind them of this fact in just a few verses). Their inability to hear they make out to be His fault, but it is their own unbelief that renders His words offensive. A true disciple will listen to his master and accept the words spoken even if not fully understood, trusting that the ultimate meaning of those words can only be Truth. This we will find to be Peter's confession on behalf of ten of his fellow disciples. But these 'disciples' cannot hear Jesus any longer and will not follow Him any longer. "By saying they are unable to hear or to listen to Jesus' teaching they stand self-condemned."<sup>240</sup> Spurgeon expands on this thought.

A true disciples sits at the feet of his Master, and believes what he is told even when he cannot quite comprehend the meaning, or see the reasons for what his Master utters; but these men had not the essential spirit of a disciple, and consequently when their instructor began to unfold the innermost parts of the roll of truth, they would not listen to his reading of it. They would believe as far as they could understand, but when they could not comprehend they turned on their heel and left the school of the Great Teacher.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Luthardt; 186.

<sup>239</sup> Westcott; 109.

<sup>240</sup> Whitacre; 173.

<sup>241</sup> MTP28.111

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, “Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?”*

(6:61-62)

It is a recurring theme in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus possessed intuitive knowledge of the thoughts of men, and He frequently responded to their thoughts rather than to their words. Jesus therefore knew that His disciples were now also murmuring – the same word is used in verse 61 as in verse 41 – having joined the Jews in their inner complaints regarding Jesus’ teaching. The question He then poses, “*Does this offend you?*” is literally, “*Does this cause you to stumble?*” The word translated ‘offend’ is *skandalizei*, literally, to scandalize. Jesus is thus noting how His Person and His ministry fulfills the Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah would be “*stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.*”

*The LORD of hosts, Him you shall hallow; let Him be your fear,  
And let Him be your dread.*

*He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense  
To both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.  
And many among them shall stumble;  
They shall fall and be broken, be snared and taken.*

(Isaiah 8:13-15)

Jesus alluded to the danger of stumbling over Him, stumbling over His words and His deeds, when He answered the Baptist’s embassy as to whether He was the Promised One,

*When the men had come to Him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’ And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight. Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended [lit, scandalized] because of Me.”<sup>242</sup>*

Once again given the opportunity to dial back the rhetoric, Jesus refuses to do so; He refuses to ease up on these men and make their path to understanding smoother. Indeed, what He refuses to do is to submit the obedience of faith to rational

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<sup>242</sup> Luke 7:20-23

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comprehension. Instead, Jesus challenges them much the same way He challenged Nicodemus on the night that Pharisee came secretly to Him.

### John 3:10-13

*Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"*

### John 6:62

*What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?"*

The question Jesus puts to His audience in each instance seems to indicate an argument from the lesser to the greater. In other words, if the people (or Nicodemus) failed to understand and believe in Jesus on the basis of what He taught them, will they be able to believe if He later reveals His divine glory more clearly? Some commentators take the question in 6:62 in a positive light, which is possible based on the grammar, that the sight of Jesus' ascension would be sufficient to clear away all doubt and enable the current unbelieving 'disciples' to finally believe. "According to this...interpretation the 'ascending up' is the Ascension as the final spiritualizing of the Lord's Person, whereby the offence of the language as to His flesh would be removed by the apprehension of His spiritual humanity."<sup>243</sup> But this does not sit well with Jesus' basic attitude in John 6 toward unbelief – either of the Jews or of those who are ostensibly His disciples. Also, the parallel with John 3 seems to argue that *even* if Jesus were to speak of heavenly things, even if these 'disciples' were to behold Him ascending to where He was before, yet they would not believe. Ryle paraphrases, "What will your feelings be if you behold this body of mine going up to that heaven from whence I came down? Will you not be much more offended?"<sup>244</sup>

Yet there is a truth contained in the positive view, at least for those like Peter who believe Jesus' words even without full understanding. The Ascension of the Lord after His death and resurrection will indeed confirm to His true disciples that all that He said and

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<sup>243</sup> Westcott; 109.

<sup>244</sup> Ryle; 414.

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taught was Truth (*cp.* 1:50-51). “The Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of the Christ are the necessary prolegomena, not only to eating His Flesh and drinking His Blood, but also to understanding what this means.”<sup>245</sup> Luthardt adds pithily, “This future is the solution of the riddle of his present.”<sup>246</sup>

*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.*  
(6:63-65)

If there is to be a lifeline to these wavering, murmuring disciples, it is in verse 63. There is a tacit reference in Jesus’ words to Genesis 2:7, where Man first becomes a living soul, “*And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*” Prior to this divine breath (the same word in both the Hebrew and the Greek for ‘spirit’), Adam was lifeless matter; one might even call him ‘flesh.’ “Just as God had to breathe into Adam’s nostrils in order for his dead flesh to become a living being, so must we receive the Spirit of God if we are to become alive with the life God offers us.”<sup>247</sup> This short statement by Jesus is, therefore, the Gospel in a nutshell, at least at it pertains to the salvation of any sinner. Paul elaborates on this theme.

*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*

(Ephesians 2:1-6)

Hoskyns comments, “The contrast is between dead flesh or matter and living flesh or matter. In itself flesh is flesh and it profiteth nothing for life or salvation, but, if penetrated by the Spirit of God, it becomes both vivified and vivifying. This is the Gospel, and this is the Christian religion. As the incarnate Word is living flesh in the power of the

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<sup>245</sup> Hoskyns; 300.

<sup>246</sup> Luthardt; 189.

<sup>247</sup> Whitacre; 174.

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Spirit, so the words of the Son of God give life to what is otherwise dead and profitless.”<sup>248</sup>

Again, we hear in Jesus’ statement in 6:63 an echo of His discourse with Nicodemus,

*Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”* (3:5-6)

*“But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. And He said, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.”* (6:64-65)

Jesus again explains what it is that manifests the presence of the Spirit and gives life to lifeless flesh: *faith*. The ‘disciples’ and the Jews wanted that bread of Life in order to believe; Jesus told them that believing is primary. “What they wanted, he would not give; what he offered, they would not receive.”<sup>249</sup> Ryle expands on what Jesus says so simply, “The true account of your murmuring and thinking my sayings ‘hard,’ is your want of faith. You do not really believe Me to be the Messiah, though you have followed Me and professed yourselves my disciples. And not really believing in Me, you are offended at the idea of eating my flesh and drinking my blood.”<sup>250</sup> This paraphrase is accurate in that it shows the primacy of faith to understanding, as we will see in Peter’s confession in a few verses. As for these alleged disciples, their “lack of faith had not been evident up to this point. Now Jesus’ scandalous teaching has brought it out in the open, and therefore he is revealing their own condition to them.”<sup>251</sup>

This function of revealing men’s hearts to themselves, and of unveiling hidden unbelief, is one of the effects of biblical preaching. Preachers do not have the divine intuitive knowledge of men’s hearts as Jesus did, but nonetheless they have the Spirit of God, who “convicts the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment.”<sup>252</sup> Unbiblical (or perhaps ‘sub-biblical’) preaching and teaching in the Church enables false disciples to continue in their self-deception; there is no scandal to the Gospel and therefore no winnowing fork on the threshing floor. Spurgeon comments,

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<sup>248</sup> Hoskyns; 299-300.

<sup>249</sup> Bruce; 164.

<sup>250</sup> Ryle; 417.

<sup>251</sup> Whitacre; 175.

<sup>252</sup> John 16:8

It often happens, in the ministry of a faithful preacher, that he has to say unpleasant things, and there are some who withdraw because of his preaching of the truth. Should he break his heart when they do so? Certainly not. They did the like with his Master; they acted the same with the apostle Paul. It will be so to the end of the chapter; and, indeed, it is part of our work to separate between the precious and the vile. Truth is like the fan which drives away the chaff, and leaves the wheat the more pure.<sup>253</sup>

But the faith that receives Jesus' words prior to understanding, the faith that appropriates (eats and drinks) Jesus Christ to oneself, does not come from within oneself. "No one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father." This is a reiteration of what Jesus said in verse 44, and the ultimate explanation (though not the exoneration) of their unbelief. "However much men and women are commanded to believe, and are held accountable for their unbelief, genuine coming to faith is never finally a matter of autonomous human decision."<sup>254</sup> This itself is one of those 'hard' truths that many professing disciples just cannot 'hear.'

*From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?"* (6:66-67)

Jesus has dealt with two groups of people thus far in the chapter; now He addresses the third. The first group was 'the Jews,' the second group the fair-weather disciples, the third group consists of the twelve men that He Himself had chosen to be His disciples. Would they also depart and stop following Jesus? Did Jesus not know the hearts of the twelve as well as He knew those of the Jews and of the 'disciples'? We may conclude that He most certainly did, and that this question was more for the benefit of the twelve than it was Jesus seeking to know what He had left to work with. "He directs the question to the twelve not for his own sake, so that he should not be left alone, but for their sake, that he might bind them more closely to him."<sup>255</sup> This is all but proven after Peter's response, when Jesus reminds them that, first of all, He had chosen them, not them Him; and secondly, in spite of this profession, one of them was a devil. We can rest assured that at all times Jesus knew, and knows, with whom He is dealing.

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<sup>253</sup> MTP 40.540.

<sup>254</sup> Carson; 302.

<sup>255</sup> Luthardt; 193.

*But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*  
(6: 68-69)

One technical note to mention here. The New King James Version follows the old one in incorporating Peter's confession from Matthew 16 into this confession in John 6. The correct text, as reflected in the New American Standard, has Peter confessing Jesus as "*the Holy One of God.*" This is the more difficult text to explain, as 'Holy One' is not a regular name for the Messiah in Second Temple Jewish writings. As "*the Christ, the Son of the Living God*" is the exact text from Matthew 16:16, it is probable that copyists incorporated the less difficult phrase in place of the more difficult. But the two events are not the same, in spite of what modern higher critics assert, and Peter's confession need not be verbatim each time. Jesus has been speaking powerfully throughout this section of the Fourth Gospel in regard to His unity with the Father. Peter's expression, therefore, that Jesus is *the Holy One of God*, "expresses Jesus' nearness to God, who is the Holy One of Israel."<sup>256</sup> It is Peter's recognition of this aspect of Jesus' nature that enable him, as a true disciple, to believe Jesus' words even if they are hard to understand or, at this point in time, downright incomprehensible. Luthardt explains,

He is the holy one of God, in so far as he, the only one among men, not only as to his personal will, but also as to his nature, is removed from the communion of human depravity, and as to his nature, therefore, can serve as the means of the impartation of the divine blessing of salvation, namely, of eternal life in its full extent.<sup>257</sup>

The crux of Peter's response to Jesus' question - and it is, of course, Peter who speaks for the twelve, though one wonders what one of the disciples was thinking at the time - is his own rhetorical question, "*To whom shall we go?*" This is perhaps the most fundamental confession of saving faith that can be expressed. What Peter says about their condition, which we will discuss shortly, is predicated on his discovery by faith that *there is no one else but Jesus*. This faith does not require full understanding, and is never accompanied by anything other than partial understanding. This faith does not consist in acceding to certain doctrines, and can indeed thrive even when important doctrines are

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<sup>256</sup> Whitacre; 176.

<sup>257</sup> Luthardt; 195.

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misunderstood or even denied. Simple but saving faith is that which says, “To whom shall we go?” “To believe is to have been brought to the place where one knows that one has to rely completely on Jesus, and on Jesus alone.”<sup>258</sup>

The order of the verbs that Peter uses in response to Jesus’ challenge is very significant. The disciples says, “*We have believed*” first, and then “*and have come to know*” last. This is the order that Jesus has been requiring throughout this entire discourse: faith *first*, then understanding. This is encapsulated in Anselm’s famous Latin phrase, *credo, ut intelligam* – “It believe in order that I may understand” – from his *Proslogium*. Faith comes first, then understanding. “Thus, as we see, belief bases itself purely on the word, unmindful of the contradiction of the sensible appearance, and it takes what the word gives it as an earnest and pledge of the future possession.”<sup>259</sup> That future possession, as Paul will put it, is when faith will become sight. In the interim, there is some progress in understanding due to the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit within and the Scriptures taken in, but the foundation of faith never changes: *We have believed* and *have come to know*.

*Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?” He spoke of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him, being one of the twelve.*  
(6:70-71)

Jesus’ statement in response to Peter’s confession here in John 6 is similar in content and in structure to the parallel event in Matthew 16. First, regarding Peter’s words of faith, Jesus reiterates the fact that, as He puts it in Matthew 16, “*flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.*”<sup>260</sup> Here, in John 6, Jesus emphasizes His role in the selection of the twelve and does so emphatically. The first person personal pronoun is used here, so that the more exact expression should be “*Did not I, Myself, choose you?*” This pertains to their role as ‘the Twelve,’ though Jesus then enigmatically calls one of them ‘a devil’ – *diabolos*. This, too, parallels the similar passage in Matthew, where shortly after his confession of Jesus as the Christ, Peter himself acts the part of Satan in trying to hinder Jesus from fulfilling His mission. Perhaps the closeness of the dialogue between the two events explains why John felt the need to clarify Jesus’ comment here in

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<sup>258</sup> Newbiggin; 90.

<sup>259</sup> Luthardt; 195.

<sup>260</sup> Matthew 16:17

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John 6, and to let his readers know that it was not Peter of whom He spoke, but Judas Iscariot.

Jesus' description of Judas is, as Ryle notes, "a singularly strong expression, and gives an awfully vivid impression of the wickedness of Judas."<sup>261</sup> There is, perhaps, a subtle contrast in the way Jesus responded to Peter in Matthew 16, "*Get behind Me, Satan,*" and what He here says about Judas Iscariot. In Matthew 16 Jesus is not calling Peter a devil, but rather indicating that Peter's thoughts were more in line with Satan's than with the Father's, even to the extent that Jesus could rebuke Peter in the name of the Adversary. This is not to say that Peter was, even temporarily, possessed by Satan; we have no biblical evidence to support such a conclusion. Rather, it is to say that the words that Peter uttered in opposition to Jesus' announced mission to die, were so contrary to the divine purpose that they may have been uttered by Satan himself. Earlier in the same passage Jesus says, "*You are Peter.*" He does not retract that and return, "*You are Satan.*" The language is, therefore, metaphorical, though powerfully graphic.

In the case of Judas, however, John explains that Jesus was aware of this disciple's impending betrayal. He is in his heart what Peter was temporarily in his mouth. "He is personified Apostasy, the spiritual father of all apostates."<sup>262</sup> The progression has thus moved in this discourse from 'the Jews,' who were firmly settled and settling in their unbelief, to the professing disciples, who fell away when Jesus' teaching became too 'hard,' and finally to the twelve, among whom there was yet one who would ultimately commit the greatest act of apostasy and betray Jesus. Yet even this betrayal is in accordance with the divine plan. "For God orders the circumstances and effects the form in which the sin of disobedience on the part of man comes to utterance and view."<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Ryle; 424.

<sup>262</sup> Hoskyns; 300.

<sup>263</sup> Luthardt; 197.

**Week 8: The Feast of Tabernacles**

**Text Reading:** John 7:1 - 24

*“A free human decision about the claims of Jesus is impossible.  
The only condition for understanding the claims of Jesus is faith.”*  
(C. K. Barrett)

For the first time in the Fourth Gospel we meet the brothers of Jesus. Unless, of course, one holds to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, in which case we meet either the half-brothers of Jesus or His cousins. That the text so naturally reads as if these would-be program managers for Jesus' public ministry were His brothers, it would seem pointless to argue. But the Mariolatry of the Roman Catholic church is so pervasive and powerful that it remains important to establish the biological relationship of these men to Jesus if only to refute the virtual deification of His mother. From an exegetical perspective, the exercise in refuting the Catholic position has the advantage of proving that, just because a word *can* mean various different things, we do not have the liberty to choose which one it means in a given context based on predetermined doctrinal conclusions. Frankly, if it were not for the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, no one would think to doubt that the 'brothers' we meet in John 7:3 were anything other than Jesus' brothers, the later sons of Mary by her husband Joseph.

We meet the earthly family of Jesus in the Synoptics in a manner that confirms John's assessment of them (at least of the brothers) at this time: that they were not yet believers. In the Matthean context, Jesus Himself accepts the most natural reading of the term 'brothers,' and then expands it to include those who do the will of His Father. There is, however, no caveat offered to explain that these who sought to speak to Jesus were anything other than his brothers in the most natural sense of the word.

*While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then one said to Him, “Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You.” But He answered and said to the one who told Him, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.”*  
(Matthew 12:46-50)

Again, the most natural reading of the expressed unbelief of the Jews in Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, is that Mary had other children with Joseph after the miraculous birth of Jesus, her firstborn.

*When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?" So they were offended at Him.* (Matthew 13:54-57)

Unfortunately for the straightforward interpretation of such texts, the deification of Mary (the evolution of Mariolatry) progressed through the first millennia alongside another heresy: the sanctity of celibacy. It was deemed abhorrent to think that Mary would have had sexual relations with her husband Joseph after the birth of Jesus; such defilement was inconceivable for the 'Blessed Virgin.' This in spite of the clear implication contained in the report that Joseph *did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son.*<sup>264</sup> The wrongheadedness of the exaltation of virginity, and its inevitable application to Mary even after the birth of Jesus, led eventually to the official codification of the doctrine of the Perpetual Virginity of Mary at the Synod of Milan in AD 390. "The deepening faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man."<sup>265</sup> Along with the parallel doctrines of the *Theotokas* – Mary as the 'Mother of God,' the *Immaculate Conception*, and the *Assumption of Mary*, the doctrine of the Perpetual Virginity rounds out the essential tenets of Mariolatry, one of the most consistent errors in Roman Catholic history. But it is the doctrine of Perpetual Virginity that *requires* the interpretation that these 'brothers' found in the Gospels must have some other relation to Jesus than being the sons of Mary, Jesus' mother.

Against this doctrine the objection is sometimes raised that the Bible mentions brothers and sisters of Jesus. The Church has always understood these passages as not referring to other children of the Virgin Mary. In fact, James and Joseph, 'brothers of Jesus,' are the sons of

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<sup>264</sup> Matthew 1:25

<sup>265</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church; 499.

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another Mary, a disciple of Jesus, whom St. Matthew significantly calls 'the other Mary. They are close relations of Jesus, according to an Old Testament expression.<sup>266</sup>

This statement, 'according to an Old Testament expression,' is the hinge on which the entire argument against the natural interpretation of 'brothers' in passages such as John 7:3. This 'Old Testament expression' is the fact that the word 'brother' – in both Hebrew and Greek – is nonspecific and can refer to one's biological fully brother, one's half-brother, one's step-brother, one's cousin, or one's close associate. Thus the Catholic Encyclopedia states,

The texts cited at the beginning of this article show beyond a doubt that there existed a real and near kinship between Jesus and His "brethren". But as "brethren" (or "brother") is applied to step-brothers as well as to brothers by blood, and in Scriptural, and Semitic use generally, is often loosely extended to all near, or even distant, relatives (Genesis 13:8, 14:14-16; Leviticus 10:4; 1 Chronicles 15:5-10, 23:21-22), the word furnishes no certain indication of the exact nature of the relationship. Some ancient heretics, like Helvidius and the Antidicomarianites, maintained that the "brethren" of Jesus were His uterine brothers the sons of Joseph and Mary. This opinion has been revived in modern times, and is now adopted by most of the Protestant exegetes.<sup>267</sup>

The arguments against the simple interpretation of the term 'brothers' in the Gospel texts divide into two basic conclusions. The first, held predominantly by the Greek and Eastern Orthodox churches, is that these 'brothers' were half-brothers of Jesus, sons of Joseph from a previous marriage. This would, of course, obviate the need for Mary to have borne any additional children, thus protecting her perpetual virginity. The second, Roman Catholic, position is that these 'brothers' are Jesus' cousins through Mary, the wife of Clopas, who was Jesus' aunt. The convoluted line of reasoning, therefore, actually places these 'brothers' as among Jesus' twelve disciples, though this is clearly refuted in John 7:5, where we read that these 'brothers' "*were not believing in Him.*" One can discern the necessity of the conclusion by reading the defense of the interpretation in the Catholic Encyclopedia,

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<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*; 500.

<sup>267</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, "The Brethren of the Lord." [CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: The Brethren of the Lord \(newadvent.org\)](https://www.newadvent.org/cathenc/11/0101.htm); last accessed 24May2021.

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That they were not the sons of Joseph and Mary is proved by the following reasons, leaving out of consideration the great antiquity of the belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary. It is highly significant that throughout the New Testament Mary appears as the Mother of Jesus and of Jesus alone. This is the more remarkable as she is repeatedly mentioned in connexion with her supposed sons, and, in some cases at least, it would have been quite natural to call them her sons (cf. Matthew 12:46; Mark 3:31; Luke 8:19; Acts 1:14). Again, Mary's annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Luke 2:41) is quite incredible, except on the supposition that she bore no other children besides Jesus. Is it likely that she could have made the journey regularly, at a time when the burden of child-bearing and the care of an increasing number of small children (she would be the mother of at least four other sons and of several daughters, cf. Matthew 13:56) would be pressing heavily upon her? A further proof is the fact that at His death Jesus recommended His mother to St. John. Is not His solicitude for her in His dying hour a sign that she would be left with no one whose duty it would be to care for her? And why recommend her to an outsider if she had other sons?... The decisive proof, however, is that the father and mother of at least two of these "brethren" are known to us. James and Joseph, or Joses, are, as we have seen, the sons of Alphaeus, or Clopas, and of Mary, the sister of Mary the Mother of Jesus, and all agree that if these are not brothers of the Saviour, the others are not. This last argument disposes also of the theory that the "brethren" of the Lord were the sons of St. Joseph by a former marriage. They are then neither the brothers nor the step-brothers of the Lord. James, Joseph, and Jude are undoubtedly His cousins. <sup>268</sup>

Perhaps the strongest argument in this paper chain is Jesus' commendation from the cross of Mary to the disciple John rather than to Mary's other children. The response to this is simple and biblical: Jesus was commending His earthly mother to the care of a believing disciple, one "*whom Jesus loved,*" rather than to His yet-unbelieving earthly family. Nevertheless, from an exegetical perspective, the entire argument is fruitless, stemming as it does from a false and idolatrous presupposition: that virginity is sanctified above marriage and childbirth.

A more sound and solid hermeneutic would be to consider how the word 'brother' is used in the Fourth Gospel, and such a study reveals that John, at least, was not being metaphorical in his use of the term *adelphos*. In several passages we see the clear, natural reading of the word, with absolutely no indication that it means anything other than 'brother.'

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<sup>268</sup> *Idem.*

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*One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated, the Christ).* (1:40-41)

*Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little." One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?"* (6:7-9)

*Then Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him."...So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother. Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."* (11:14, 17-23)

Laying aside the false and idolatrous notion of Mary's perpetual virginity (and the other three idolatrous falsehoods as well), we may safely conclude with C. K. Barrett, "It may be said here that there is nothing in the fourth gospel itself to suggest any other view than that the brothers were sons of Joseph and Mary."<sup>269</sup> Sadly, however, at this stage of the narrative, Jesus' brothers numbered themselves among His detractors and not among His disciples. This will change, by God's grace, and these same brothers will later be found among the disciples in the upper room (*cp.* Acts 1:14). But for now, in John 7, "*not even His brothers were believing in Him.*"

***After these things Jesus walked in Galilee; for He did not want to walk in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill Him. Now the Jews' Feast of Tabernacles was at hand.*** (7:1-2)

John again uses his workhorse phrase, '*after these things,*' to indicate merely the order of events rather than any specific chronology. That chronology, in the Fourth Gospel, is provided through the mention of the various feasts – this one being the Feast of Tabernacles. Thus as many as sixth months have passed since Jesus was last in Jerusalem (*cp.* 5:1), time that He has spent entirely in Galilee. Jesus' absence from Jerusalem is explained in the opening verse, "*because the Jews were seeking to kill Him.*" It is certainly not to be concluded that Jesus feared the Jews, or the loss of His life, but rather – as will

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<sup>269</sup> Barrett; 256.

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become a theme both in this chapter and in the rest of the Fourth Gospel – Jesus' *time had not yet come*. Therefore, He stayed in Galilee.

This fact brings to light the significance of the events recorded in Chapter 5 – the healing of the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda, a healing that took place on the Sabbath. We read there that, because of Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, and His self-association with God, *"the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God."*<sup>270</sup> The enmity between 'the Jews' and Jesus was growing, even in Galilee where the Jews had undoubtedly followed Him. It would continue to grow until the next Passover, when the Jews would succeed in their endeavor, and would kill Jesus. Olshausen remarks that "a powerful hatred against the Lord has been developed in the minds



**Hermann Olshausen (1796-1839)**

of the Jews."<sup>271</sup> We will be able to sense the simmering rage of 'the Jews' throughout the rest of the Fourth Gospel. "From now to the end of the public ministry John depicts a steadily deepening hostility."<sup>272</sup>

Jesus knows that He cannot avoid Jerusalem forever, for He Himself stated that *"it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem."*<sup>273</sup> Nonetheless, as Luthardt notes, "Jesus did not seek the conflict, but let it come to him."<sup>274</sup> One can feel the world shrinking around the Lord, though, as His circle of disciples gets ever smaller and the enmity of the Jews spreads like a cancer through both Galilee and Judea. This growing animosity will inexorably draw Jesus back to Jerusalem, but it will be according to the Father's timing and that of no one else, including Jesus. "Jesus stands in the midst of a world of unbelief; even his brethren do not believe on him. But the centre of the unbelief is Jerusalem."<sup>275</sup>

The feast that John notes here in Chapter 7, that of Tabernacles or Ingathering, was widely considered (and written of) as the most festive and popular among the annual

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<sup>270</sup> John 5:18

<sup>271</sup> Olshausen, Hermann *Biblical Commentary on the Gospels: Volume III* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1849); 473.

<sup>272</sup> Morris; 392.

<sup>273</sup> Luke 13:33

<sup>274</sup> Luthardt; 200.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*; 199.

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feasts. It was celebrated as a combination of a Thanksgiving Feast for the final harvests and a Commemoration Feast for Jehovah's provision during Israel's long sojourn in the Wilderness. Thus we read of the feast under these two different aspects in its Old Testament.

*[A]nd the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field.* (Exodus 23:16)

*Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the LORD for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest. And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. You shall keep it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.* (Leviticus 23:39-43)

Morris writes, "The Feast of Tabernacles was a feast of thanksgiving primarily for the blessings of God in the harvest, but it was also observed with special reference to the blessings received during the wilderness wanderings, the time when God was pleased to manifest Himself in the tabernacle."<sup>276</sup> Jesus, whom John reveals in the opening chapter as having come down to 'tabernacle' among us, would use this Feast to begin to speak of the Holy Spirit and as Himself as the Light of the world. These two themes flow easily from the feast itself, during which water was drawn from the Pool of Siloam each morning, and the evening of each day saw a myriad of lamps lit in the Court of Women, with a great deal of singing and dancing. Beasley-Murray summarizes the important aspects of the Feast of Tabernacles which will be utilized by Jesus to further establish His identity as Israel's Messiah,

Primarily a thanksgiving for the harvest of wine, fruit, and olives, it was conjoined with a remembrance of the mercies of God during the forty years of wilderness wanderings and an anticipation of their return at the second Exodus when the kingdom of God should come. The most outstanding features of the festival were the camping out in the huts, the

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<sup>276</sup> Morris; 392.

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ceremonial drawing of water each morning from the pool of Siloam, and the rejoicing at night in the light of the enormous candelabras set up in the court of the women.<sup>277</sup>

The feast was, according to Jesus' brothers, the perfect venue for a would-be Messiah to make His case known and to solidify His base of disciples. "The world is offering the Son of God some marketing advice."<sup>278</sup> Jesus, of course, will ignore it.

*His brothers therefore said to Him, "Depart from here and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may see the works that You are doing. For no one does anything in secret while he himself seeks to be known openly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world." For even His brothers did not believe in Him.* (7:3-5)

The position in which we find Jesus' brothers is not one of enmity toward Jesus, nor is it one of faith. It is evident that they acknowledge Jesus' works as being significant, perhaps even messianic in their significance, but their conception of what the Messiah was to be is no different than those who sought to take Jesus and make Him their king. To these men, the Messiah's ministry is to lead the Jews out of their bondage to the Romans and to establish the Davidic kingdom once again in Jerusalem and over all of Judea and Galilee. Thus it was a mystery to them why Jesus holed Himself up in the backwater of Galilee when the real event was in Jerusalem. "They do not find the proper publicity in Jesus' working."<sup>279</sup>

However, theirs was not the open hostility of 'the Jews,' but rather the ignorant longing for political deliverance that characterized the majority of Second Temple Judea. "Although these words may not have been spoken without some feelings of derision, yet it must not be supposed that they proceeded from absolute hostility. The state of mind that existed in the individuals above-mentioned was probably one of vacillation."<sup>280</sup> The brothers further establish the backdrop against which Jesus is presenting to Israel the true kingdom. "Jesus' aim is not to gain a following but to reveal his Father by being faithful and obedient to him."<sup>281</sup>

It may well be that Jesus' brothers were at least tangentially associated with the zealot movement. This period was simmering with revolt, and would-be messiahs had

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<sup>277</sup> Beasley-Murray; 106.

<sup>278</sup> Whitacre; 179.

<sup>279</sup> Luthardt; 203.

<sup>280</sup> Olshausen; 474.

<sup>281</sup> Whitacre; 179.

little difficulty drawing men to themselves to incite rebellion against Rome. Added to this was the tradition that the Messiah, when He did come, would not do so in secret but would announce Himself in a very public manner. “According to one rabbinic tradition, ‘he will come and stand on the roof of the holy place; then he will announce to the Israelites, ‘Ye poor, the time of your redemption has arrived.’”<sup>282</sup> In any event, it seemed to Jesus’ brothers that He might reverse the losses He suffered in Capernaum, where so many of His disciples stopped following Him, by taking His miraculous works to Jerusalem, to “*show Yourself publicly to the world.*” But, as we have already seen, Jesus’ brothers were not operating from a position of faith, because as of yet they remained unbelieving. Therefore they could have no sound or solid advice to give to Jesus; they could not comprehend what it was that motivated Him.

*Then Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready. The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil. You go up to this feast. I am not going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come.” When He had said these things to them, He remained in Galilee.* (7:6-9)

There is more to this passage than simply the appropriateness of Jesus’ attendance at the feast according to the timing of His brothers. For one thing, their timing was integrally tied to what it was they anticipated and wanted Him to do, if He were indeed the Messiah. They make this clear in their admonition to Jesus to get Himself up to Jerusalem to take advantage of the crowds gathered at the feast. Jesus’ response is of the same line of thought, though His brothers do not understand what it is He is saying to them. Fundamentally, as Jesus has already stated, He does not operate according to anyone else’s calendar, and not even according to His own, but only according to the Father’s. Thus the initial understanding of the dialogue tracks along the dichotomy of ‘your time’ and ‘My time,’ which parallels the essential relationship of each party with ‘the world’: the brothers are of the world; Jesus is not. “They, free and separate from God, followed the guidance of their own inclinations; he, on the contrary, never acted arbitrarily, but according to the will of God, in obedience only to his intimations.”<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Bruce; 171. The quote is from the *Pesiqta Rabboti*, a rabbinical collection of homilies dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>283</sup> Olshausen; 475.

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In this way the passage parallels the interchange between Jesus and Mary at the wedding in Cana,

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come."* (John 2:1-4)

In the earlier passage, as with the one before us in Chapter 7, Jesus does what it is He is being exhorted to do – He turns the water into wine at Cana, and He travels to Jerusalem for the feast. But in each episode He rejects being guided by another person or persons, each time using a similar phrase: *My hour/time has not come*. The fact that Jesus did perform what he was being asked to perform has troubled commentators throughout the ages, but there is a key to each event that unlocks the conundrum: in both instances Jesus did what He was being asked to do, *in secret*. In Cana only the servants were witnesses of the miracle; Jesus would not allow His identity to be made public before 'His hour.' Here we read that Jesus did eventually go up to the feast, but *in secret* rather than publicly. "The contrast between revelation and concealment is ultimately not chronological but theological. Jesus becomes manifest to those whom the Father draws to him, but to them only."<sup>284</sup> There would be a very public entrance into Jerusalem at the proper time; actually, in about six months. In other words, what Jesus refuses to do in each case is to be directed by others rather than His Father. "The point is that John's *I do not go up* merely negatives the request of the brothers, and does not negative absolutely the intention of Jesus to go to Jerusalem at the proper time. He refuses in the plainest terms to comply with human – and unbelieving – advice, but acts with complete freedom and independence with regard to men, and in complete obedience to his Father."<sup>285</sup>

Here in Chapter 7, however, there seems to be a deeper meaning underlying the surface conversation, a meaning tied up in the verb *go up*. This same verb is used frequently in the Fourth Gospel in reference to Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. In His brothers' minds, Jesus needed to 'go up' to Jerusalem – the trip to Jerusalem was to the south, but one must ascend to reach the city gates, so 'going up' was

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<sup>284</sup> Barrett; 255.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*; 258.

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the normal parlance. But in Jesus' mind His 'going up' was synonymous with His being 'lifted up,' which would indeed be done publicly, just not at this feast. This is probably the subtle meaning behind what appears to be a categorical refusal to even attend the feast, "*I do not go up to **this feast** because My time has not yet fully come.*" (7:8) "He speaks to His brothers spiritually and in a mystery and they did not understand what He said. For He told them that He would not ascend at that feast neither into heaven nor on the cross to fulfill the plan of His suffering and the mystery of salvation."<sup>286</sup> Westcott leans toward this view, "Perhaps however it is better to give a fuller force to the 'going up' and to suppose that the thought of the next paschal journey, when 'the time was fulfilled,' already shapes the words."<sup>287</sup>

*But when His brothers had gone up, then He also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret. Then the Jews sought Him at the feast, and said, "Where is He?" And there was much complaining among the people concerning Him. Some said, "He is good"; others said, "No, on the contrary, He deceives the people." However, no one spoke openly of Him for fear of the Jews.*  
(7:10-13)

Jesus' brothers need not have worried about His not being well known; in fact, there is a buzz (the word here is, again, murmuring) at the feast about Him. He is on everyone's minds and, under their breath, on everyone's lips. "The rulers were seeking Him whom they dared not even name, presumably in order to put Him to death. The crowd wavers in its ignorant opinion concerning Him; but dares no open expression."<sup>288</sup> Olshausen adds, "No one was indifferent, but the opinions concerning him were very various, and the people only shrank from publicly expressing them on account of the Sanhedrists."<sup>289</sup> But what the people were murmuring among themselves represented two vastly different views: one benign, the other condemning; neither believing.

To say that Jesus was 'a good man' was probably then as it is today, a meaningless and tepid acknowledgment that there was something good about Jesus. "He is a good man' indicates an awareness of His character and a lack of perception of His Person."<sup>290</sup> The people probably reasoned that Jesus healed people and delivered them from demonic

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<sup>286</sup> Epiphanius, *Against Heresies*; 51.25. Quoted by Hoskyns; 313.

<sup>287</sup> Westcott; 117.

<sup>288</sup> Hoskyns; 313.

<sup>289</sup> Olshausen; 476.

<sup>290</sup> Morris; 402.

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oppression and possession. He was also a good teacher, and the crowds loved to hear Him expound on the Scriptures *“as one with authority, and not as the scribes.”* But the other opinion, that Jesus *led people astray*, was far more sinister and serious. In most ancient cultures, including that of the Jewish nation, *leading people astray* was a capital offense.<sup>291</sup> *“The latter charge is a serious one in Jewish law, and if established could lead to capital punishment.”*<sup>292</sup> It is tantamount to being a false prophet, and the manner in which Israel was to deal with a false prophet is clearly set forth in Deuteronomy,

*If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’ – which you have not known – ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams **shall be put to death**, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst.*

(Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

To the Jew, leading astray could only mean leading *away* from Yahweh, and this is what some in the crowd claimed Jesus was doing. It is probably that their opinion had been formed for them by ‘the Jews,’ and that they opposed Jesus in large measure in order to keep themselves on the good side of ‘the law.’ But the penetration of this murderous thought into the crowd shows us which way the wind was blowing, toward Golgotha. Jesus knows this full well, even better than the crowd does itself. *“Labeling Jesus as a deceiver is probably like charging him with being a false prophet who should be put to death for leading Israel astray in her relationship with God.”*<sup>293</sup>

The title ‘deceiver’ would be the standard Jewish treatment of Jesus even after His death, and later writings even deny the historical manner of His death on the cross in order to sustain the fiction that He was tried and found guilty of ‘deception.’ Two ancient Jewish documents, known as *baraita* (‘outside’) for being outside the usual Mishnaic

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<sup>291</sup> This was the charge and conviction of Socrates, that he ‘led astray’ the young men of Athens.

<sup>292</sup> Beasley-Murray; 107.

<sup>293</sup> Whitacre; 181.

teachings, have interesting testimonials regarding the 'trial' and death of the 'deceiver' Jesus. One from *Baraita Sanhedrin* claims that Jesus of Nazareth was stoned on the eve of the Passover, after a crier went out before him to see if anyone would stand as witness on his behalf. The claim that Jesus was stoned instead of crucified follows logically from what goes before in this document: it was the biblical punishment that a deceiver be stoned. The later Jewish rabbis who provided this 'history' of Jesus' execution evidently did not want to admit that Jesus was not dealt with as the Law prescribes, but actually had 'close ties' to the gentile authorities, who sought to have him released.

The mishna teaches that a crier goes out before the condemned man. This indicates that it is only before him, i.e., while he is being led to his execution, that yes, the crier goes out, but from the outset, before the accused is convicted, he does not go out. The Gemara raises a difficulty: But isn't it taught in a *baraita*: **On Passover Eve they hung the corpse of Jesus the Nazarene after they killed him by way of stoning. And a crier went out before him for forty days, publicly proclaiming: Jesus the Nazarene is going out to be stoned because he practiced sorcery, incited people to idol worship, and led the Jewish people astray. Anyone who knows of a reason to acquit him should come forward and teach it on his behalf. And the court did not find a reason to acquit him, and so they stoned him and hung his corpse on Passover eve.** Ulla said: And how can you understand this proof? Was Jesus the Nazarene worthy of conducting a search for a reason to acquit him? He was an inciter to idol worship, and the Merciful One states with regard to an inciter to idol worship: "Neither shall you spare, neither shall you conceal him" (Deuteronomy 13:9). Rather, Jesus was different, as he had close ties with the government, and the gentile authorities were interested in his acquittal. Consequently, the court gave him every opportunity to clear himself, so that it could not be claimed that he was falsely convicted.

(*b. Sanhedrin 43a, 20-21*)

The salient point of this text is that the Jews maintained for many years this claim that Jesus lead the Israelites astray and, therefore, was properly and judicially condemned and executed. These are, in fact, Jewish apologetical writings in the face of a growing Christian Church in the late 1<sup>st</sup> Century and beyond. It also shows that declaring Jesus to be a deceiver was by no means an innocent opinion; it was a statement of the most serious content. Whitacre points out that our very tolerant and benign worldview often fails to recognize how important a charge of 'leading astray' was in ancient Israel.

The Jewish leaders understand the enormity of Jesus' claims and the foundation issues he raises. Their reaction is justified if Jesus' claims are indeed false. If Jesus' claims are not

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true, then he is not a harmless teacher who can be tolerated or ignored. In our pluralistic society we have lost the sense of significance regarding religious views. While we need not return to stoning false prophets, believers should have a sense of urgency in opposing false teaching. Jesus and his opponents cannot both be correct, and the choosing between them has eternal consequences.<sup>294</sup>

Yet even those who were saying that Jesus was a deceiver of Israel did not say so out loud, because all were living in fear of the authorities, ‘the Jews.’ “So long as the authorities have not declared themselves officially, and the people are not certain of the definitive decision of the authorities, it seems prudent to refrain from every judgment, even from an unfavourable one. This position of affairs, the hostility of the authorities, the uncertainty of the decision, and the fear on the part of the people to come out with their decision, - all this shows that Israel advances to the judgment.”<sup>295</sup>

*Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught. And the Jews marveled, saying, “How does this Man know letters, having never studied?” (7:14-15)*

Jesus does go up to Jerusalem, secretly; but He cannot be in the midst of Israel and not teach the crowds about the kingdom that has come with Him. As He states elsewhere, He must always be about His Father’s business, and a large part of that business is in His teaching the crowds the true meaning of the Scriptures and their fulfillment in Him. “Jesus could not stay in Jerusalem and be silent. He desires to use the opportunity of teaching, yet so that he does not directly provoke the conflict, and at the same time does not avoid it through fear.”<sup>296</sup> Others have noted the amazing authority with which Jesus taught; now ‘the Jews’ make the same observation. Only this time the tone is not admiring, but condemning. Academic elitism was as prevalent in Second Temple Judaism as it is in modern western Evangelicalism. You cannot just go about teaching without certification and licensure! “No one but a Rabbi might deliver his own sentiments; the pupils and assistants were only at liberty to repeat what they had learned.”<sup>297</sup> Jesus had no rabbinic training – that is what the Jews mean when they claim that He had never been educated – and therefore what He was teaching must be of his own imagination. As such, it was

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<sup>294</sup> Whitacre; 181.

<sup>295</sup> Luthardt; 211.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*; 212.

<sup>297</sup> Olshausen; 477.

invalid. To the Jewish authorities Jesus is one of the ignorant crowd which is accursed and *knoweth not the law* (vii.49), and His claim to interpret it in public is a blasphemous impertinence. The interpretation of the scriptures is safely entrusted to those who are disciples of the Jewish doctors and to them only.”<sup>298</sup>

This rigid elitism among the rabbis was explained in their day much the same as academic elitism in the Church is explained today: it serves as a protection of the Truth that only those who have been ‘trained’ and ‘certified’ are allowed to teach their own views, all others may do nothing more than parrot what they have heard from their rabbi, with ample reference and citation to that rabbi. Anyone who violated this standard was held in contempt. Beasley-Murray quotes the school of Rabbi Meir, “If anyone has learned the Scripture and the Mishna but has not served as a student of the Learned he is one of the people of the land. If he has learned the Scripture but not the Mishna he is an uneducated man. If he has learned neither the Scripture nor the Mishna the Scripture says of him, ‘I sowed the house of Israel and the house of Judah with seed of men and seed of cattle.’ (i.e., he is reckoned as an animal!)”<sup>299</sup>

*Jesus answered them and said, “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority. He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him. (7:16-18)*

Jesus response confirms the prior analysis, that the Jewish leaders were disparaging Jesus as ‘self-taught’ because of the fact that He had not been taught and certified (or licensed) by one of the accepted rabbinic schools. “The scribes were authorized teachers trained and accredited by the accepted teachers before them. Jesus did not have this authorization. He had not taken the proper training. The natural inference is that he was simply propagating his own ideas.”<sup>300</sup> Jesus therefore immediately denies that His teaching is His own. But in doing so, He also indicates once again what it takes for anyone to recognize the true authority behind His teaching, a much more powerful authority than any rabbi: God Himself. In order to be able to receive the divine teaching, one’s entire disposition must be changed and reoriented toward God in mind and will. “We do not

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<sup>298</sup> Hoskyns; 314.

<sup>299</sup> Beasley-Murray; 108.

<sup>300</sup> Newbigin; 95. Compare the similar charge against Peter and John; Acts 4:13

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will as we think, but we think as we will. We must desire to do the will of God, if we wish to come to sure knowledge concerning the question of Jesus' doctrine and its origin."<sup>301</sup> Again, *"This is the will of God, that you believe on Him whom He has sent."* Faith is, as always with Jesus, prior to knowledge. Indeed, apart from faith all knowledge is ignorance. It was rank unbelief that left the Jews marveling at Jesus' teaching, and offended by it. "Their wonder, however, is a morally worthless one. It does not permit itself to be affected by the contents of his teaching, but merely puts before itself the riddle of its origin."<sup>302</sup>

Jesus claim in verse 17, *"If any man is willing to do the will of God, he will know of the teaching,"* is a powerful polemic against apologetical/rationalistic evangelism. The idea that we can reason an unbeliever into faith is both unbiblical and counterproductive. It serves to exalt the rational faculty and to subsume faith to it, which is the opposite of what Jesus has been teaching throughout this section, and most powerfully here in verse 17. "A free human decision about the claims of Jesus is impossible. The only condition for understanding the claims of Jesus is faith."<sup>303</sup> Bruce expands on this,

As then so now it is not simply intellectual penetration that will determine truly whether Jesus' claim to impart the Father's teaching is well founded or not; an attitude of heart is also important. If there be a readiness to *do* the will of God, the capacity for discerning God's message will follow. Whoever has that readiness of heart will recognize in the teaching of Jesus a message which authenticates itself to spiritual perception and conscience as the truth. Truth must be self-authenticating; it cannot appeal to any authority external to itself.<sup>304</sup>

***Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keeps the law? Why do you seek to kill Me?" The people answered and said, "You have a demon. Who is seeking to kill You?" (7:19-20)***

This statement by Jesus has direct connection back to the His previous visit to Jerusalem, when He healed the paralytic man on the Sabbath. The crowd is evidently unaware of the murderous animosity toward Jesus that is reaching a boiling point among 'the Jews.' But they will progressively come to realize that this is exactly what their leaders wish to do with Jesus. Later in the same chapter we read, *"Therefore some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, 'Is this not the man whom they are seeking to kill?'"* (7:25)

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<sup>301</sup> Luthardt; 215.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*; 213.

<sup>303</sup> Barrett; 262.

<sup>304</sup> Bruce; 175-176.

Things would come to a head later in this same visit to Jerusalem, with the Jews picking up stones to stone Jesus, but He escaped their grasp (8:59).

What Jesus is doing here is once again turning the tables on the Jews, and putting them on trial under the Law of Moses that they so proudly claim to teach and follow. His argument will develop in the closing verses of this section, but the fundamental charge that He levels against the Jews is that they seek to kill Him for something that they do all the time: violate the Sabbath. This is undoubtedly that aspect of 'the law' to which Jesus refers, as it connects the reason for the Jews bitter enmity toward Him with the previous miracle that He performed on the Sabbath. But, as He will state in just a few verses, the Jews' judgment is not righteous; it is discriminatory and partial, and therefore wicked.

*Jesus answered and said to them, "I did one work, and you all marvel. Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?" (7:21-23)*

This is Jesus' *tour de force* and intensifies the confusion of the crowd and the anger of the Jews. By the 'one work' Jesus certainly means that healing of the paralytic on the Sabbath that enraged the Jews the last time He was in Jerusalem, and for which they were still in a murderous frame of mind. "They could neither forget nor forgive this supposed breach of the Sabbath."<sup>305</sup> But Jesus points out the well-known fact that the Jewish law of circumcision regularly trumped that of the Sabbath, as a male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day from his birth, even if that day fell on a Sabbath. This was universally accepted among the rabbis; no dissent. Furthermore, the Jews were well aware that this was a *violation* of the Sabbath, and accepted it as such. From the Mishna we read,

They may deliver a woman on the Sabbath and summon a midwife for her from anywhere, and they may **profane** the Sabbath for the mother's sake and tie up the navel-string. R. Jose says: They may also cut it. And they may perform on the Sabbath all things that are needful for circumcision. (Sanhedrin 18.3)

Rabbi Ishmael says: Great is circumcision which overrides even the rigour of the Sabbath. (Nedarim 3:11)

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<sup>305</sup> Luthardt; 218.

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Circumcision, therefore, had precedence over the Sabbath commandment. Jesus maintains this as something the Jews both knew and regularly practiced. "Circumcision is the sign of the covenant of promise, which precedes the sign of the Sinaitic covenant...Hence circumcision, taken up into the law, precedes the Sabbath."<sup>306</sup> Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater: if it is lawful to circumcise on the Sabbath, how is it a violation of the law to heal an entire man on the Sabbath? This is actually something that even many of the rabbis recognized: that the law of the Sabbath was secondary to the necessity of mercy. But the rabbis limited the extent of 'profaning' the Sabbath, beyond circumcision, to saving a man who is in imminent danger of death. "If a man has a pain in his throat they may drop medicine into his mouth on the Sabbath, since there is doubt whether life is in danger, and whenever there is doubt whether life is in danger this overrides the Sabbath."<sup>307</sup> Jesus does not place such a limit on the doing of good on the Sabbath; indeed, what He has done is to show exactly what it was that circumcision truly meant, and truly pointed toward. He is teaching the Jews a lesson on the circumcision when He says, "*For this reason Moses has given you circumcision...*"

This is a purpose clause, introducing the explanation for why Moses encoded the Abrahamic covenant sign of circumcision into the Sinaitic Law of Israel. Hoskyns reminds us to keep John 5:46 firmly in mind whenever we hear Jesus mention the name of Moses, "*For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me.*"

Moses gave the Jews circumcision and the right to break the sabbath for the purpose of performing circumcision, *for this cause*, namely that it should be a type and anticipation of that greater and entire healing by the Christ, which also of necessity displaces the sabbath. The action of Jesus in making the cripple every whit *whole* on the sabbath day is therefore the divine fulfilment both of the original gift of circumcision and of the continuous Jewish practice of circumcising on the sabbath.<sup>308</sup>

The Jews had evolved a murderous zeal regarding the Sabbath, one that would seek the death of a man who did undeniable good to another man on that day. "Thus it is not

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<sup>306</sup> Luthardt; 220.

<sup>307</sup> Mishna *Yoma* 8.6

<sup>308</sup> Hoskyns; 316.

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Jesus but his opponents who are going against Moses. They are breaking the law by their observance of the sabbath because their observance does not include doing good.”<sup>309</sup>

*Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.* (7:24)

The Law commanded judges among the people to *judge with righteous judgment* and to hear the case between two people before issuing judgment. Deuteronomy 1 may have been on Jesus’ mind when He gave this admonition to the Jews, for they were condemning Him without a fair trial, or even a fair hearing (Nicodemus will lodge the same complaint within the Sanhedrin later in this same section; John 7:51).

*Then I commanded your judges at that time, saying, ‘Hear the cases between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the stranger who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man’s presence, for the judgment is God’s.* (Deuteronomy 1:16-17)

But it may be that Jesus’ thoughts were also, and even more so, on Isaiah 11, where we read of the promised Messiah that He would judge in righteousness,

*And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears; But with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.* (Isaiah 11:3-4)

The Jews cannot judge righteously because they judge according to their own perception, and their perception is blinded by unbelief. So rather than recognizing Jesus as the One of whom Moses wrote, they see nothing but an uneducated bumpkin who blasphemously dared to teach them the law. But it is they who are blaspheming, for as Jesus will continue to say in their hearing, everything He does and everything He is proclaim Him to be the Promised One, if they would judge with righteous judgment. “In seeking His death they deny their learning in the Scriptures and oppose the will of God. Their whole blasphemous behaviour rests upon a false judgement which discerns only the outward form of what Jesus had done. They judge according to the flesh, and perceive only a violation of the sabbath punishable by death.”<sup>310</sup> Bruce adds, “It was a very

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<sup>309</sup> Whitacre; 186.

<sup>310</sup> Hoskyns; 316.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

superficial judgment which condemned him for performing such a good deed on the sabbath. Righteous judgment would penetrate beneath the surface appearances and judge according to the spirit and purpose of the law.”<sup>311</sup> This is a timeless lesson not only in regard to the Sabbath or Lord’s Day, but also in regard to all application of legal principles within the community of faith, the Church. *Judge with righteous judgment.*

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<sup>311</sup> Bruce; 177.

**Week 9: Rivers of Living Water**

**Text Reading:** John 7:25 - 52

*“No doubt true repentance is never too late;  
but late repentance is seldom true.  
Hell itself is truth known too late.”  
(J. C. Ryle)*

Christian readers of the gospels, especially those sections where Jesus is in some verbal debate with the Jewish religious leaders, are tempted to intervene in the dialogue and give a straightforward answer to the objections. There is an instance of this phenomenon in our focus passage: the Jews insist that the Messiah was to be from Bethlehem of Judah, but Jesus was known to be from Nazareth in Galilee. So we think, Why not just tell the people that He was, in fact, *born* in Bethlehem according to the Scriptures, but was *raised* in Galilee? Why allow the crowd to continue in ignorance when a simple statement would clarify the issue? This temptation arises from the modern tendency to think that people can be brought to a saving knowledge of God through Jesus Christ via rational debate and reasonable argument. Just answer all of the sinner’s questions, and presto! Conversion follows! But it not only does not work this way, it is diametrically opposed to the manner in which God *planned* for it to work. Consider, for example, the prophetic charge given to Isaiah.

*And He said, “Go, and tell this people:  
‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’  
Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes;  
Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears,  
And understand with their heart, and return and be healed.”* (Isaiah 6:9-10)

This does not sound like a victorious charge at all; rather it is a prediction of frustration and defeat. The more effort the prophet puts into his message from Jehovah, the harder of hearing and the blinder the people become. How does this constitute Church Growth strategy? Yet it is the same approach that Jesus Himself took through His parabolic teaching,

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:*

*'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive;*

*For the hearts of this people have grown dull.*

*Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed,*

*Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,*

*Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.'*

(Matthew 13:10-15)

Lesslie Newbigin comments on this phenomenon throughout his short commentary on John's Gospel, referring to it as the combination of revelation and concealment. Newbigin's point is that divine revelation must bring concealment along with it, since it is inaccessible to fallen man apart from divine grace. Man cannot understand revelation because man will not understand God, that is both the cause and effect of man's sin. Ryle comments succinctly, "There are none so blind as those who will not see."<sup>312</sup> And it is not the plan of God to give rational sight to blind sinners apart from the *prior* sight of faith. Hence the teaching in parables and the incendiary metaphorical use of 'His flesh' and 'His blood' as true meat and drink. "*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.*"<sup>313</sup> But to men dead in trespass and sin, blinded by corruption and self-will, Jesus' words are just so much gibberish, incomprehensible to their darkened minds. A true, biblical evangelism will both understand and accept biblical Anthropology, that fallen man is blind and deaf to the truth until regeneration. At which point the answers to the prior objections become embarrassingly obvious from the pages of Scripture.

This is the answer to the modern liberal criticism of the 'evangelist' – as modern critical scholars will not admit that the author of the Fourth Gospel is the Apostle John – that he was not himself aware of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth or of Jesus' nativity in Bethlehem. This is the critical explanation for why the author does not bring up Jesus' Bethlehem roots in order to clarify the misunderstanding of the Jews in John 7. The irony (and stupidity) of this criticism is lost on the critics themselves, for they vehemently

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<sup>312</sup> Ryle, J. C. *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John Vol. II*; 31.

<sup>313</sup> John 6:63

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

maintain that the gospel was a late production, perhaps even 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, during which time the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and Jesus' Bethlehem nativity were universally held among all Christian communities. It would have been more likely that the Apostle John, living contemporaneously with Jesus, had not known of Jesus' origins (perhaps Jesus never spoke of it with His disciples?) than of some 2<sup>nd</sup> Century author; but any evidence of Johannine authorship, even based on the ignorance of the author, is inadmissible within the critical camp.

The true interpretation flows from Jesus' own words regarding His parabolic teaching method as fulfillment of the Isaianic prophecy: It was never His intention to make His message *rationaly simple* for unbelievers to grasp. Indeed, He has made it clear in these chapters of the Fourth Gospel that *faith* is itself the key to *knowledge* and *understanding*. But faith is never founded on reason; rather the exact opposite is uniformly the case with divine revelation (and, really, all knowledge). In regard to the crowd's contention that they knew where Jesus was from, Newbigin comments, "The truth is that they both know and do not know the secret of his origin and his person. Once again we are dealing with the paradox of revelation, that it must be both a veiling and an unveiling it if is to be true."<sup>314</sup>

This concept probably lies behind Paul's enigmatic words in II Corinthians 5, where he writes, "*Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer.*"<sup>315</sup> To know something or someone 'according to the flesh' is to rely on visible, tangible, and *worldly* knowledge rather than spiritual and divine revelation. The Jews could not get past their 'knowledge' of Jesus 'according to the flesh,' that is, that He was from Nazareth in Galilee and, therefore, could not possibly be the Messiah. Ironically, this was the same problem the Jews in Nazareth had with Jesus, that they knew Him and His family all too well.

*So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth. And they said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" He said to them, "You will surely say this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.'" Then He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country."*

(Luke 4:22-24)

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<sup>314</sup> Newbigin; 97.

<sup>315</sup> II Corinthians 5:16

Newbigin points out the inherent difficulties presented by the concept of divine revelation. On the one hand, if the revelation is to be comprehended at all it must be *human* in form, for humans cannot register the divine. But on the other hand, if the revelation is human in form, then fallen man is incapable of seeing past the humanness to discern the divine. “If God is to be revealed in such a way that the revelation can be grasped, then it must be in an actual life lived at a particular place and time in the continuum of world events. The revelation must be flesh – Jesus, the man from Nazareth. But if Jesus is simply perceived by the experience of the world, then there has been no revelation. For this man of flesh and blood, the carpenter from Nazareth, is at the same time the one who has been sent by, comes from, and knows the Father in a sense which is not true of any other.”<sup>316</sup> That which makes the connection between the ‘flesh’ and the ‘spirit’ of divine revelation is, and must be, *faith*.

This truth should go a long way toward at least explaining the constant frustration that believers have when communicating with unbelievers, wondering how it is that the unbeliever fails to grasp the obvious truth of who Jesus is and what He has done. We are often told, and correctly so, that the unbeliever is dead and cannot understand the words that will give him life, until he is given life through regeneration. But the truth of the unbeliever’s deadness in sin does not always help us when we are being hit by a barrage of very alive objections, rational-sounding arguments against the basis of our faith. In other words, the dead sinner does a lot of kicking. The biblical apologist, however, will rest secure in the knowledge that the unbeliever *must be born again*, and only then will he or she understand the truth *as it is in Christ Jesus*. The biblical apologist also knows that the Holy Spirit will make use of the Scriptures to bring about that faith, long before the words of Scripture make any rational sense to the unbeliever. In the meantime, the *foolishness of the cross* is to be proclaimed without attempting to remove its foolishness to the unbeliever; it cannot be otherwise so long as the hearer remains in unbelief. Revelation veils just as much as it reveals, and the gospel is “*the savor of life unto life to those who are being saved, and the stench of death unto death to those who are perishing.*”<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Newbigin; 97-98.

<sup>317</sup> II Corinthians 2:16

*Now some of them from Jerusalem said, "Is this not He whom they seek to kill? But look! He speaks boldly, and they say nothing to Him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is truly the Christ? However, we know where this Man is from; but when the Christ comes, no one knows where He is from."* (7:25-27)

John introduces a third grouping of Jews in his narrative of the Feast of Tabernacles: *Jerusalemites*. The word is used only here and in Mark 1:5, where Mark is referring to those who were going out to be baptized by John at the Jordan River, "*Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.*" It is a single noun in the Greek and is more literally translated 'Jerusalemites.' It is evidently intended as a narrowing description of Judean Jews who were inhabitants of the capital city, Jerusalem. The point here in John 7 is in the distinction between this narrower group – *Jerusalemites* – and 'the Jews' who were increasingly hostile toward Jesus, and the 'crowd' attending the feast. The latter were undoubtedly a mixture of Jews from Judea, from Galilee, and even from the Diaspora. But it is this group, the *Jerusalemites*, who would be most aware of the attitude of the leaders toward this would-be Galilean Messiah, Jesus. *They*, at least, are in the know regarding the murderous hostility that 'the Jews' possess toward Jesus, and are therefore astounded to find Jesus teaching freely in the Temple. "*But look! He speaks boldly, and they say nothing to Him.*" Luthardt writes, "Since they know the thoughts of their authorities, they wonder that Jesus is permitted to speak so openly and freely, without anyone contradicting him."<sup>318</sup> Carson adds,

Those who ask the question are *the people of Jerusalem*. They are far more likely than the Galileans and other pilgrims to know the mind and machinations of the Jerusalem authorities. While some in their naïveté might doubt that anyone was trying to kill Jesus (7:19, 20), these people knew better. What took them by surprise was the public nature of his proclamation, even in the face of such a threat.<sup>319</sup>

The Jerusalemites pose an almost ridiculous theory for Jesus' open preaching in the Temple precincts, and then immediately retract the theory as impossible. Could the religious leaders have heard or seen something in the interim that has convinced them that

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<sup>318</sup> Luthardt; 223.

<sup>319</sup> Carson; 317.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

this man is, indeed, the Messiah? That would at least explain how it was that this ‘unlettered’ rabbi from Galilee was allowed to teach with impunity and without hindrance. But, therein lies the rub: *Jesus is from Galilee* and therefore cannot be the Messiah. “*However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from.*” This comment might seem incongruous compared to the later mention of the Messiah’s origin from Bethlehem (7:42), but the two comments are merely indicative – in an historically accurate way – of the diversity of opinion concerning the advent of the Promised One, the Christ. Many in Second Temple Judea and Jerusalem were convinced that the Messiah would be a secret personage until His sudden appearance on the scene to enact the promised redemption and restoration of Israel. This was largely based on Malachi 3:1, “*And the Lord whom you seek will **suddenly** come to His temple...*” Luthardt comments, “According to Jewish opinion, the descent of the Messiah, namely, not his Davidic ancestry, but his closer family connection, was to be unknown.”<sup>320</sup> This mysterious and sudden appearance of the Messiah is encapsulated in an odd rabbinic saying quoted by several commentators, “Three things come unawares: Messiah, a found object, and a scorpion.”<sup>321</sup>

The notion of a sudden and unexpected appearance of the Messiah is not without biblical merit, for we are told by Jesus Himself that this is exactly how His *second* advent will be.

*Then He said to the disciples, “The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look there!’ Do not go after them or follow them. For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day. (Luke 17:22-24)*

This reference from Luke also has a very similar statement regarding the Jews searching earnestly for the Messiah and not being able to find Him, as we find here in John 7, verse 34.

*Then Jesus cried out, as He taught in the temple, saying, “You both know Me, and you know where I am from; and I have not come of Myself, but He who sent Me is true, whom you do not know. But I know Him, for I am from Him, and He sent Me.” (7:28-29)*

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<sup>320</sup> Luthardt; 223.

<sup>321</sup> Quoted, for instance, by Morris; 412n50.

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Twice in this passage Jesus ‘cries out’ (*cp.7:37*), something unusual for Him of whom it is prophesied that,

*He will not quarrel **nor cry out**, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets.*

*A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench,*

*Till He sends forth justice to victory.*

(Matthew 12:19-20)<sup>322</sup>

The prophecy, of course, was not meant to indicate that the Messiah would *never* raise His voice, but only that He would be relatively non-descript and mild compared to what passes for ‘powerful’ and ‘influential’ in this world. The Greek word translated *cry out* even sounds like its meaning: *krazō*, and is “an expression John uses for significant proclamation, even revelation.”<sup>323</sup> Jesus knows what the Jerusalemites are murmuring amongst themselves, and He attempt to both get their attention and to shake them from their ‘fleshly’ consideration of Him. What Jesus says at first, “*You both know Me and know where I am from,*” can be taken one of two ways, both of which can be supported from the original. First, it may be that Jesus is speaking ironically, or at least in a manner that highlights the extreme limitation of the people’s knowledge of His origins. Jesus acknowledged that the crowd ‘knows’ where He is from: Nazareth in Galilee, but immediately shows just how blinkered, and therefore worthless, this ‘knowledge’ is for them. “Jesus admits, and indeed could not deny, the truth of the claim made by the Jerusalemites, in their own sense, though there is another sense in which his origin is quite unknown to them.”<sup>324</sup>

A second way of reading the clause, and equally acceptable from the perspective of the original Greek, is as a question, “*Do you both know Me and where I come from?*” Carson writes, “Alternatively, the words could be read as a question: ‘You know me, and you know where I am from?’ – *i.e.*, a fundamental challenge to their pretensions. Either way, their deep ignorance is exposed.”<sup>325</sup> Whitacre adds, “Bu this is bitinglly ironic since their knowledge of him as a Nazarene misses the most significant truth of his origin; they are judging by appearances. For in fact they do not really know where his is from because he

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<sup>322</sup> Matthew is quoting Isaiah 42:2-3

<sup>323</sup> Whitacre; 188.

<sup>324</sup> Barrett; 266.

<sup>325</sup> Carson; 318.

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is from the Father. They do not know his ultimate origin, and therefore they do not really know him.”<sup>326</sup>

Jesus again refers to the One who sent Him into the world; this is the ultimate origin of the Son of Man, the Christ. Nazareth (and, indeed, Bethlehem) is merely a physical address of no real significance toward the true knowledge of who Jesus is. “He is from the Father, both as to his being and as to his vocation. In these two phrases, then, Jesus comprehends, in the most concentrated way, his entire self-witness.”<sup>327</sup> Whitacre helpfully points out, “The issue at stake is knowledge, as the use of the word *know* seven times in verses 26-29 indicates. These Jerusalemites claim to have knowledge, but they do not. Jesus is the one who knows God, knows who he himself is and knows the truth about his opponents. The opponents are out of touch with reality.”<sup>328</sup>

*Therefore they sought to take Him; but no one laid a hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come. And many of the people believed in Him, and said, “When the Christ comes, will He do more signs than these which this Man has done?” The Pharisees heard the crowd murmuring these things concerning Him, and the Pharisees and the chief priests sent officers to take Him. (7:30-32)*

Those who ‘sought to take Him’ are evidently the Jerusalemites, who seem to have a better - though tragically unprofitable to themselves - idea of what it is Jesus is saying. This follows from the distinction John makes in this passage between those who *sought to take Him* and the Sanhedrin, who subsequently send out the Temple police to ‘take Him.’ The two groups combined (and the second group itself constitutes an unlikely alliance between the Sadducees and the Pharisees), however, fairly represent the growing unbelief and enmity toward Jesus that will result, by God’s plan and timing and not man’s, in Jesus’ death roughly six months later. “In this appears the judgment of hardening, to which they become more and more subject; and at the same time the fact appears that they dare not do what they wish to do, but that Jesus’ history proceeds according to the saving will of God.”<sup>329</sup>

Yet in the midst of this hostility there are those, presumably also among the Jerusalemites, who begin to believe that Jesus is the Christ. At least, they are finding it

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<sup>326</sup> Whitacre; 188-189.

<sup>327</sup> Luthardt; 225-226.

<sup>328</sup> Whiteacre; 189.

<sup>329</sup> Luthardt; 226.

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harder and harder to believe that the Christ, if it is someone else, will do more and greater miracles than this Jesus has done. We need not assume that this 'faith' was saving, nor that it was not. For many it was adequate, and for many it was probably not. Hoskyns takes a more cynical view than most commentators, "The appeal to the number of miracles of Jesus therefore betrays a misunderstanding of the messiahship of Jesus which is equivalent to unbelief."<sup>330</sup> It is true that few have shown enduring faith on the basis of miracles; most simply want more miracles. It is also true that these same Jerusalemites, in roughly six months time, will praise Jesus with 'Hosanna, Son of David' as He enters Jerusalem ahead of Passover, and will cry out 'Crucify Him!' less than a week later.

The theme of this shorter passage within the overall pericope is that of 'being sought.' The Jews - Jerusalemites and Sanhedrinists as distinct groups united in one purpose - were *seeking* Jesus in order to arrest Him, to do Him harm. Jesus' response to this is, as we have come to expect, both enigmatic and condemning.

*Then Jesus said to them, "I shall be with you a little while longer, and then I go to Him who sent Me. You will seek Me and not find Me, and where I am you cannot come."* (7:33-34)

The 'them' to whom Jesus is speaking is indeterminate and could be the Jerusalemites or the Temple officers, or both, or just everyone gathered around. The latter option is perhaps the strongest when one considers the judgment Jesus pronounces upon Jerusalem as recorded in the Synoptics.

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate.* (Matthew 23:37-38)

*But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her.* (Luke 21:20-21)

This analysis assumes, with most commentators, that Jesus' comment here is one of judgment: *They will seek Him, but will not be able to find Him.* This again is the process of judicial hardening that we have been seeing develop through the Fourth Gospel: the Jews are hardening their hearts toward Jesus, and God is hardening the Jews' hearts. The

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<sup>330</sup> Hoskyns; 319.

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sentiment contained in Jesus' warning is one that is somewhat familiar in the Old Testament: that there is a time when God can be found, and it does not always (or often) coincide with a time convenient for man. This phenomenon is encompassed in the idea of the 'foxhole prayer,' the desperate plea of a man in grave (literally) danger for divine intervention, when the same man had no consideration toward God when times were good and prosperous. The prophets spoke of Israel in the same vein.

*"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord GOD,  
"That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,  
But of hearing the words of the LORD.  
They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east;  
They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD,  
But shall not find it."* (Amos 8:11-12)

*They do not direct their deeds toward turning to their God,  
For the spirit of harlotry is in their midst, and they do not know the LORD.  
The pride of Israel testifies to his face;  
Therefore Israel and Ephraim stumble in their iniquity;  
Judah also stumbles with them. With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the LORD,  
But they will not find Him; He has withdrawn Himself from them.* (Hosea 5:4-6)

Proverbs also speaks of a time when God will turn a deaf ear to the cries of His people, as they had turned a deaf ear to His entreaties in previous times.

*Then they will call on me, but I will not answer;  
They will seek me diligently, but they will not find me.  
Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD,  
They would have none of my counsel and despised my every rebuke.  
Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies.* (Proverbs 1:28-31)

Passage might be multiplied to the same meaning: there is a time when God may be found, and if this time is neglected and spurned, there is also a time when He may be sought, but not found. "At the time of judgment, which must come upon Israel on account of the rejection of Jesus, they will in anxiety of soul seek Jesus – not merely the Messiah – and not be able to find Him... These words are a proclamation of the judgment, full of

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tragedy.”<sup>331</sup> Ryle insightfully comments, “Hell is the truth known too late.”<sup>332</sup> In a positive light, those who do seek the Lord ‘when He may be found,’ will find Him present in times of distress,

*For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found;  
Surely in a flood of great waters they shall not come near him.  
You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble;  
You shall surround me with songs of deliverance.* (Psalm 32:6-7)

*Then the Jews said among themselves, “Where does He intend to go that we shall not find Him? Does He intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What is this thing that He said, ‘You will seek Me and not find Me, and where I am you cannot come?’” (7:35-36)*

Those gathered at the feast in Jerusalem were, sadly, not of the ‘godly’ type spoken of in Psalm 32, and sought Jesus only to bring Him to harm. Yet in spite of the similarity of Jesus’ words, “*You will seek Me and not find Me,*’ to the prophetic warnings, these Jews still did not comprehend what Jesus was saying, but instead wondered among themselves whether He was planning on leaving Judea and Galilee and going among the Diaspora, perhaps even to preach and teach to the pagan Gentiles! This last theory indicates a fair amount of scorn among the Jews in their response to Jesus, as it would have been the greatest shame to any rabbi to ‘*give the children’s bread to the dogs*’ by teaching and preaching to the Gentiles. Yet as with the high priest Caiaphas later in this same gospel, these murmurers against Jesus were uttering prophecy unawares. “Little did the speakers know that, while Jesus was not to go in person among the Greeks, his followers would be numbered in tens of thousands in the Greek lands in a few years’ time.”<sup>333</sup> Luthardt agrees,

In this they must unconsciously declare the future of the gospel proclamation. It proved to be so, just because they would not know anything of him; an involuntary prophecy, like the later one of Caiaphas.<sup>334</sup>

*On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

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<sup>331</sup> Luthardt; 228.

<sup>332</sup> Ryle; 41.

<sup>333</sup> Bruce; 189

<sup>334</sup> Luthardt; 229

This is the climax of the passage, occurring appropriately on the ‘*last day, that great day of the feast.*’ Commentators disagree as to whether this was the seventh day of the feast or the eighth day, the great Sabbath which constituted the true end of the feast. Arguments can be made for either view, and one’s conclusion does not materially impact the meaning of the verses. As it was on the eighth day that the booths were disassembled and people began their journey home, it is perhaps more likely that it was at that time that Jesus stood on some promontory and, again, ‘cried out’ to the crowd. Since the Feast of Tabernacles was commemorative of the wilderness years, the time when God provided water from the rocks through Moses’ intervention, Jesus’ claim that He was the ultimate source of living water to quench any man’s deepest thirst, would connect directly, as He has done before, with Moses. The form of Jesus’ pronouncement would also strike a chord in His hearers’ minds, as it sounds very much like a similar passage in Isaiah.

*Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
And you who have no money, come, buy and eat.  
Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.  
Why do you <sup>spend</sup> money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance.  
Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live;  
And I will make an everlasting covenant with you – The sure mercies of David.*

(Isaiah 55:1-3)

Jesus’ statement is also reminiscent of His conversation with the Samaritan women at Jacob’s well,

*Jesus answered and said to her, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”*

(John 4:13-14)

Commentators debate endlessly as to the proper understanding of the last clause of John 7:38, as it seems to speak of the rivers of everlasting water flowing out of believers. While it is possible to make the subject of this clause to be Jesus – and there can be no doubt that *He* is the source of living waters – the construction is unnatural and forced. The problem is one that need not have arisen, for the comparison with John 4 establishes that,

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while in both cases Jesus is the source of living waters and faith in Jesus is that which constitutes 'drinking' from Him, those living waters are by no means trapped in the individual believer as if he were a well or a dam; they flow outward to others without any confusion of the believer being the source. Morris summarizes, "Again, while it is true that the living water comes from Christ as the ultimate source, yet the believer is mediately a source to others."<sup>335</sup>

John intervenes at this point to explain what it is that Jesus is talking about: the Holy Spirit, who was not yet given since Jesus was not yet glorified. This concept of 'glorification' will take on a greater role in the Fourth Gospel as Jesus approaches the cross, for the evangelist understands that the entire passion event – the Death, the Resurrection, and the Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ – constituted His 'glorification.' Hoskyns writes, "the word *glorify* denotes the death, the resurrection and the return of Jesus to the Father, and in the gospel each stage of this glorification is marked by the gift of the Spirit to one or more of the disciples, the death (19:30), the resurrection (20:22), the return to the Father (14:26, 16:7)."<sup>336</sup> That Jesus should be glorified in what any man would consider to be abject humiliation is, again, that concept of revelation with concealment. It is not what man would look for in a Messiah and will indeed constitute the greatest stumbling block for the Jews: a dying Messiah. But Jesus' entire passion event not only brings ultimate victory over death and the grave, it releases the gift of the Holy Spirit, who was widely considered by the Jews to be the harbinger of the Messianic Age.

The link between the gift of the Holy Spirit – the *river of living water* – given by Messiah Jesus, is attained by one means, and one means only: *faith*. To believe is to drink, and to drink is to receive the Holy Spirit. "There is an inseparable connection between faith in Christ and receiving the Holy Ghost. If any man has faith he has the Spirit. If any man has not the Spirit he has no saving faith in Christ. The effectual work of the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity is never divided."<sup>337</sup>

*Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, "Truly this is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Will the Christ come out of Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the*

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<sup>335</sup> Morris; 423-424.

<sup>336</sup> Hoskyns; 323.

<sup>337</sup> Ryle; 54.

*town of Bethlehem, where David was?" So there was a division among the people because of Him. Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him. (7:40-44)*

We see in this passage the ongoing confusion among the Jews as to the various Old Testament personages who were to, in some part, bring in the messianic era. The 'Prophet' is no doubt the one promised through Moses in Deuteronomy 18,

*And the LORD said to me: 'What they have spoken is good. I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.'* (Deuteronomy 18:17-18)

The similarity of Jesus' proclamation to that of Isaiah 55 – as well as several other Old Testament prophetic passages concerning both water and God's Spirit – connected Him in many minds with this 'Prophet' who was to be like Moses. Still, many did not connect the promised Prophet with the Messiah, considering them to be two different people in God's redemptive plan. Since the Messiah was to have Elijah as a forerunner, it was not a stretch to think that this revived Elijah – himself the greatest of the Old Testament prophets – was both a distinct person from the Messiah and one who would come before. Thus some in the crowd may have concluded that this was the role being played by Jesus of Galilee. Others, however, still considered the frequency and magnitude of the miracles that Jesus had performed and concluded that He must be the Christ. "It is possible (though not certain) that Christians were the first to identify the Davidic Messiah with the Prophet like Moses, precisely because they recognized in Jesus the one who perfectly fulfilled both prophecies."<sup>338</sup>

But the majority of the crowd is still hung up on Jesus' place of birth, thinking as they continue to do that He is originally from Nazareth. There was much more consensus among the Jews that the Messiah was of the Davidic line, and the prophecy in Micah 5 was almost universally interpreted as giving the place of the Messiah's birth (though this view was in contradiction to the earlier view, also extant among Second Temple Jews, that the origin of the Messiah was an unknown),

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<sup>338</sup> Carson; 329

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah,  
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel,  
Whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.* (Micah 5:2)

At this point Jesus could have simply explained that He was, indeed, born in Bethlehem, thus fulfilling perfectly the prophecy of Micah. This information could also have been obtained by the Jews, for they kept scrupulous records of their lineage, tribe, and place of birth. In addition to the meticulous Jewish records, Joseph found himself in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth, because of the Roman census, thus providing even more data confirming Jesus' birthplace for anyone who cared to look. The mystery of Jesus' origin was one of the Jews' own making and was not a little motivated by the Judean prejudice against all things Galilean. But Jesus refuses to help the Jews out in their unbelief, because a faith obtained through rational argument puts the cart before the horse and might not be true faith at all.

There still remained those, probably the majority, who rejected Jesus entirely and thought He would be better off removed from the public eye permanently. This section of the crowd would now include the Temple officers sent by the Sanhedrin to seize Jesus in order, as we will see in just a few verses, to put Him to death. The lesson of this passage is timeless, "People confronted with the revelation of God in Christ are not allowed to remain neutral; they divide before him as before the judgment seat of God."<sup>339</sup>

*Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why have you not brought Him?" The officers answered, "No man ever spoke like this Man!"* (7:45-46)

Several days have passed, it would seem, since the Temple officers were first commissioned to arrest Jesus and this their return to the Sanhedrin. We have no doubt that they heard a great deal more from Jesus than just the short phrases recorded by John. "These are only specimens of what our Lord said, and furnish a keynote to us indicating the general tenor of His teaching."<sup>340</sup> That teaching was powerful and irrefutable, and swayed the officers to the point of rendering them incapable of moving against Jesus. It is worth noting that these Temple police were themselves Levites and their captain was second only to the High Priest in power within the religious structure of Second Temple

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<sup>339</sup> Beasley-Murray; 119.

<sup>340</sup> Ryle; 63.

Jerusalem. In other words, they were not ignorant of Scripture. “The speech of Jesus is not the speech of a *man*. The constables were cowed by his superhuman authority, though they draw no precise conclusion about his person.”<sup>341</sup> One does reasonably wonder if perhaps some of these same men were among the priests who believed and were baptized following Pentecost (*cp.* Acts 6:7).

Several times we read of the authorities being incapable of seizing or arresting Jesus. We need not imagine in each case that those who were attempting to take Him were themselves rendered physically incapable of movement; paralyzed, as it were, by some mysterious force. That may have been the case in some instances – and we know that His self-revelation in the Garden on the night of His betrayal caused the soldiers to fall backward to the ground. But in this case it was the power of His teaching that neutered the powers arrayed against Him. “The servants allege that the power of his word was what made it impossible for them to carry out the command of their chiefs.”<sup>342</sup> This event, and the others like it, further illustrate Jesus’ own teaching concerning His life, that no one had the power to take it from Him; He would voluntarily lay it down.

The power which Jesus’ personality exercised even upon the hostile minds, and which displays thoroughly how Israel never could have seized and slain Jesus if the will of God and of Jesus had not itself permitted it, and which then, moreover, finds its actual confirmation in the story of the arrest, 18:6 – this power is at the same time a condemnation of the enmity. This hostility appears as condemned. If it reaches its desire in the end, that is only a sign that God has given it up entirely to the judgment of unbelief. They will fall into this judgment, because they have hardened themselves in unbelief.<sup>343</sup>

*Then the Pharisees answered them, “Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.”* (7:47-49)

One can envision some frothing at the mouth among the Pharisees in the council room when they heard the report of the Temple officers. They include the ‘rulers’ along with their own number, but it was the Pharisees who were most offended by Jesus’

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<sup>341</sup> Barrett; 273.

<sup>342</sup> Luthardt; 237.

<sup>343</sup> *Idem.*

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

teaching. The rulers were, by and large, of the Sadducean party, the high priestly family, and were hardly at this time sticklers on Bible doctrine or teaching. Their animosity toward Jesus revolved mostly around the threat He posed to their comfortable co-existence with the Roman authorities. These Pharisees respond to the Temple officers with an argument that has absolutely no merit, though this fact has not stopped it from being used throughout time, including in the Church, *“Have any of us believed in Him?”* Carson notes, *“The religious authorities boast that they have not been duped; their very boasting is precisely what has duped them”*<sup>344</sup> This is another illustration of that academic elitism that stifles and strangles true knowledge. Ryle paraphrases and comments,

Can a person be deserving of the least credit, as a teacher of a new religion, if those who are the most learned and highest in position do not believe Him? – this is precisely the common argument of human nature in every age...The very possession of rank and learning is often a positive hindrance to a man’s soul. The great and the learned are often the last and most unwilling to receive Christ’s truth.<sup>345</sup>

The Pharisees continue by pouring contempt upon the people who have followed Jesus, the ‘crowd’ which does not know the Law, calling them ‘accursed.’ *“According to their view, this following of Jesus is only to be explained from ignorance. They look down upon the people with proud contempt.”*<sup>346</sup> In this the Pharisees have gone far beyond that which is written, and in doing so have brought themselves to a place of disobedience to the Law, and of condemnation. For the Law only cursed the man who disobeyed the Law, failing to keep the commandments (*cp.* Deut. 27:26), whereas the Pharisees curse all who fail to abide by their interpretation of the Law, and their recognition (or not) of a valid teacher of the Law, even if that teacher might be Israel’s Messiah. But even the Pharisees were mistaken in thinking that none of their number was favorably inclined toward Jesus; there was still Nicodemus, the one who came to Jesus at night (*cp.* 3:1-2). The bulk of the Pharisees, however, will have no difficulty extending their bitter contempt to one of their own number.

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<sup>344</sup> Carson; 331.

<sup>345</sup> Ryle; 63-64.

<sup>346</sup> Luthardt; 239.

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*Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, "Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?" They answered and said to him, "Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee." (7:50-52)*

Nicodemus ventures into the lion's den in defense of what the Law actually requires of this tribunal – that the accused be heard. The presentation of witnesses is of the essence of the Jewish judicial process, something that was quite radical in the ancient world,

*If there is found among you, within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you, a man or a woman who has been wicked in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing His covenant, who has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, either the sun or moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded, and it is told you, and you hear of it, **then you shall inquire diligently**. And if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination has been committed in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has committed that wicked thing, and shall stone to death that man or woman with stones. Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness. (Deuteronomy 17:2-6)*

*One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established. If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, then both men in the controversy shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. And **the judges shall make careful inquiry**, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you. (Deuteronomy 19:15-19)*

Later, when Jesus is finally brought before the Sanhedrin, false witnesses will be brought forth, witnesses who will be unable to corroborate their testimonies. But diligent inquiry and witnesses is simply what Nicodemus is asking for in accordance with the Law that the Pharisees claim to uphold so scrupulously. Unfortunately Nicodemus is about to learn that justice is the last thing on his compatriots' minds, though he may have suspected as much. "The Pharisees make no attempt to answer the accusation, since the issue is not really the legality of their actions, but the claim of Jesus to be the Christ. They therefore rudely and scornfully silence Nicodemus by stating that only a Galilean, ignorant of the Scriptures, could suppose that even a prophet could emerge from Galilee."<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Hoskyns; 325.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

The Pharisees at this point are irrational in their anger, for the statement that no prophet arises out of Galilee is patently incorrect. Jonah, for one, was from Gath-hepher which is in the region of Galilee just north of Nazareth itself, and quite possibly Nahum, Hosea, and even Elijah were from this territory. Rabbi Eliezer, roughly contemporary with the Apostle John, noted “Thou hast no tribe in Israel from which a prophet has not come forth.”<sup>348</sup> It may be that the Pharisees were referring specifically to *the* Prophet foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18, though there is no indication anywhere in Scripture as to from whence that Prophet should arise. It may be more likely that, in their uncontrolled anger at their own impotence versus Jesus, these men were simply venting their spleen, from which flowed a deep antipathy and prejudice against Galilee. “They were angry men, and men who had been baulked of their prey, so their answer is not a careful one.”<sup>349</sup>

Nicodemus will show up once more in the Fourth Gospel, attending to the dead body of Jesus along with Joseph of Arimathea. In that later reference, as here, John points out that this was the Nicodemus “*who came to Jesus,*” as if this earlier nocturnal visit defines the man. We may see a progression in Nicodemus’ own position relative to Jesus, for though his ‘defense’ of Jesus in verse 51 is hardly a spirited or self-invested one, it is nonetheless offered in the presence of what Nicodemus himself would recognize as ravenous wolves, his fellow Pharisees. Ryle is encouraged by Nicodemus’ intervention, “I think there can be no reasonable doubt that these words show Nicodemus to have become a real, though a slow-growing disciple of Christ, and a true believer.”<sup>350</sup> This is probably borne out by Nicodemus’ later care of Jesus’ body, and we can hope.

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<sup>348</sup> Beasley-Murray; 121, quoting *B. Sukkah* 27b.

<sup>349</sup> Morris; 434.

<sup>350</sup> Ryle; 65.

**Week 10: *Pericope de Adultera***

**Text Reading:** John 7:53 – 8:11

*“This patch of cloth sown onto John’s Gospel  
has the same pattern as the whole,  
even if the colors are somewhat different.”*  
(Rodney Whitacre)

If you are reading a modern commentary on the Gospel of John, you might be surprised that the commentator does not follow the text of your Bible but rather moves immediately from verse 52 of Chapter 7 to verse 12 of Chapter 8. But if you persist, you will find comment on the intervening verses, 7:53- 8:11, located either at the end of the chapter (in the commentary, that is) or as an Appendix at the end of the book. This is an unparalleled phenomenon in both modern textual criticism and modern biblical commentary: to determine that a passage does not belong to the original text, but to comment extensively on it anyhow. But this practical fact illustrates the conundrum of the *Pericope de Adultera* – the Narrative of the Adulterous Woman – that while scholars have almost universally concluded that the story did not come from John’s pen, it is nonetheless an authentic piece of ‘Gospel history.’ This is also why some modern commentators both deny the passages original authenticity on the one hand, while on the other hand comment on the passage in consecutive order following 7:52. Luthardt is a member of the latter group and his reasoning serves as an excellent summary of much of modern evangelical textual criticism upon this passage.

The following paragraph concerning the adulteress is a fragment of a very old tradition, but is not from the hand of John, and is wrongly inserted here...Yet the narrative seems to be a piece of genuine tradition. The spirit of mildness which reveals itself in Jesus’ conduct is too foreign to the later church for any one to have invented such behaviour on the part of Jesus. The whole is so characteristic and original, and so little copied after another narrative, that we may venture to regard it as historical.<sup>351</sup>

Luthardt follows this comment with a verse-by-verse exposition of John 7:53 – 8:11.

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<sup>351</sup> Luthardt; 242-243.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

There is only one modern scholar who attempts a defense of the Johannine authorship of the passage and, unfortunately, this particular scholar may seem disqualified to comment on account of his aberrant views on the 'lordship' of Christ. Zane



**Zane Hodges (1932-2008)**

Hodges, however, was a well-respected scholar in the field of biblical textual criticism, being an advocate of the Majority Text. Hodges published a series entitled "Problem Passages in the Gospel of John" in *Bibliotheca Sacra*; two articles in the series were devoted to the *Pericope de Adultera*, the Story of the Woman Caught in Adultery, in John 8. Hodges arguments and conclusions are in large measure ignored by the vast majority of modern textual critics and commentators on the passage, with the following passage in *An Introduction to the New Testament* being the only reference to Hodges' work found among the nay-sayers: "Despite the best efforts of Zane Hodges to prove that the narrative of the woman caught in adultery was originally part of John's Gospel, the evidence is against him."<sup>352</sup> Unfortunately Messrs. Carson, Moo, and Morris do not then interact with Hodges defense at all.

Before we do so, however, it might be helpful to set forth the indisputable facts of the case: *The pericope of John 7:53 – 8:12 is either original to the Fourth Gospel or it is not, meaning that it has either been removed from the text in certain manuscripts or added to the text in others.* It constitutes one of the longest textual variants in the New Testament (the other being Mark 16:9-20). In spite of the preponderance of scholarly opinion against Johannine authorship of the passage, the narrative is still to be found in almost every English translation, usually bracketed with a disclaimer such as this one from the New American Standard Bible: "John 7:53-8:11 is not found in most of the old mss." The English Standard Version (ESV) notes that even though the passage is bracketed as inauthentic in the Nestle-Aland and United Bible Society Greek New Testament texts, the verses "are present in over 900 mss of John." In other words, the pericope is hardly a rare occurrence among the ancient manuscripts. Its origin and authenticity, therefore, deserve investigation.

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<sup>352</sup> Carson, D. A., Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1992); 172.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Scholarship divides along three broad avenues in this matter: First, there are those who consider the passage to be Johannine; second, those who consider it to be from another, unknown author but nonetheless to be authentic ‘Gospel history’; and third, those who consider the passage not only inauthentic, but undeserving of comment. This latter view is by far the minority, held among the commentators consulted for this study only by Olshausen. Zane Hodges seems to be the sole occupant of the first position, leaving the second to be the majority report among modern evangelical scholars. Representative of this second opinion is this comment by Beasley-Murray,

It is clear that the story was not penned by the Fourth Evangelist (or any of the other three Gospel writers), yet there is no reason to doubt its substantial truth. The saying that it preserves is completely in character with what we know of our Lord, and quite out of character with the stern discipline that came to be established in the developing Church.<sup>353</sup>

The argument against original Johannine authorship rest primarily on textual evidence and secondarily on linguistic issues within the pericope itself. Textual criticism itself is based on the reality that we do not possess the ‘autographs’ – the original documents penned by the biblical authors. Our translations, therefore, are based on the manuscripts available (‘extant’) and textual criticism is the academic approach to determining the ‘best’ manuscript evidence among the variations that exist. The process of ‘criticism’ has been going on from the beginning: as the biblical text has been translated into a multitude of languages, the translators have had to decide between whatever manuscript evidence that they possessed since variations between texts do, unfortunately, exist. Within this effort there are two broad schools of thought, the ‘Majority Text’ and the ‘Critical Text.’ The **Majority Text** considers the manuscript evidence that has the most extant examples to be the most authentic, whereas the **Critical Text** uses those manuscripts deemed oldest and therefore closest to the original.<sup>354</sup>

To summarize, the crux of textual criticism is not *criticizing* the Bible, but trying to determine which of the available manuscripts best represents the original document. This process is not only essential to Bible translation, it was made necessary in the post-

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<sup>353</sup> Beasley-Murray; 143.

<sup>354</sup> There are, to be sure, nuances involved in the technical definitions of these textual apparatus; but the brief outline provided is a good, general rule of thumb as to the different views.

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apostolic era in order for the Church to determine the ‘canon’ – those books of the New Testament that were to be universally received (though they rarely were ‘universally’ received) by all churches. In the second century, Marcion of Sinope severely restricted what he considered to be canonical to those books written by the Apostle Paul. Marcion’s view was widely rejected and he was condemned as a heretic, but his movement provided the impetus for the Church – both Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) – to formulate a ‘canon.’ Zane Hodges makes an interesting note, quoting another scholar, that the Marcionite movement tended to solidify and establish the ‘accepted’ books as well as the ‘accepted’ texts of those books within the two linguistic branches of the Church, Greek and Latin. Hodges quotes the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Anglican scholar George D. Kilpatrick,

We may take it that by the end of the second century A. D. Christian opinion had hardened against deliberate alteration of the text, however harmless the alteration might be. The change of opinion was connected not with the canonical status of the New Testament but with the reaction against the rehandling of the text by the second century heretics. This argument confirms the opinion of H. Vogels...that the vast majority of deliberate changes in the New Testament text were older than A.D. 200.<sup>355</sup>

Hodges makes this point because the *Pericope de Adultera* is undoubtedly an *intentional* emendation or alteration of the text of the Fourth Gospel. In other words, it is not merely a copyist mistake or a subconscious addition of text due to a mental connection with a similar passage. John 7:53 – 8:11 was either (1) *original* to the text of the Fourth Gospel and was *removed*; or (2) was *not original* to the text and was therefore *added*; or (3) was *original* but *removed* and later *added* back again. None of these actions can be considered accidental or incidental. “Whatever may be said about this famous passage, its appearance or nonappearance after John 7:52 is in no way accidental but is in fact a deliberate act of textual emendation.”<sup>356</sup> If, therefore, it is correct to conclude that such intentional alteration of the New Testament text became difficult to impossible by the beginning of the third century, then we can conclude that whatever emendation was made to the story of the adulterous woman, it was made prior to AD 200.

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<sup>355</sup> Hodges, Zane C. “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John Part 8: The Woman Taken in Adultery” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136:544 (Oct 1979); [problem passages in the gospel of john part 8 the woman taken in adultery john 7 53-8 11 the text - by zane c. hodges.pdf \(themileses.com\)](#) Accessed 07June2021.

<sup>356</sup> *Idem.*

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This observation is germane due to the fact that the controversy revolving around the *Pericope de Adultera* divides almost exclusively along the linguistic branches of the early Church, Greek and Latin. The Greek manuscripts tend *not* to contain the narrative; the Latin ones do. There are, of course, exceptions, and interesting there are more exceptions on the Greek side than on the Latin. In other words, there are more Greek manuscripts that *do* contain John 7:53-8:11 than there are Latin manuscripts that *do not*. But Hodges point regarding the probably date of emendation begin prior to the third century is that most of the manuscripts and texts that are utilized in the critical debate date from over a century to many centuries beyond AD 200. Hodges points out that “for two hundred years – between AD 200 and 400 – the data consists of four texts, all Egyptian.”<sup>357</sup>

Textual Criticism as a ‘science’ is not as objective as the critics would have us believe. For one thing, it cannot be determined beyond reasonable doubt whether a text is more accurate (closer to the autograph) if it is found in a greater number of manuscripts or if it is found in the oldest manuscripts. On the one hand, an error can be faithfully copied a multitude of times and, if it happens to circulate in an arid climate zone, be preserved in a majority of discovered manuscripts and texts. On the other hand, a mistake or alteration can be made very early in the transmission history of a text and therefore pass muster as authentic for those critics who value age over frequency. This does not mean that textual criticism should not be done, but it does mean that some statements regarding any particular text – the *Pericope de Adultera* in particular – are inadvisable. For example, C. K. Barrett’s “It is certain that this narrative is not an original part of the gospel”<sup>358</sup> and Leon Morris’ “The textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the Gospel”<sup>359</sup> are both a bit too strong given the actual evidence. For instance, it is often cited that the *Pericope de Adultera* is absent from the Syriac Peshitta version, a Syrian translation of the Bible circulating from about the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. But the same version also excluded II Peter, II & III John, Jude, and Revelation. Textual critics are often very selective in their source material. What appears to have happened with the *Pericope de Adultera* is somewhat of a snowball (or perhaps avalanche) effect: as more and more

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<sup>357</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>358</sup> Barrett; 490.

<sup>359</sup> Morris; 882.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

scholars find against the authenticity of the passage, more and more scholars follow suit. Even Olshausen, known in his day for his independence of thought and scholarship, writes, “most of the modern inquirers are so unanimous in their opinion, that we may regard it as settled.”<sup>360</sup>

This is an example of the notable fact that textual criticism tends to include the evidence that supports a conclusion, and to deal very lightly with evidence that might argue in a contrary direction. Evidence is also presented in a manner that predisposes a conclusion, and not always fairly. For instance, it is pointed out by those who deny the original authenticity of John 7:53-8:11 that is ‘floats’; in other words, it is found in different locations in different texts. It is true that the passage is located otherwise than where we find it in our English Bibles – it is found after 7:36, 7:44, or 21:25 in the Fourth Gospel and even in the Gospel of Luke, after 21:38. However, the fact remains that in the vast majority of texts that contain the passage, it is located immediately after John 7:52. We must consider the fact that the passage is not universally located in the same place, but we must also give due weight to the variations. This is not always done, as is evidenced by Morris’ presentation: “It is not attested in the oldest manuscripts, and when it does make its appearance it is sometimes found in other positions, either after v. 36, or after v. 44, or at the end of this Gospel, or after Luke 21:38.”<sup>361</sup> Carson adds, “The diversity of placement confirms the inauthenticity of the verses.”<sup>362</sup> These two examples are highly representative of the prejudicial (as in, ‘pre-judged’) manner the data is often presented, which is out of proportion to the textual data itself. Hodges estimates the number of Greek manuscripts in which the *Pericope de Adultera* is located after John 7:52 to be in the range of 450, whereas those texts in which it is located elsewhere are “miniscule in the extreme, hardly reaching much beyond a couple dozen.”<sup>363</sup>

### **Added or Removed:**

Still, there is no denying that the textual evidence presents one of the greatest ‘variant’ issues of the New Testament. There are many texts and manuscripts on both

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<sup>360</sup> Olshausen; 518.

<sup>361</sup> Morris; 882.

<sup>362</sup> Carson; 333.

<sup>363</sup> Hodges; *op. cit.* It may be argued that ‘a couple dozen’ hardly constitutes ‘miniscule in the extreme.’ Both sides are guilty of their fair share of hyperbole.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

sides of the debate: texts that *include* the pericope and texts that *exclude* it. Therefore we must apply one of the principle questions used in textual criticism, or rather a twofold question. If the text was not original, can we surmise why it might have been added? Or if the text was original, can we surmise why it was removed? It is generally considered that the simpler version of a passage is more likely to be original than a more complex rendering, though this must be admitted to be an assumption that cannot be held dogmatically. But when a passage is either wholesale included or excluded, the 'simplicity' test does not apply; we must attempt to determine whether it makes more sense that the passage would be added, or that it would be removed.

For the latter option, Augustine, who accepted the passage as Johannine, theorized that its removal was made due to a mistaken interpretation that Jesus was going light on the sin of adultery and that the passage might encourage wives to be unfaithful. It is a sad testimony to the degeneracy of the Roman Catholic Church that easy forgiveness of adultery did, in fact, develop alongside the profligacy of the clergy due to the unbiblical strictures of celibacy. But this was long after Augustine and certainly had no bearing on any alterations of the text of the Fourth Gospel prior to AD 200. Indeed, Augustine's rationale seems stretched; Jesus does not condone adultery in this passage. Though He allows the woman to go free, it is not with words of acquiescence but rather, "*Neither do I condemn you...*" Hardly a lenient attitude toward adultery.

Thus it falls to the other option: Why was the passage *added*? As it turns out, the arguments for why the passage might have been added can also be adduced for its being original and why it is most frequently located immediately after John 7:52. This is because the pericope fits remarkably well within the context of this section of the Fourth Gospel. One overarching theme of the section is a 'contest' or comparison between Moses and Jesus. Another is the theme of "*judging with righteous judgment*". And there is the ongoing enmity and animosity from the Jewish religious authorities toward Jesus, which would be logically accounted for in a 'test' such as this narrative presents. Nicodemus has just issued a challenge to the Sanhedrin concerning their treatment of Jesus; it is not unreasonable that members of the assembly should thereafter attempt to snare Jesus in a test regarding the Mosaic Law, thus providing the Sanhedrin with the evidence it requires

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to condemn Him. Indeed, the passage actually fits quite well in the location in which it is predominantly found; so well, in fact, that it might be original!

This brings us to the second argument against inclusion of the *Pericope de Adultera* in the canonical Gospel of John – apparent non-Johannine construction and wording. For instance, it is argued that John would not have referred to the ‘scribes and Pharisees,’ as he does not use that combination elsewhere in the Gospel. It is true that John’s most common reference to the religious leaders thus far has been ‘the Jews,’ and it is undeniable that he does not use the phrase ‘scribes and Pharisees’ in any other passage than this disputed one. However, it is one of the prejudicial tenets of textual criticism that an author is not allowed to use a word only once. But what if the context of the passage lends itself to this phrasing – and it was the scribes and the Pharisees that attempted to trap Jesus in this event. The point at issue was both the interpretation and application of a Mosaic statute – that concerning a woman caught in adultery. It should be remembered that the scribes were not merely copyists, as their title – *grammateis* – might indicate; they were lawyers, students and interpreters of the Mosaic Law. Many of the scribes were also Pharisees, but there is no evidence that a majority were; their role within the religious system of Second Temple Israel was the development and promulgation of Mosaic case law. Therefore issues that impinged upon, or flowed from, the Mosaic Law were the proper domain of the scribes. So, even if it is unusual that John should introduce the scribes here for the first (and only) time, it fits exactly with the context and should not be deemed as disqualifying.

Another point against the authenticity of the pericope is the mention of the Mount of Olives, again a *hapax legomena* in the Fourth Gospel, though mentioned much more frequently in the Synoptic Gospels. But this demerit again only pertains if it is accepted that the use of a word once and only once ‘proves’ that it was not written by the original author. This is an untenable principle for valid textual criticism, being the basic foundation of Julius Wellhausen’s infamous Documentary Hypothesis, in which he divided up the Pentateuch into multiple authors and dates of composition based largely on



**Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918)**

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whether an 'author' used 'Yahweh' or 'Elohim' for the name of God, among other linguistic criteria. The acceptance or rejection of John 7:53-8:11 should not be made on the basis of words used only in this pericope, especially if there are other words – phrases, even – that are uniquely Johannine. And this there are.

Two such phrases are located in the *Pericope de Adultera* which are not found in the Synoptic Gospels in the same formulation. The first, in 8:5, is “*Moses in the Law*” – found also in John 1:45. This is uniquely a Johannine phrase, as is another one found in 8:6, “*this they said tempting Him,*” found also in John 6:6 in exactly the same word order and nowhere in the Synoptics. These two phrases do not, of course, prove that the pericope was original to the Fourth Gospel, but they ought to be included in the debate as to whether the pericope is Johannine or not.

The argument is further made that the passage interrupts the flow of the narrative between John 7:52 and 8:12. Given how some biblical writers (think: Paul) frequently use ellipses and anacoluthai – sentence structures that are grammatically incomplete – and often interrupt the logical progression of a passage with a parenthesis or doxological expostulation, judgment should be reserved for any author 'convicted' of doing these things. But that also assumes that the story of the woman caught in adultery *does* interrupt the flow. Furthermore, alleged inconsistency of logical flow is one of the basic arguments against the unity of authorship of the Prophecy of Isaiah. But before investigating the claim as it pertains to John 7:53 – 8:11, it might be interesting to hear the conclusion of Edwyn Hoskyns, who believes the passage to be inauthentic and relegates his own commentary on the pericope to an appendix in the back of his commentary. Hoskyns writes, “The story can therefore remain where it is without breaking the theological sequence of thought by its intrusion.”<sup>364</sup> One might wonder why Hoskyns himself did not leave the passage where it was, but instead relegated it to the back of his book!

Is the passage misfit? Consider the reading if the *Pericope de Adultera* is removed.

*Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, “Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?” They answered and said to him, “Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.” (7:50-52) ...Then Jesus*

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<sup>364</sup> Hoskyns; 571.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." (8:12)*

There is not only no logical or theological connection between the closing verses of Chapter 7 and John 8:12, the entire scene shifts from the privacy of a Sanhedrin meeting to the public teaching and declarations of Jesus. The disputed passage actually smooths the transition between what was probably a late-night meeting of the Sanhedrin and the events of the next day, most likely the first day after the close of the Feast of Tabernacles. Even the statement of 7:53, "*and everyone went to his own house,*" has greater significance considering that, during the eight days of the Feast, everyone lived in temporary shelters or 'booths.'

The *Pericope de Adultera* has had a tough go of it through the ages, of that there is no doubt or argument. Modern scholarship has aligned almost uniformly against the Johannine authorship of the passage and, as Whitacre comments, "Those who believe that authorship is a primary criterion for canonicity will suspect or even reject this passage."<sup>365</sup>

The problem is that *almost none* of the modern scholars who reject the originality or Johannine authorship of the passage also reject its canonicity.



**Craig Blomberg (b. 1955)**

"Most of Christendom, however, has received the story as authoritative, and modern scholarship, although concluding firmly that it was not a part of John's Gospel originally, has generally recognized this this story describes an event from the life of Christ. Furthermore, it is well written and as theologically profound as anything else in the Gospels."<sup>366</sup> Craig Blomberg, in his *The Historical*

*Reliability of John's Gospel*, writes, "Contemporary textual critics almost unanimously agree that this famous pericope does not form part of what John originally wrote...Many scholars nevertheless suggest that it may reflect a genuine episode from Jesus' life, preserved in oral tradition, and later added to the text by Christian scribes."<sup>367</sup> Even so notable a Reformed scholar as John Calvin writes of the pericope that "it has always been

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<sup>365</sup> Whitacre; 204.

<sup>366</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>367</sup> Blomberg, Craig *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 2001); 140.

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received by the Latin Churches and is found in many Greek manuscripts, and contains nothing unworthy of an apostolic spirit; so there is no reason why we should refuse to make use of it.”<sup>368</sup>

Examples could be multiplied here from commentator after commentator who, while rejecting the authenticity of the passage, go on to defend its canonicity and perennial benefit to the Church, always followed by a verse-by-verse exposition of the pericope itself. This is disingenuous and may sow seeds of doubt in the minds of believers who, coming to John 7:53-8:11, do not know what to think or do with the passage. If the passage is not authentic, then why exegete it? (even if the exegesis is done in an appendix at the back of the commentary). If it is canonical, then why does it matter who wrote it? There are many other passages in Scripture that either were not written by the original author (for instance, the narrative of Moses’ death most certainly was not written by Moses) or are of unknown authorship entirely (for instance, the Epistle to the Hebrews, unless one holds incorrectly 🙄 that Paul wrote it).

What is the conclusion of the matter? First, it is to question the merit of the basic premise that authorship determines authenticity or canonicity. This is an untenable position and therefore whether John was the original author of the pericope or not, its inclusion in so many manuscripts, and the continued loyalty that it generates even among nay-sayers, argues strongly for its canonicity. Second, the primary grounds of suspicion rest upon the pericopes exclusion from the majority of early Greek manuscripts, although the point has been made that it is *included* in many early Greek manuscripts as well. This negative is itself suspect, as it is a fairly well-established principle (at least among Western theologians) that the Greek branch of the Church was looser in its treatment of Scripture, and more prone to allegorizing, than the Western. Most of the suspect manuscripts have their provenance in Egypt, and it has never been a good idea to uncritically take to heart anything that came out of the early Christian schools in Egypt. Third, the internal argument from the passage in its context between John 7:52 and 8:12 is inconclusive and may actually lean more in favor of the authenticity of the pericope than against it. Finally, there is the never-discussed possibility that the author himself added the pericope in a

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<sup>368</sup> Calvin, *John Commentary on the New Testament: Volume 4* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1993); 206.

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later revision of his Gospel. Such things do happen, and if John had been either copying the Gospel or supervising the writing of copies for distribution, he may have had a further remembrance of an event that was quite pertinent to the overall theme of this section of his Gospel. This would explain why the passage is in some ancient manuscripts and not in others. Sadly, we are somewhat at a loss as to why it is located differently in a few manuscripts that do contain it. But all-in-all, it is reasonable to conclude that the passage is both authentic and canonical, and that it belongs just where we find it at the end of John Chapter 7.

*And everyone went to his own house. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.* (7:53-8:1)

We all know that the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are not original. Most are reasonable, some are questionable, and a few are just wrong. Even if one assumes that the overall passage is inauthentic, why would someone break a chapter between two clauses that are obviously contrasting: *everyone when to his own home* and *Jesus went to the Mount of Olives*? The first phrase, in 7:53, is indeed unusual and that fact is one of the primary internal ‘evidences’ against the authenticity of the passage. But this argument is a two-edged sword, as it can also be argued that anyone both bold and skilled enough to insert a large section of text in the midst of a well-circulated book such as the Fourth Gospel, and to do so in such a manner as to convince a large segment of the reading audience of the validity of the insertion, would also be skilled enough to smooth the transition between the authentic and the inauthentic.

But, in fact, there is nothing odd about what we read in verse 53, for the ‘great day’ of the feast – the eighth day – was coming to a close and it would be natural to report that everyone when home. “If, as it seems likely, this last ‘great day’ was after all the eighth day referred to in Leviticus 23:39, there is an almost unique appropriateness to the mention of each person going to his ‘house.’ For on the previous seven days observant Jewish worshipers would have followed Old Testament prescription and would have lived in ‘booths.’”<sup>369</sup> That Jesus, on the contrary, went to the Mount of Olives merely records the well-attested fact that “*the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*”<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Hodges; 9.1.

<sup>370</sup> Matthew 8:20

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*Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?"* (8:2-5)

That this is a trap is obvious at first glance, for such adjudication of a crime against the Mosaic Law never fell within the jurisdiction of a rabbi; it was to the Sanhedrin that this woman should have been taken. There is a glaring hole in the situation as it is presented by the scribes and Pharisees: if the woman was caught *in flagrante delicto* – in the very act of adultery – then where is her partner, the man? This omission is often overlooked by modern commentators, whereas a great deal of ink is spilled as to whether the woman was herself married, since the specific provision for stoning in Deuteronomy 22 indicates that the woman either be married or betrothed. But this is casuistry; the principal behind the law is that *"you shall put away the evil from among you"* and one particularly heinous crime was adultery (which, by the way, can only involve a married person or persons, otherwise it is called fornication).

*If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then both of them shall die – the man that lay with the woman, and the woman; so you shall put away the evil from Israel. If a young woman who is a virgin is betrothed to a husband, and a man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry out in the city, and the man because he humbled his neighbor's wife; so you shall put away the evil from among you.*

(Deuteronomy 22:22-24)

What is clear from this passage is that *both* the man and the woman were to be put to death. The absence of the male offender in this scene before us is quite significant. Some commentators believe that the posse allowed the man to escape; it seems more reasonable that the entire event was a set-up and that the offending man was a party to the conspiracy, and may have been in the midst (though his presence there would create the possibility of the woman identifying him as her accomplice). In any event, the 'trial' is not only being convened in an unlawful setting – at the teaching chair of a rabbi – it is lacking in a fundamental component of justice, that *both* offenders were guilty and to be punished. But, of course, justice is the farthest thing from the minds of these scribes and Pharisees. It

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is as Jesus has recently said, *“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”*<sup>371</sup> Indeed, the whole pericope anticipates Jesus’ further words in Chapter 8,

*You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. And yet if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent Me.* (8:15-16)

Further evidence that this was a trap – which we read, of course, in verse 6 – is the nature of the challenge. There are two ready objections to this case being brought before Jesus in addition to the fact that it was not His jurisdiction to begin with. The first is that the death penalty had been taken from the Jewish nation by the Romans, as the Sanhedrin itself acknowledges later to Pontius Pilate, *“We are not permitted to put anyone to death.”*<sup>372</sup> The second legal fact is that the penalty of stoning for adultery was apparently very rarely carried out in Israel (along with many other Mosaic injunctions that were all but ignored in practice). Whitacre comments, *“There is no evidence that this law was carried out with any regularity, so they are raising a question in the name of loyalty to Moses, using a part of Moses’ teaching that they themselves most likely have not kept.”*<sup>373</sup> This is, of course, the hypocrisy that characterizes the entire Jewish leadership in the Gospels. But it also was something well known among the ‘Jerusalemites,’ who would probably speedily conclude that the scribes and Pharisees were attempting to get Jesus in trouble with the law – either the Law of Moses, or the Roman law that governed Judea.

*This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear.* (8:6)

How exactly this circumstance would trap Jesus is not detailed in the text. It may be that His well-known affinity for *tax-gatherers and sinners*, including harlots, provided an opening – in their minds, at least – to reduce Jesus’ popularity with the multitude. Ryle surmises that if Jesus had ‘sided’ with the Mosaic Law and demanded the woman’s death, the scribes and Pharisees “would have published everywhere our Lord’s inconsistency in offering salvation to publicans and harlots, and yet condemning to death an adulteress for

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<sup>371</sup> John 7:24

<sup>372</sup> John 18:31

<sup>373</sup> Whitacre; 206.

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one transgression.”<sup>374</sup> Hoskyns adds, “Their purpose in bringing the woman before Jesus is not to secure His moral guidance, but to place Him in a public dilemma.”<sup>375</sup> On the flip side, if Jesus acquitted the woman He would be going against Moses, and therefore perhaps the scribes and Pharisees “hoped that by setting himself against Moses, he would forfeit public esteem and perhaps render himself liable to prosecution before the Sanhedrin.”<sup>376</sup> Even though they castigated him the night before, it may well be that these scribes and Pharisees were seeking to provide the evidence demanded by their compatriot, Nicodemus. Hoskyns prefers this scenario, “It would be more natural to suppose that the scribes and Pharisees, knowing the mercy of Jesus towards sinners, desire to set this mercy in direct opposition to the Law of God, in order that they may accuse Him as a transgressor of the Law.”<sup>377</sup>

It is also possible that they were trying to get Jesus in trouble with the Romans, as they were the only authorities who could execute this Galilean rabbi (and, by the way, the adulterous woman as well, which it was highly unlikely the Romans would do). Bruce comments, “If he gave an independent ruling on the point of issue, and, especially, if he said that the death penalty should be carried out, he could be accused of usurping the governor’s jurisdiction, or of usurping jurisdiction which the Roman administration had expressly reserved to the Sanhedrin.”<sup>378</sup>

The way the scribes and Pharisees see it, they have Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. “If he upholds the Law, he contradicts his way of life and his preaching; if he maintains his outlook and preaching regarding sinners and denies Moses, he shows himself a lawless person and perverter of the people who must be brought to justice.”<sup>379</sup> Ryle puts in their minds, “Let us put before Him a woman caught in adultery; let us ask what is ordered in the law concerning her; if He shall bid stone her, He will not have the repute of gentleness; if He gives sentence to let her go, He will not keep righteousness.”<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Ryle; 78.

<sup>375</sup> Hoskyns; 568.

<sup>376</sup> Bruce; 415.

<sup>377</sup> Hoskyns; 569.

<sup>378</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>379</sup> Beasley-Murray; 146.

<sup>380</sup> Ryle; 79.

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In any event, their ham-fisted attempt to trap Jesus are met with His indifference, *“But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground.”* This action by Jesus is, as often the case, quite enigmatic and inexplicable. Calvin is perhaps safest in concluding that it was an action of sheer indifference on the part of our Lord. *“Christ intended, by doing nothing, to show that they were not worth listening to.”*<sup>381</sup> Ryle concurs, *“His first silence and significant refusal to attend, were a plain proof to all around that He did not wish to interfere with the office of the magistrate, and had not come to be a judge of offenses against the law.”*<sup>382</sup> Jesus’ actions have raised the perennial (and unanswerable) question: ‘What did He write?’ While there are many theories and much conjecture, the text is absolutely silent on the matter, except perhaps in the fact that Jesus’ actions might well have drawn the attention of the scribes and Pharisees – and any other bystanders who knew their Scriptures – to Jeremiah 17:13. The allusion of this verse to *‘fountains of living water’* is almost too close to be coincidental.

*Those who depart from Me shall be written in the earth (lit. dust)*

*Because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters. (Jeremiah 17:13)*

***So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. (8:7-8)***

These men were persistent, for they had an ulterior motive, the destruction of Jesus. But the Lawgiver Himself certainly knows the Law, and the law concerning stoning required that the witnesses be the first to cast the stone.

*The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you. (Deuteronomy 17:7)*

It is widely accepted that Jesus’ comment regarding *being without sin* refers to sin in relationship to this particular case and not with sin in general, for that would mean that no sin could be punished in accordance with the Law. Also, the response of the scribes and Pharisees indicates that this is how they, too, understood Jesus’ response – recognizing that He had caught them in their own trap. For in order to stone the woman, one or more

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<sup>381</sup> Calvin; 207.

<sup>382</sup> Ryle; 80.

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of the men would have to admit to being there when the sin was committed, which was tantamount to admitting that the whole thing was a setup. It is even possible that one of the men there was the woman's partner, though as mentioned earlier this might have complicated the Jews' conspiracy. Ryle considers the reference to sin to be that against the seventh commandment. In other words, he views Jesus as basically accusing each and every man of being an adulterer. This seems a bit stretched. It seems more natural to limit Jesus' mention of *'he who is without sin'* to be in reference to the crime before Him. In this way the scribes and Pharisees set the trap, but it is Jesus who spring it, on them.

*Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. (8:9)*

The scribes and Pharisees were not yet beyond the reach of conscience, and Jesus had once again turned the tables on them, forcing them to admit to themselves that each one of them was unfit before God to cast the first stone at the woman. Perhaps this was because the entire episode was of their connivance; perhaps it was because the knowingly and willingly allowed the woman's partner to go free. Whatever went through their minds, it was certain that not one of them stood self-acquitted; they were each guilty of sin in this matter and therefore disqualified from casting a stone at the woman. "It has often been suggested that the eldest accusers were the first to leave because they recognized their own sinfulness more readily. However, leaving in this order may simply reflect the custom of deferring to the elders. In any case, their withdrawal was in fact a confession of sin."<sup>383</sup> The woman is left alone with Jesus.

*When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (8:10-11)*

The conclusion of the event is undoubtedly much better than the woman had any reason to hope or expect when she was first dragged before Jesus. Her accusers had gone away and she was left with this remarkable rabbi from Galilee; what will He do? It might have seemed to her that His response to her accusers was not all that favorable to her case; "You who are without sin cast the first stone" is hardly an exoneration. There was no doubt in

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<sup>383</sup> Whitacre; 208.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Jesus' mind, it seems, that the woman was guilty as charged. But the whole process was unjust and therefore unrighteous, and Jesus was not about to be pulled into unrighteous judgment by the scribes and Pharisees. Still, one can well imagine the anxiety that must have been in the woman's mind and heart when Jesus stood again and faced her.

Jesus' judgment is not based on the fact that the woman's accusers failed to follow through with her condemnation. An underlying theme of this section in John's Gospel is the fact that Jesus judges with righteous judgment; that is why He refused to fall into their trap and to condemn the woman in their kangaroo court. But it is important to note that "Jesus grants pardon, not acquittal, since the call to leave off sinning shows he knew she was indeed guilty of the adultery."<sup>384</sup> Jesus' response to her is reminiscent of His words to the paralytic healed at the Pool of Bethesda, "*Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you.*"<sup>385</sup> As with the paralytic, we are left uncertain of the woman's spiritual condition; we frankly do not know if she was saved or not through this encounter with Jesus. Perhaps we have an indirect and positive answer: it may be that the story became known to the disciples through the woman's own testimony of Jesus' mercy.

The narrative itself fits well within the overall theme of this section of the Fourth Gospel, which compares Jesus to Moses, and follows on the earlier (Chapter 1) theme of law versus grace. Jesus did not condone the woman's sin, but neither did He come into the world to judge but rather that by Him the world might be saved. Yet Jesus did not leave the woman in her sin with impunity; to receive forgiveness – which we hope she did – means to turn from sin, as Jesus' admonition to her clearly shows. "How any one, in the face of this text, can say that our Lord palliates and condones the woman's sin it is rather hard to understand."<sup>386</sup> Hoskyns concludes, "Theologically the inclusion of the story in the Johannine narrative of the controversy of Jesus with the Jews is wholly relevant...The story can therefore remain where it is without breaking the theological sequence of thought by its intrusion."<sup>387</sup> If an intrusion it is.

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<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*; 209.

<sup>385</sup> John 5:14

<sup>386</sup> Ryle; 82.

<sup>387</sup> Hoskyns; 571.

**Week 11: I Am the Light of the World**

**Text Reading:** John 8:12 - 30

*“But light establishes its claim.  
It does so, not by arguments, but by shining.  
Light must always be accepted for itself,  
and that notwithstanding the objections of the blind.”  
(Leon Morris)*

In one sense Jesus is walking a very fine line between life and death, and in another, truer, sense, His life is secure *“until His hour has come.”* On the face of it, the religious leaders’ hostility toward Jesus is truly growing murderous, as we will see at the end of John 8. The evangelist is continuing his narrative of the opposition and animosity of ‘the Jews’ toward Israel’s Messiah; their steadfast unwillingness to recognize Jesus as such is becoming hysterical to the point of violence. Set against this we find Jesus continuing His intransigence toward the Jews, His steadfast refusal to make their life easier by explaining Himself in terms they could accept. This part of the overall narrative – John 8:12-59 – is structured in a manner to highlight the growing enmity of the Jews toward Jesus, and the judicial hardening that is taking place upon these same Jews. This structure is set forth in the repetitive use of a common phrase: three times by Jesus and then, at the end, once by the Jews. The phrase is *“therefore again Jesus said to them”* or a close variation on the same. Each usage of the phrase marks the beginning of a significant statement or action by the one(s) to whom the phrase refers; again, three times (8:12, 21, and 31) referring to Jesus and once (8:57) to the Jews.

*Again therefore Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the Light of the world...’* (8:12)

*He said therefore again to them, ‘I go away, and you shall seek Me, and shall die in your sin...’* (8:21)

*Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him...* (8:31)

*The Jews therefore said to Him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?’* (8:57)

Each of these statements is in a couplet with another statement that indicates the position of the Jews – usually a position of settled hostility with the exception of verse 30.

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Thus in verse 13 we hear the Pharisees, completely ignoring the content of what Jesus had just said, arguing that His statement is false because He is bearing witness of Himself; in verse 20 we read that, in spite of the growing hostility of the Jews toward Jesus, *“no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come”*; and in verse 59 we come to the climax of hostility, *“Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him...”* Only in verse 30 is there a positive development, though it remains to be seen how significant and sincere it will be, *“As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him.”* Thus Luthardt summarizes, *“At ver. 20, we see the hostility still held in check. At ver. 30, the mood has decided more in his favour, but in that very act has been divided. At ver. 59, the hostility breaks out openly in a tumultuous attempt at murder.”*<sup>388</sup>

In this way the author is picking up the tempo of conflict between the Jews and Jesus. Jesus’ statements are shorter and the Jews’ interruptions more frequent and more strident. As we have noted earlier, Jesus is driving a wedge between the hardening unbelief of the Jews and any chance of salvation. In doing so, He is bringing to fulfillment the words with which this Gospel opened, *“And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it...He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.”*<sup>389</sup> The Jews, by their inveterate rejection and hatred of Jesus, are both hardening their hearts and being hardened through Jesus’ continued teaching and self-attestation. *“It lies in the nature of the thing, that through the antagonism the words of Jesus received more and more the form of sharp, decisive, and divisive self-witness.”*<sup>390</sup> The inexorable flow of John’s narrative is toward *judgment*, though it is, in a sense, a passive judgment made inevitable by the Jews’ continued unbelief. It is as we read in Chapter 3, *“And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil.”*<sup>391</sup> Bruce comments, *“The sons of light come to the light and follow the light; those who will not do this must remain in the darkness, because there is not other light than the light of the world.”*<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Luthardt; 253.

<sup>389</sup> John 1:5, 11

<sup>390</sup> Luthardt; 253.

<sup>391</sup> John 3:19

<sup>392</sup> Bruce; 188.

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Thus we find the arguments of the Jews becoming more and more pedantic, even scornful toward Jesus; unreasoning contention barely masking seething hatred. They seem fixated on His 'identity,' seeking to establish it in terms 'of the flesh,' terms that they could easily understand (and theoretically, easily refute). We read such deep intellectual ripostes as "Where is Your Father?" and "Who are You?" and "Are you yet fifty years old and have you seen Abraham?" From a debating perspective, the Jews are not on their best form here. Perhaps they are beginning to sense that Jesus' self-attestation, if it is indeed true, places in front of them a decision that they cannot avoid: either to reject the Promised One or to humble themselves and receive Him through faith. "This testimony necessarily places me at a point of decision, of crisis, which I cannot evade. I must either accept this testimony or else reject it because it is not corroborated by any witness from the world of human experience...If I seek to evade total responsibility for that decision by looking for validation from the accumulated experience of the world, I am in fact rejecting the truth."<sup>393</sup> This is exactly what we are watching the Jews do.

On the face of it, however, their objections seem to stand the test of both the Mosaic Law and normal human processes of validation. Even Jesus admitted earlier that a matter must be established by at least two witnesses (*cp.* John 5:31). Here in John 8, however, Jesus seems to reject that earlier statement concerning the necessity of two witnesses (though He does not reject it completely, as we will see). In the comparison between the two passages – John 5 and John 8 – we see the progression of Jesus' self-witness, not that He Himself was progressing in self-awareness, but rather that He progresses in His presentation of this self-awareness to others, especially to the Jews. In Chapter 5 Jesus speaks of the various 'witnesses' that validate His self-attestation, though He Himself rejects all such witnesses except for that of the Father – so there is really no conflict with the current chapter at all.

Rather it is the case that here in Chapter 8 Jesus basically presents the irrefutable argument that *no human witness* can attest to God or to the One whom the Father has sent. Indeed, the One who has been sent by the Father is Himself the *only* witness to the Father, and can Himself only be witnessed *by* the Father. Jesus has already taught this principle,

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<sup>393</sup> Newbigin; 103.

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*“Not that any man has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father.”<sup>394</sup>*

The Jews nonetheless continue to demand corroborating evidence to Jesus’ self-witness, but none can be given, in the very nature of the case. Consider even the prophecy concerning *the Prophet* who was to come, where is the corroborating evidence of His arrival?

*I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.*

(Deuteronomy 18:18-19)

One consistent theme in the Fourth Gospel is that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the One in whom the knowledge of the Father may be attained. As the One sent by the Father to do His will, Jesus cannot be validated or vindicated by any other voice from the world to which He has been sent. As Newbigin points out, Jesus speaks nothing but the truth, and the two-witness principle is founded on the untruthfulness of fallen men in a fallen world. “The rule that at least two witness are needed is in fact a sign of the real character of the world – that it is a world which is not ruled by the truth. If everyone spoke only the truth no second witness would be needed. And if he who is himself the truth speaks to this world, the possibility that he should need, or would accept, corroborative witness does not arise.”<sup>395</sup> Later Newbigin asks rhetorically, “What witness can God call to validate his own revelation of himself?”<sup>396</sup> The Jews – and anyone else who demands a human reason based ‘proof’ of Jesus as the true and final revelation of God – are making a category error. And this error must always lead to condemning judgment.

If Jesus is simply a man making assertions about himself and therefore seeking his own glory, his witness must be rejected in the absence of corroboration. But if Jesus is in truth the one sent by the Father, the one in whom is life and light, and who seeks only the glory of his Father, then the world cannot apply the tests to which it is accustomed. It cannot ask for corroborative testimony. It must either come to the light or turn away into darkness. This is the judgment.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> John 6:46

<sup>395</sup> Newbigin; 103.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*; 104.

<sup>397</sup> *Idem.*

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This is one of the most profound messages of the Fourth Gospel, that Jesus is Himself the sole witness of the Father, and therefore there can be no other witness to Jesus but the Father Himself. “He himself is the presupposition for the knowledge of his Father...Jesus can only answer, that he can only show him in his own self-presentation. He can therefore name no other way by which they can come to a knowledge of the testimony of the Father, than by understanding him himself.”<sup>398</sup> Morris adds, “If Jesus really stands in the relationship to God in which He says He does, then no mere man is in a position to bear witness. No human witness can authenticate a divine relationship.”<sup>399</sup> Newbigin continues, “God is to be known in his revelation of himself. To know the revelation is to know the one who is revealed, and there is no other way of knowing.”<sup>400</sup> Morris concludes, “It is a key doctrine of this Gospel that it is in the Son and in the Son alone that the Father is revealed.”<sup>401</sup> This is the meaning behind Jesus’ short dialogue with His disciples in John 14, and particularly His answer to Philip,

*Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him. Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”* (John 14:6-9)

Perhaps it is for the purpose of driving this point home – that there can be no witness to God but God alone – that the frequency of the ‘I Am’ statements increases as we continue through John 8. There are the famous *ego eimi* phrases that Jesus uses – *I Myself Am* – sometimes with a predicate, as in, “*I am the Light of the world*” and sometimes without a predicate, as in “*Before Abraham was, I Am.*” This expression is the equivalent in the Greek Old Testament to the Name of God, YHWH – “*I Am that I Am*” – and while it is not necessarily a direct claim to deity on the part of Jesus every place where it is used, it is always, as Beasley-Murray puts it, “a revelatory declaration.”<sup>402</sup> In the many instances where the *ego eimi* is coupled with a predicate, we read of the path to salvation which lies solely through Jesus. Where the short phrase stands alone, we can only read the divine

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<sup>398</sup> Luthardt; 262-263.

<sup>399</sup> Morris; 443.

<sup>400</sup> Newbigin; 105.

<sup>401</sup> Morris; 443.

<sup>402</sup> Beasley-Murray; 127.

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nature of Jesus Himself. His self-witness is unmistakable, meaning the decision one is brought to by the revelation of the Father in the Son Jesus Christ, is truly a matter of salvation or condemnation, of light or darkness, of life or death.

*Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."* (8:12)

There is a concerted effort among commentators to try to link the pericope beginning in verse 12 with something that went before. Leaving out the *Pericope de Adultera*, as most modern scholars do, verse 12 follows quite abruptly on the end of the narrative in the Sanhedrin. Carson thus takes us back even farther by creating a parenthetical statement for the Sanhedrin narrative, linking 8:12 with 7:37-39. This works well, but is unnecessary. Indeed, the repeated phrase *again therefore Jesus spoke...* seems to indicate a break from the earlier passage and not a continuation. If we accept the narrative of the woman caught in adultery, we find Jesus back in the Temple after the feast, just as we find Him in the current pericope (*cp.* 8:20). But beyond that, we need not strain ourselves looking for historical connectivity in the author; John's purpose here is to show the increasing hostility of the Jews toward Jesus, a hostility that will lead to Jesus' crucifixion. "The evangelist, not being a writer of history in the ordinary sense, is not concerned so much about the time, but much more about the relation of Jesus and the Jews, as it shaped itself at the feast."<sup>403</sup> The frequent references in Chapters 7 & 8 to Jesus' hour not having come seems to confirm this analysis of the flow of the narrative.

Jesus' exclamation, "*I am the Light of the world,*" may have been a reference to the lighting of the great candelabra on the evening of the first day of the feast. This was done in the Court of Women, which is also where the Treasury was to be found. The feast being over, it may be that Jesus is now declaring Himself to be all that the candelabra was to signify. Many commentators interpret the passage in this manner. However, the lighting of the candelabra was not a biblical command; it had developed over time as a tradition accompanied with a great deal of festivity and dancing. Commentators are divided as to whether the candelabra was lit on each of the seven evenings of the feast, or was lit the first evening and then kept burning through the week. There is fair consensus that it was

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<sup>403</sup> Luthardt; 250.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

not lit on the eighth day. This being the day after the ‘great day’ of the feast, the candelabra would have been already two days in the past.

One need not look to a Jewish festival tradition for the explanation of Jesus’ pronouncement, for ‘light’ is a very common metaphor both in Old Testament Judaism and in Eastern religions in general. “The symbol of the light belongs to the oldest religious conceptions of the divinity in the East.”<sup>404</sup> This symbol is attached to the promised Messiah in the Old Testament, especially in the prophecy of Isaiah.

*Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed,  
As when at first He lightly esteemed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,  
And afterward more heavily oppressed her,  
By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles.  
The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.*

(Isaiah 9:1-2)

*I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness, and will hold Your hand;  
I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles,  
To open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison,  
Those who sit in darkness from the prison house.*

(Isaiah 42:6-7)

*Indeed He says,  
‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob,  
And to restore the preserved ones of Israel;  
I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the  
earth.’*

(Isaiah 49:6-7)

If we look ahead to the miracle that Jesus will perform in Chapter 9, closing out this particular narrative – the healing of the man born blind – then we may interpret Jesus’ comment here in Chapter 8 in anticipation of that miracle, the miracle itself being a powerful object lesson as to the veracity of Jesus’ claim (*cp.* Isaiah 42:7 above, *To open blind eyes*). In addition, the increasing intensity of the hostility of the Jews toward Jesus is, as noted above, a powerful manifestation of the darkness reacting to the light, and rejecting it. “He puts the divinely-ordered reality, in the first instance in his own person, into contrast with the God-hostile reality in the darkness of sin.”<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*; 254.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*; 256.

Jesus inseparably connects the Light with Himself, using the *ego eimi* phrase that is reminiscent of the name of God in the Old Testament. *I AM* the Light of the world, He says, the one who follows Me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life. Just as the Jews are hardening themselves against Jesus, Jesus is intensifying His claim to be the One in whom alone is salvation. “Light is not a natural human possession. It comes only from Christ. And it is not a separable entity which may be possessed in itself. It is not an objective revelation which men may receive and hug to themselves. Jesus *is* the light. To have the light is to have Jesus. There is no light apart from a right relationship to Him.”<sup>406</sup>

*The Pharisees therefore said to Him, “You bear witness of Yourself; Your witness is not true.”*  
(8:13)

What is remarkable about this retort is that the Pharisees are not even listening to what Jesus is saying. They are bent on discrediting Him at the source, so that anything He says will carry no weight with the masses. Thus they dredge back up the conversation from Chapter 5, attempting to use Jesus’ own words against Him, “*If I alone bear witness of Myself, My testimony is not true.*”<sup>407</sup> But this objection by the Pharisees only serves to allow Jesus to move on from the technical legalities of judicial witness, to the unique position that He occupies as the Light of the world. First of all, the requirement for two or more witnesses pertained not to one’s own claim concerning oneself, but rather to a court of law where a man is charged with a crime, particularly a capital crime. Thus the requirement does not even apply to what Jesus is saying. Second, His declaration of Himself as the Light of the world also precludes human corroboration. The nature of light is to shine and by shining to prove itself to be light. As Morris writes, “But light establishes its claim. It does so, not by arguments, but by shining. Light must always be accepted for itself, and that notwithstanding the objections of the blind.”<sup>408</sup> For all who can see, light needs no corroborative witness. It is itself contrasted with darkness and the presence of light is self-attesting. Corresponding to the Light/Darkness paradigm is the Life/Death paradigm, also not needing external witness. “As death and darkness belong together, so do life and

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<sup>406</sup> Morris; 438.

<sup>407</sup> John 5:31

<sup>408</sup> Morris; 439.

light...In this sense he calls himself the light of life, in so far as light is the constitution of the life."<sup>409</sup>

*Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going."* (8:14)

The apparent contradiction with what Jesus said earlier concerning bearing witness of Himself is just that, apparent. In the earlier passage Jesus submitted Himself to the manner of judgment of His opponents in order to show that He was not bearing witness of Himself; there were other witnesses (thought they meant nothing to Him). He is saying the same here; highlighting this time the fact that *even if* He bears witness of Himself, His witness is true because of who He is and from whence He has come. "This has the consequence of identifying the revelation of God with the (self-) testimony of Jesus."<sup>410</sup> This is a truly profound argument in terms of Jesus' own self-attestation in particular and Christian apologetics in general. It hinges on the simple question: If God reveals Himself, who among men can bear witness for Him? "The witness of Jesus, that is of the Christ, the Son of God, is inevitably a witness to Himself which can, as yet at least, be corroborated by no human witness. He is a solitary witness among men, since He alone knows whence He comes and whither He goes."<sup>411</sup> Luthardt writes,

He alone knows that he had a being with God before he became man, and that he also as such a one, because come from God, has a vocation to the whole world, and a saving vocation to the world, since God is the God of the world in general and the God of salvation.<sup>412</sup>

This has been a recurring theme in the Fourth Gospel as the author has focused on Jesus' self-attestation, showing the impossibility that the testimony of the Son of God should be subject to the normal judicial processes that prevail among men. Of the same nature is Jesus' enigmatic phrase from Chapter 7, "If any man is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself."<sup>413</sup> These statements

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<sup>409</sup> Luthardt; 257.

<sup>410</sup> Beasley-Murray; 129.

<sup>411</sup> Hoskyns; 331.

<sup>412</sup> Luthardt; 259.

<sup>413</sup> John 7:17

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combine to prove that the revelation of God – the *Light* – is not susceptible to human corroboration; it is not subject to human lawcourts or human judgment. “What witness can God call to validate his own revelation of himself?”<sup>414</sup> Thus Jesus is even more pointedly linking Himself inexorably and essentially with God; He is above their Law for He is the One who gave them their Law.

*You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. And yet if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent Me.* (8:15-16)

“According to the flesh” is a common phrase in the New Testament, and it is uniformly negative. It need not mean abject wickedness but only human (fallen) judgment. Granted, that human judgment will lead to the abject wickedness of the crucifixion, but at this point Jesus is simply pointing out that the Pharisees cannot see past their noses; they cannot accept that the Son of Man, who is also the Son of God, must come to them under the authority of His own testimony, His own validation. Therefore just as His self-witness is true even if it stands alone, so also is His judgment true, even though He has not come for the specific purpose of judgment. Jesus is claiming in unmistakable terms to be one with the Father, to be God.

The mission of the Son of God is a mission, not of condemnation, but of salvation. And yet, since the rejection of Jesus involves present and ultimate condemnation, the work of salvation is inevitably also a work of condemnation; and if He condemns, His condemnation is true and genuine; there is no escape from it...The judgement of the Pharisees is therefore a false opinion; the judgement of Jesus is a sovereign decision, a divine decree, pronounced in strict accord with the will of God.<sup>415</sup>

These Pharisees did not have the good sense possessed even by Pontus Pilate: to be *afraid* of this Man. “There is the implication here that, while they were sitting in judgment on him and his claims and reaching an adverse verdict it was in reality he who was judging them, and judging them beyond the possibility of error because of his oneness of mind with the one who had sent him.”<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Newbiggin; 103.

<sup>415</sup> Hoskyns; 331.

<sup>416</sup> Bruce; 189

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*It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me.* (8:17-18)

Again, Jesus does not bear witness of Himself (though if He did, it would still be valid). It is of the utmost importance to Jesus to establish His full dependence on the Father. This dependence does not lessen or invalidate His own identity as the Son of God; indeed, it further establishes it. Thus Jesus makes an accommodation to the Jews and to their Law, but only insofar as to bring forward His two witnesses: *Himself* and *His Father*. “The Law accepts the testimony of two *men*. What shall we say then of the testimony of the Father and the Son?”<sup>417</sup> What Jesus is saying here puts the Pharisees, and all men, in a crisis position, for if Jesus is speaking the truth, then to reject His testimony is to reject God. “If Jesus really stands in the relationship to God in which He says He does, then no mere man is in a position to bear witness. No human witness can authenticate a divine relationship...It is a key doctrine of this Gospel that it is in the Son and in the Son alone that the Father is revealed.”<sup>418</sup> John will write later that this is the witness that all believers have through faith.

*If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

(I John 5:9-12)

*Then they said to Him, “Where is Your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither Me nor My Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also.”* (8:19)

It is quite possible that the Pharisees question is one of scorn, and even insult. There was a pervasive rumor begun by the Jews that Jesus was illegitimate, though we cannot be sure when this wicked rumor began. Jesus is here claiming that His Father bore witness of His person and ministry, and it has been quite clear thus far just who this Father is: God. To ask at this point, ‘Where is your father?’ is, most likely, a form of mockery and derision. But Jesus takes advantage of this comment to state that “He himself

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<sup>417</sup> Morris; 442.

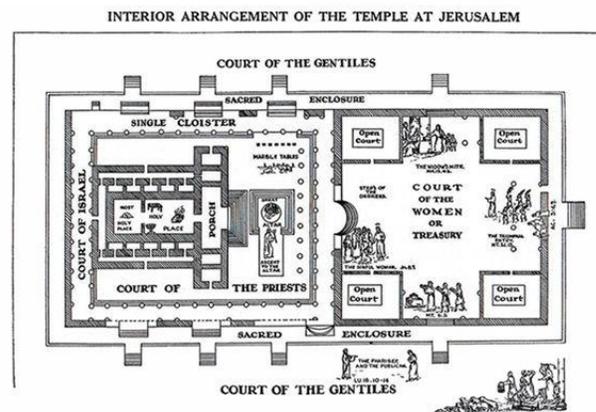
<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*; 443.

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is always the presupposition for the knowledge of the Father.”<sup>419</sup> There is no other way to know the heavenly Father but through the Son whom He has sent. To ask Jesus to show them His Father is to ask Jesus to show them Himself, which is exactly what He says in response. “To this Jesus can only answer, that he can only show him in his own self-presentation. He can therefore name no other way by which they can come to a knowledge of the testimony of the Father, than by understanding him himself.”<sup>420</sup>

*These words Jesus spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one laid hands on Him, for His hour had not yet come.* (8:20)

As the Jerusalemites marveled during the feast, so Jesus continues to teach publicly without any interference from the authorities. The Treasury of the Temple was located in the Court of Women and was the very public place where Jews brought various forms of offerings and tax to the money receptacles that were kept there. In this way John shows us that, while Jesus’ discourse seems to be a head-to-head with the Pharisees, it is also being done in front of a large crowd. It is easy for the reader to isolate Jesus with whatever group He happens to be dialoguing with at the time, forgetting that there was most likely a much larger crowd standing by. Jesus’ refutation of the Pharisees is at the same time a continued teaching of His disciples and of those who are sitting on the fence (*cp.* 8:30).



John’s frequent reference to Jesus’ ‘time’ or ‘hour’ shows his fundamental emphasis on the Cross, but no means simply the end of his story about Jesus. Rather it is the goal to which all narratives move, the culmination of all that Jesus did and taught. John’s particular way of phrasing the matter – showing time and again that the ‘hour’ of Jesus’ departure was of no man’s making – dovetails with his particular emphasis (among the evangelists) on Jesus as the ‘Sent One’ from the Father. In this way, the Fourth Gospel

<sup>419</sup> Luthardt; 262.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*; 263.

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consistently highlights the interdependence of the Father and the Son, and the independence of both to human devices or plans. This reality will be vividly displayed at the end of Chapter 8, when the Pharisees *“pick up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself, and went out of the temple.”*

*Then Jesus said to them again, “I am going away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin. Where I go you cannot come.” So the Jews said, “Will He kill Himself, because He says, ‘Where I go you cannot come?’”* (8:21-22)

The dialogue continues much as it had in Chapter 7, *“For a little while longer I am with you, then I go to Him who sent Me. You shall seek Me, and shall not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come.”*<sup>421</sup> Jesus, however, ramps it up a few notches in this passage in Chapter 8,



**John Calvin (1509-64)**

adding an ominous *“you will die in your sin.”* The Jews are becoming even more hardened toward Him, removing themselves ever farther from the salvation that only He can bring. Their scornful *“Where is your father?”* was just the growing fruition of their disdain for Jesus; Jesus in turn grows ever harder toward them. Calvin notes, *“When He sees that He is doing no good among these obstinate men, He threatens their destruction. And this is the end of all who reject the Gospel, for it is not sown uselessly in the air but must breathe forth either of life or death.”*<sup>422</sup> In this Jesus is also informing His opponents that the door is closing upon them and their generation. The Synoptics also speak of the same impending cataclysm,

*Therefore the wisdom of God also said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,’ that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.*

(Luke 11:49-51)

This is the specific meaning of Jesus’ departure to the generation of Israel that saw His coming. *“There is no escape from the necessity of death in sin except by faith in Jesus;*

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<sup>421</sup> John 7:33-34

<sup>422</sup> Calvin, *New Testament Commentary: Volume 4*, 214.

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consequently, His imminent removal strictly limits the opportunity of their salvation, and renders the witness which He bears to Himself pregnant with judgement.”<sup>423</sup> It is important to limit Jesus’ comment to the generation then living, for Jesus’ death by no means condemns every generation to ‘death in sin.’ Indeed, it is Jesus’ death and resurrection that empowers the very salvation that He came to bring. But it was different for the generation of Israel to whom He came, *“He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.”* This could not be without judgment; Israel’s hope of redemption was running out.

And the Pharisees response only serves to prove the increasing compressive strength of their hard and hardening hearts. *“Will He kill Himself?”* Suicide, of course, was an abhorrence to the Jew. Morris quotes a passage from Josephus regarding the unique punishment that befalls one who commits suicide, *“But as for those who have laid mad hands upon themselves, the darker regions of the nether world receive their souls, and God, their father, visits upon their posterity the outrageous acts of the parents.”*<sup>424</sup> It was generally believed that, apart from unique and praise-worthy cases such as Samson, the self-murderer’s soul transferred both directly and permanently to Gehenna, ‘below.’ This was certainly a place where these self-righteous Jews did not see themselves going, so they – perhaps jestingly – theorize that this is where Jesus plans to go? It is quite possible that Jesus’ response hits directly on their thoughts concerning suicide, and again turns their thought back upon them.

*And He said to them, “You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am, you will die in your sins.”* (8:23-24)

They theorize that Jesus will kill Himself and go directly to Gehenna, where they certainly will not follow Him. Note here the digression of their thinking: when Jesus first mentioned His departure from their midst, they theorized that He might go to the Dispersion and even preach among the pagan Greeks – still something that they would never follow. Here they assign even more ridiculous notions to Jesus’ words; they are becoming almost incoherent in their opposition and rage. But Jesus picks up on their

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<sup>423</sup> Hoskyns; 333.

<sup>424</sup> Morris; 446.

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allusion to ‘below’ – Gehenna – and turns it around again to the fundamental distinction between Himself and His opponents: *They* are from below/beneath; He is from above. It is they who will die in their sin and go *below* to Gehenna; He will indeed die (perhaps they are finally catching on to this point?), but He will return to where He was before: above. “These words trace the contrariety of destiny, back to the contrariety of origin.”<sup>425</sup> Jesus will intensify this line of reasoning against the Jews later in this same discourse,

*You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.* (8:44)

Jesus places His opponents as categorically different from Himself, both as to origin and as to destiny. This theme will run through the end of the Gospel as Jesus has all but given up on ‘the Jews’ and shows that they are fulfilling their nature in rejecting Him. To be ‘of the world’ is to remain in one’s sin, to reject the salvation brought by the One who is ‘not of this world.’

Those who belong to the lower realm cannot by themselves make the journey to the upper realm; they cannot even grasp the language of the upper realm...The only possibility for those of the lower realm to be transferred to the upper realm is if someone descends from the upper to the lower realm and then ‘ascends back where he was before’ (John 6:62), opening up a way – indeed, himself constituting the way – by which others may ascend there too.<sup>426</sup>

For the Jews in their hardened state, their continued enmity toward Jesus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of their own doom. Their only escape is to believe that “*I Am*,” for this is the literal rendering of the statement in verse 24, not the “*I am He*” of so many English versions. The phrase is the now-familiar *ego eimi*, which is the Greek equivalent to the mysterious name of God – YHWH – in the Old Testament. The adding of the ‘He’ in our English translations (most versions put this in italics to indicate that it is not part of the original Greek text) may be motivated by the Pharisees’ response in verse 25, but it is unnecessary since the mere shock of hearing Jesus utter the *ego eimi* in regard to Himself

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<sup>425</sup> Luthardt; 266.

<sup>426</sup> Bruce; 192.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

would be sufficient to justify their question. Indeed, as Hoskyns notes, their question is just as well explained by the *lack* of a predicate.

And yet, the procession of the Jews along the road of sin which leads to death is imposed upon them by no categorical necessity. They are riveted to the world by unbelief; but the opportunity of their removal from this slavery is provided by the presence of Jesus in their midst and by the public and insistent witness which He bears to Himself – *Except ye believe that I am, ye shall die in your sins...* The Jews demand that the omission be corrected and that a definite predicate be provided for the *I am*.<sup>427</sup>

But Jesus will not provide what they are demanding. “He does not give them a round answer to their question. They do not deserve it.”<sup>428</sup>

*Then they said to Him, “Who are You?” And Jesus said to them, “Just what I have been saying to you from the beginning. I have many things to say and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him.” They did not understand that He spoke to them of the Father. (8:25-27)*

Jesus’ response, His ‘non-answer,’ is somewhat difficult in the Greek; its literal rendering being “*Why do I continue to talk with you?*” There is probably a barely-concealed frustration in Jesus’ voice at this point, and since He goes on to say that He has many other things He would tell them, the literal Greek translation is probably best glossed by our English, “*Just what I have been telling you from the beginning.*” How could they only now come to ask Him, “*Who are You?*” when He has been telling them who He is, and who it is that sent Him, all along? They were at a loss to understand His words because they could not find it within themselves to believe what He said, “*They did not understand that He spoke to them of the Father.*”

‘What’ his is, Jesus does not say, for the Old Testament says that. He, therefore, is its substance. The new point which his preaching, which the New Testament, has furnished is, that ‘He’ is it. Hence the first thing in question is not new knowledge, but a fact in the history of salvation; this is to be expressed, this is to be believed.<sup>429</sup>

Just as Jesus’ time with them is approaching an end, so also is His patience. Though He has *many things* He would say to them *to speak and to judge*, their hard hearts could not

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<sup>427</sup> Hoskyns; 334

<sup>428</sup> Luthardt; 270.

<sup>429</sup> Luthardt; 269

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

receive it. This is vastly different from the condition of His own disciples, who were not capable of hearing all that He wanted to tell them; not capable, that is, until He sent them the Comforter (*cp.* 16:12-13). These Jews will not receive the gift of the Holy Spirit because they did not meet Jesus with faith, but with rational argument. To those who respond in faith, there will be further instruction; to those who demand further rational proof, there will be condemnation. “To the degree that their opposition remains and increases, his judicial testimony against them must continue and grow more severe.”<sup>430</sup>

*Then Jesus said to them, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him.” As He spoke these words, many believed in Him. (8:28-30)*

This passage is similar to Jesus’ response when the Jews demanded a sign from Him, telling them that the only sign they would get would be the ‘sign of Jonah.’ The Cross is the supreme revelation of God to man and it is the full and final explanation of who Jesus is. “To the question ‘Who are you?’ no adequate answer will be given until the Son of Man has been ‘lifted up’; that will be the definitive answer. The cross is the complete revelation of the divine glory manifested in the Son.”<sup>431</sup> The narrative is moving along two lines to the same point: the Crucifixion. On the side of the Jews, their hardening and hostility will grow so venomous that they will accept Jesus’ innocent blood upon their own heads and the heads of their children, just so long as He is dead. On the side of Jesus, the Cross is the culmination of the work for which He was sent by the Father, it is the ultimate victory and glory, for in it He will conquer sin and death forever. Thus John’s narrative finds those two lines of force drawing closer together as they approach the denouement they both share and do not share, for the Cross will mean condemnation for the Jews, and salvation for those that believe. And of these latter there are still some to be found, even in the Temple, even at this late hour. Come Pentecost of the following year, they will form the core of the early Church.

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<sup>430</sup> Luthardt; 274.

<sup>431</sup> Bruce; 195.

**Week 12: Free Indeed!**

**Text Reading:** John 8:31 - 59

*“He who is truth and in whom there is no lie  
is alone able to deliver those who are captive to the power of the lie.”*  
(Lesslie Newbigin)

On January 1, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln officially issued an Executive Order known as the *Emancipation Proclamation*. The intent of the document was to provide a motivational rallying point for the North to continue the conflict against the Southern Confederacy after almost two years of failure on the part of the Union forces to end the war ‘for the Union.’ It was a bold *volte face* for Lincoln, who had ardently promised not to touch slavery in the states in which it existed and who not long before famously announced to publisher Horace Greeley,

My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do *less* whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do *more* whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause.<sup>432</sup>

Lincoln fans today are not impressed when informed that the *Emancipation Proclamation* did, actually, fit squarely into this overall strategy to save the Union. In fact, on the day the *Proclamation* was issued, it can be argued that not one single enslaved American was emancipated. The wording of the document was very careful, making application of emancipation solely to those states that were currently ‘under rebellion.’ In other words, states in which the Confederate government held sway and Union armies had not yet gained victory. Border States, by this time largely under Federal occupation, were exempt from the proclamation and slaves held in these states – Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, Maryland, and Delaware – remained enslaved on January 2<sup>nd</sup>. In addition,

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<sup>432</sup> Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley, letter dated August 22, 1862. [Abraham Lincoln's Letter to Horace Greeley \(abrahamlincolnonline.org\)](http://abrahamlincolnonline.org). Accessed 21 June 2021.

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those parts of the South (i.e., New Orleans) that had come under Federal military control were also exempted from the proclamation.

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.<sup>433</sup>

It was not until the *Proclamation* was read by Union troops throughout the South on June 19, 1865 – *after* Lee has surrendered at Appomattox – that it could be said that the document actually freed anyone.

To give credit where credit is due, however, it must be said that the *Proclamation* did succeed in changing the tenor of the conflict, finally making slavery the primary issue (as everyone already knew it was, but no one was willing to say). Not everyone in the North supported the *Emancipation Proclamation* – many immigrants in the Northeast were even violently opposed to the granting of emancipation to Southern blacks, fearing their arrival in the large northern cities in a competition for already-scare employment. Nonetheless, having issued the *Proclamation*, Lincoln began the final march to the eventual abolishment of slavery under the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment (ratified December 6, 1865) and the true emancipation of American slaves.

However, it is pretty well undeniable that the ‘freedom’ that formerly enslaved African-Americans experienced – in the South particularly, but also in the North – was hardly what any white person in either region would call liberty, and would not be so for over a century following the war. No longer *legally* enslaved, the blacks of the South were economically and politically situated in such a way as could only be called bondage. Many continued in the illiterate condition of their former enslavement, and most were prevented by subsequent state laws from exercising any real economic, civil, or political freedom. The Jim Crow Laws legalized segregation throughout the South, and essentially two nations rose up (one rose, the other was kept down) out of the ashes of the

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<sup>433</sup> [Transcript of the Proclamation | National Archives](#). Accessed 21 June 2021.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Confederacy. Prejudice was also a powerful force in the North as many whites and most immigrant whites, had no desire to see the African-American population truly co-exist along the white population. Slavery had been abolished, but it was not replaced by Liberty.

There is a great deal of angst in our current time over these historical facts, though much has been done over the past fifty to sixty years to redress the wrongs of the past. For the Church, however, the experience of the African-American over the past four hundred years is but another tragic illustration of how empty the word 'liberty' is when it is based on the largesse of man himself. Can a man truly be called 'free' if he owes that condition to another man? A slave was often permitted to purchase his freedom in the ancient world, but then he was called a 'freedman,' a classification that always set him apart from those who were born free; it was a constant reminder that he was once enslaved. A convict might serve his sentence and be 'set free,' but his record precedes him and his opportunities are severely limited on account of his former incarceration.<sup>434</sup> Worse than these is the licentiousness of libertinism – antinomianism in its theological garb – in which all manner of vice is excused on the basis of 'liberty.' This is a bondage to which all mankind, regardless of their economic, civil, or political condition, are enthralled. "The freedom in view is not a freedom to do whatever we wish according to the dictates of our own fallen selves, but a freedom from our fallen selves and the power and guidance to act in accordance with God himself, the source of all goodness and life."<sup>435</sup>

Every good thing is imitated by Satan, who is the master of counterfeits, and hence, liberty – a word fit to be used in heaven, and, almost too good for fallen earth – has been used for the very basest of purposes, and men have misnamed the devil's offspring by this angelic title.<sup>436</sup>

The Church must never lose sight of the fact that, as Ryle puts the matter, "There is no slavery like this. Sin is indeed the hardest of all task masters."<sup>437</sup> It is good that the Christian witness in the world has had, and must continue to have, the leavening impact

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<sup>434</sup> This is, of course, the central plot line of Victor Hugo's classic novel, *Les Miserables*, in which the protagonist, Jean Valjean, is followed relentlessly by his former prison keeper, Inspector Javert.

<sup>435</sup> Whitacre; 219.

<sup>436</sup> Spurgeon, Charles H. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 10*; 223.

<sup>437</sup> Ryle; 115.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

of bringing social, economic, political, and civil liberty everywhere it has gained a foothold. But Christians must never make such ‘freedom’ the goal of the witness, for the bondage to sin is forever and cannot be released by any government proclamation. “There are many who are totally ignorant of the highest, purest form of liberty. The noblest liberty is that which is the property of the true Christian. Those only are perfectly free people whom the Son of God ‘makes free.’ All else will sooner or later be found slaves.”<sup>438</sup>

Worldly liberty and true freedom are at issue in the discourse between Jesus and the Jews through the closing verses of John 8. The Jews furnish a powerful example of how the concept of ‘liberty’ can intoxicate a people to the point of oblivion concerning their true condition – even their true physical condition, to say nothing of their spiritual state. The Jews were wholly under the civil and political thumb of the Roman Empire, and even their religious ‘freedoms’ were had at the behest of the Roman authorities. Previously the Jews had labored under the yoke of the Greeks, the Medo-Persians, and the Babylonians; in no sense common to the term could it be said that the Jews were a ‘free’ people. Yet the Jews loudly protest to Jesus, “*we have never yet been enslaved to anyone.*” Even if this were true, which it was not, the Jews were still in the same bondage that afflicts all mankind on account of Adam’s fall: the bondage to sin. “He is the free man who is master of himself through the grace of God. He who serves his own passions is the slave of the worst of despots.”<sup>439</sup> This Jesus tries to teach them, but they have long ago stopped listening to Him. “We are here dealing with the terrible reality of the bondage of the human will, and this has as much to do with twentieth-century Christians as with first-century Jews.”<sup>440</sup>

*Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”* (8:31-32)

There is a fair amount of debate within the commentaries as to whether the ‘Jews who believed’ in verse 30 were truly believers. Some maintain that Jesus here exposes the falsity of their faith, that they are still in the bondage of sin. This does not seem to fit the context very well, for those Jews who continue to oppose Jesus in this section are still seeking His death. It would be a strange form of schizophrenia for some of the Jews to be

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<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*; 116.

<sup>439</sup> Spurgeon; 218.

<sup>440</sup> Newbiggin; 112.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

'believing' in verse 30 while still seeking Jesus' death just a few verses later. This does not, of course, prove that the 'faith' of these Jews was abiding faith – that seems to call forth Jesus' admonition to them in verse 31, to "*abide in My word*" so that their faith might prove true. But it seems more reasonable to conclude that these Jews, probably a minority in the crowd, were making a good start and we may hope that at least a fair percentage of them were named among the early disciples come Pentecost.

The principle that Jesus inculcates is both a common one within His own teaching and within the teaching of Scripture in general. It is amazing how often Christianity has substituted how one behaves, how one speaks, with whom one associates, etc. as marks of true faith when Jesus gives the only true litmus test of saving faith, '*abiding in His word.*' "To remain in the word: the word formed the foundation of the new relation toward Jesus upon which they had entered. And the word must continue to be that foundation if the relation is to come to its truth and completion."<sup>441</sup> Jesus expands on this truth in His Vine metaphor in John 15,

*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. **If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you,** you<sup>l</sup> will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.*

(John 15:5-8)

"The mark of a true disciple of Jesus is that they abide permanently in His word."<sup>442</sup> The word translated 'abide' in these passages is the Greek *meināte* which has a very durable sense of remaining. Beasley-Murray comments, "The primary duty of a believer is indicated in the exhortation of Jesus. 'Remain in my word.' That is the mark of a real disciple. *Meināte* signifies a settled determination to *live* in the word of Christ and by it, and so entails a perpetual listening to it, reflecting on it, holding fast to it, carrying out its bidding."<sup>443</sup> This is a very important distinction to make in modern evangelism and discipleship, where many in the Church are teaching that continuing in the word of Christ is *optional* toward future, heavenly rewards but is not necessary for salvation itself. But

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<sup>441</sup> Luthardt; 279.

<sup>442</sup> Hoskyns; 338.

<sup>443</sup> Beasley-Murray; 133.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Jesus makes it clear (John 15 above), that His word abiding in His disciple constitutes the reality of *Him* abiding in His disciple; and if He is not abiding in His disciple, that person is no disciple at all. “There can therefore be no abiding in His teaching apart from an abiding in Him, nor can His teaching abide in men unless He abides in them.”<sup>444</sup>

But this abiding in Christ’s word is more than Bible study, more than intellectual knowledge of the Scriptures, though these are undoubtedly components of it. ‘Abiding’ is more accurately describes in the language of Psalm 119, where the psalmist incorporates some variation of God’s self-disclosure in His Word into each of the 176 verses. The word of Christ thus becomes the living, breathing atmosphere of the disciples new life. “As the revelation of Christ is inseparable from his redemptive action, the knowledge of the truth is not alone intellectual, but existential; hence it is *life* under the saving sovereignty of God.”<sup>445</sup> Luthardt adds, “And the question here certainly is not merely as to a truth of thought, but of being. The true relation to God has been revealed in Christ.”<sup>446</sup> And this truth and life constitute the only true freedom for any man.

“*You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.*” This is one of the most powerful statements of the entire Bible, but its power is proportional in our reception to our understanding of the true nature of bondage. John has a great to say (or to record Jesus as saying) about ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ in the Fourth Gospel and in this pericope he sets true knowledge against both ‘the lie,’ and the one from whom the lie has come, Satan. The dichotomy between ‘truth’ and ‘the lie’ is of the very same nature as between ‘light’ and ‘darkness,’ both of which are manifestation of the dichotomy between Life and Death. These three couplets are interspersed liberally in John’s Gospel and may almost be taken as synonyms; they certainly belong to the same thought family. The ultimate possession of Truth belongs only to the one who knows God the Father through the Son Jesus Christ, “*And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.*”<sup>447</sup> Newbigin writes, “The knowledge in question is that personal knowledge of

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<sup>444</sup> Hoskyns; 338-339.

<sup>445</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>446</sup> Luthardt; 280.

<sup>447</sup> John 17:3 (NASB)

him who is the truth which grows out of the believing and which is itself a sharing in the eternal life of God.”<sup>448</sup>

*They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free?’”* (8:33)

The Jews continue their irrational assault on whatever Jesus says. In this circumstance they bring up Abraham for the first time, which will provide Jesus with the opportunity to fully drive home the self-awareness of His own eternal deity. For now, however, the Jews irrationally claim their own liberty on the basis of being the physical descendants, *literally*, ‘the seed (*sperma*),’ of Abraham. They are not entirely ignorant of their current political situation – they are well aware that they do not possess civil or political freedom while under the rule of the Romans – but in their minds the covenant God made with them through Abraham establishes their ‘independence’ from all nations, even those nations under which they find themselves in political bondage. “This answer is a perfectly natural one for Jews, since they ever confound the historical position in the history of salvation with the actual possession of the essential blessing of salvation itself.”<sup>449</sup> This notion of liberty derived from descent from Abraham was highly motivational among the various Zealot sects and formed the substance of the chronic rebellions of the Jewish people. Josephus writes of one such rebellion under Judas the Galilean (also mentioned in Acts 5:37), “These men agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty; and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord. They also do not value dying any kind of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends.”<sup>450</sup>

But Beasley-Murray is correct when he writes, “The first objection to the teaching of Jesus in the dialogue that follows rests on a double misunderstanding, namely on the meaning of freedom in Jesus’ proclamation and on the identity of Abraham’s children.”<sup>451</sup> The Jews’ double error will form the content of Jesus’ response. First Jesus will deal with

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<sup>448</sup> Newbiggin; 109.

<sup>449</sup> Luthardt; 281.

<sup>450</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*; 18.1.6.

<sup>451</sup> Beasley-Murray; 133.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

their incorrect definition of ‘freedom,’ and then He will deal with their faulty understanding of what it means to be a ‘child of Abraham.’

*Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”* (8:34-36)

Jesus’ initial response contains both a great theological truth and a stern prophetic warning. The theological truth is that all men, including the covenant descendants of Abraham, are in bondage to sin and cannot either free themselves or be freed from any religious activity. “There is a slavery from which Abraham’s descendants are not exempt and which Abraham’s merits cannot affect: bondage to sin is a reality for every one who sins, including Abraham’s children.”<sup>452</sup> This truth underlies Jesus’ challenge in just a few verses that the Jews to ‘convict Him of sin,’ something that they cannot do. As for themselves, all their protestations of liberty are powerless to truly set them free from the one bondage that they share with all mankind, the bondage into which all men have been plunged by the sin of the first man, Adam. This status of bondage is confirmed in every generation by the fact that “*there is no man who does not sin.*”<sup>453</sup> Morris summarizes, “The man who sins is a slave to sin and this whether he realizes it or not. This means also that he cannot break away from his sin. For that he needs a power greater than his own.”<sup>454</sup> Spurgeon eloquently adds,

Talk to me not of dark dungeons beneath the sea level; speak not to me of pits in which men have been immured and forgotten; tell me not of heavy chains nor even of racks and the consuming fire; the slave of sin and Satan, sooner or later, knows greater horror than these – his doom more terrible because eternal, and his slavery more hopeless because it is one into which he willingly commits himself.<sup>455</sup>

What Jesus states so briefly here, the Apostle Paul expands into the full theological doctrine of both *original* and *universal* sin. In Romans 5 the apostle finds the origin of sin in the fall of Adam, and in Chapter 6 he speaks of the universal scope of sin over all mankind

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<sup>452</sup> Beasley-Murray; 134.

<sup>453</sup> I Kings 8:46.

<sup>454</sup> Morris; 458.

<sup>455</sup> Spurgeon, *op cit*; 218-219.

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in Adam. Speaking to those who have now received the true liberty of which Jesus speaks in John 8, Paul writes,

*Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! **Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?** But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. **For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.** What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. **But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.** For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

(Romans 6:12-23)

Jesus goes on from the theological truth to a stern prophetic warning quite consistent with what He says concerning Israel in the Synoptic Gospels. His allusion to the slave and the son in the home – only one of which possesses permanence there – is of the same prophetic nature as His words in Matthew, “*Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.*”<sup>456</sup> The Jews who thought themselves secure on account of their heritage in Abraham are, in fact, only slaves; they are not sons and therefore have no permanent residence or claim upon the house. “*In consequence, they have only the vocation of servants in God’s house; they do not stand in part possession of the property of the house, namely, of the blessings of salvation. They therefore remain in the house only so long as the master of the house needs them; their position is only a historical one.*”<sup>457</sup> Again, Paul picks up this theme in his own writings, developing the allegorical understanding of Abraham’s family in Galatians 4. The Apostle clearly links the Jews of his generation not with Isaac, the son of the promise, but with Ishmael, the son of the bondwoman. And as with Ishmael, such

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<sup>456</sup> Matthew 21:43

<sup>457</sup> Luthardt; 282.

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slaves have no permanent place in the house. The true sons, however, abide in the house forever.

*Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.* (Galatians 4:28-31)

But there is in the house a true Son, one whose relationship with the Father is from eternity and is without the stain of sin. Here is the One who can set a slave free and that slave be *truly* free. "If, acting by the authority with which the Father has invested him, the Son emancipates a slave, that slave henceforth is 'really free.'"<sup>458</sup> Jesus' statement in verse 36 is a direct link to His earlier comment about 'the truth' that would set men free. That truth is Jesus: "*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man comes to the Father but through Me.*" The Jews in their stubborn unbelief proudly cling to a chimera of liberty on the basis of their Abrahamic blood, while seeking to kill the only One who can set them truly free from the inexorable bondage that, in their self-blindness, they cannot even see (*cp.* 9:41).

The flip side of this theological truth is that those whom the Son *has* set free are completely and totally free, "*There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...*" Hoskyns writes, "All that Christians are, they are because of His creative activity, and only those whom He has liberated are, in any genuine sense of the word, free."<sup>459</sup> This is why Christians must at all times be advocates of all forms of freedom, while also at all times reminding the world that there is a bondage that no proclamation or law of man can release. Civil, economic, social, political liberty are all byproducts of the ethical impact of true Christianity within any society; they must never become the goal and substance of that Christianity for they are, as noble as they may be, nothing but more tolerable forms of bondage. Indeed, believers now know that the entire Creation, also in bondage because of Adam's (Man's) sin, is promised the same liberty as Jesus has pronounced over His own,

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<sup>458</sup> Bruce; 198.

<sup>459</sup> Hoskyns; 340.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into **the glorious liberty of the children of God.*** (Romans 8:19-21)

*I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father. They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father."**(8:37-39a)***

Jesus continues the line of reasoning that the Jews themselves started, that they are the 'seed' of Abraham. This He does not deny, for there is no reason to deny that the Jews are the physical descendants of Abraham. What He does establish, starting in verse 37, is that while these Jews are the *seed* of Abraham, they are not the *children* of Abraham; their parentage is truly from another. "Jesus agrees that they are Abraham's descendants in the natural sense. But, he goes on to point out, moral relationship is more important than natural relationship, and Abraham's true children are those who follow Abraham's example."<sup>460</sup> Example is the principle that establishes a filial relationship; in general, at least, the son will do what he learns from the father. As it is so frequently put, the nut does not fall far from the tree. "True sonship consists in conformity of the action of the sons to that of their father."<sup>461</sup> The problem with the Jews is that they *think* their tree is Abraham when it is, in fact, someone far more sinister. Interestingly, Jesus leaves off naming their 'father,' their true parent from whom they have learned and adopted their murderous inclinations.

*Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You do the deeds of your father."**(8:39b-41a)***

Jesus uses the Greek word *tekna* in His response to the Jews, instead of the *sperma* that both He and the Jews have been using thus far. "The Jews repeat their claim: 'Abraham is our father.' This time Jesus denies it, in that he distinguishes between Abraham's 'descendants' (*sperma*) and Abraham's 'children' (*tekna*), implying that the latter category is the important one."<sup>462</sup> They are indeed the descendants, the *seed*, of Abraham, but they are the *children* of another, who still remains nameless up to this point

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<sup>460</sup> Bruce; 198.

<sup>461</sup> Hoskyns; 341.

<sup>462</sup> Beasley-Murray; 134.

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in the dialogue. Jesus denies their right to claim Abraham as their father since they refuse to do the deeds of Abraham and instead seek to kill Him, a man who has told them the truth. This links their parentage, as Jesus does in the Synoptics, with those who killed the prophets in ages past. Thus the Jews of Jesus' day fill to full measure the sins of their forefathers, and fulfill not the deeds of Abraham (or the will of God), but the will of another murderer who is their real father. "They cannot therefore invoke the name of Abraham to define their identity. They bear another identity – an identity which derives from that power which destroys life and denies truth, the power of death and darkness."<sup>463</sup> Hoskyns adds, "The pedigree of the Jews is invalid. They are physically descended from one father, and imitate the works of another."<sup>464</sup>

*Then they said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God." (8:41b)*

There is something insidious in the Jews' comment, something that seems to imply a distinction between themselves and Jesus. It is indeterminate just how much the Jews of Jesus' day knew about the circumstances of His birth, though it did not take long after the Resurrection for the Jews to circulate the hateful rumor that He was illegitimately born. In itself the Jews' response is odd and grating; as an underhanded insult to Jesus it at least fits with what was the later theory within unbelieving Israel concerning the Virgin Birth.

It is also likely that, with their crass literalism in regard to everything Jesus has said, the Jews simply do not understand what He is saying to them about another 'father.' He has told them that they seek to kill Him, therefore they are following a father who is a murderer. They seek to kill Him in spite of (or because of?) the fact that He has told them nothing but the truth, so they are following the actions of a father who is a liar, someone who hates the truth. It seems that Jesus is giving them hints as to who He is referring to as their true father, the father to whom they are obedient children. But they are not picking up His hints; they simply do not get it. What they do seem to grasp is that Jesus is definitely calling into question their parentage, so they up it a notch and claim God as their Father. "They dimly perceive the drift of Jesus' discourse. He was not speaking of physical paternity when He spoke of their father. They apparently now realize this, and

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<sup>463</sup> Newbigin; 111.

<sup>464</sup> Hoskyns; 342.

proceed to claim the highest spiritual paternity."<sup>465</sup> Jesus will no sooner grant them this than He has allowed their parentage from Abraham.

*Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. (8:42-43)*

"The form of the conditional denies both propositions. 'If God were your Father (which He is not), you would love me (as you do not).'"<sup>466</sup> Jesus is powerfully destroying all their pretense, showing that their hatred of Him is proof of their true parentage, and proof that they are not from God. He has spoken nothing but truth; soon He will challenge them to convict Him of sin – which they cannot do – and all the while their hatred toward Him is boiling up within them to the point that, at the end of the discourse, they will literally seek to kill Him on the spot, to stone a man without trial and within the Temple precincts. Although the thought evidently never came to the Jews – except for a few like Nicodemus – it must have been on the minds of most the bystanders: 'Why do the leaders hate this man so?' Jesus Himself seems almost incredulous at their thick-headedness. Literally He asks them, "*Why is it that you cannot understand My speech?*" Why is it that what I am saying is so completely incomprehensible to you?

His answer is one of ultimate judgment, "*it is because you have no ability to hear My Word.*" The first phrase uses the more generic, *lalian*, meaning the speech of Jesus; what it is He is saying. It is the second phrase that gets to the heart of the matter, and here Jesus uses the word *logon* (from *logos*), meaning the true content of what Jesus is saying, the content of the revelation that forms His speech. They cannot comprehend His speech because they are unable – literally *not capable* – of hearing His Word. His Word has no place in them. "The Jews are unable – literally unable – to hear his *logos*, the word which he himself is. And this is because the *logos* is in fact the true source and center of all that exists and its presence requires the abandonment of the whole enterprise of understanding and managing the world from a center in the human ego. From this center belief is simply an impossibility. It is not that the man of the world has the free option to believe or not to

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<sup>465</sup> Morris; 462.

<sup>466</sup> *Idem.*

believe.”<sup>467</sup> But there is someone the man of the world has no trouble hearing, and it is his word that the unbeliever, especially these Jews, both understand and follow.

*You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.* (8:44)

Just when we think the relationship between Jesus and the Jews could not get any worse, Jesus calls them the children of the devil. By their response to Jesus’ person and His teachings, the Jews are unmistakably lining themselves up with the devil, the father of lies and the archetypal murderer. Thus, in a sense, Jesus here says nothing more than the prophets of old had proclaimed to the forefathers of these Jews. “It is the complaint of all the prophets: God has brought up children for himself; but they have fallen away from him. Thus they have become children of another. They have done this by a fellowship of will, into which they have entered, and from which their willing and their conduct now has received its necessary ethical character.”<sup>468</sup> They show themselves thoroughly opposed to the truth, and they seek to kill the One who speaks it to them. Thus their father is a liar and a murderer; the devil. “God is the life-giver and the fountain of truth; the devil is the life-destroyer and the father of lies.”<sup>469</sup> The Jews have made their paternity crystal clear.

*But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.* (8:45-47)

Now Jesus at last drives the stake home, demanding that – since they have put Him on trial – they produce the evidence. “Show Me where I have sinned; convict Me of iniquity if you can.” “Their unbelief and their hatred for the truth has no justifying reason in Jesus. They must bear him witness that they cannot bring against him any moral reproach.”<sup>470</sup> One wonders again if these words were not spoken more for the surrounding audience than for the Jews themselves, whose hearts are far past entertaining the innocence of Jesus. This is probable, since Jesus has already indicated the hardness of their hearts and their

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<sup>467</sup> Newbiggin; 112.

<sup>468</sup> Luthardt; 292.

<sup>469</sup> Bruce; 201.

<sup>470</sup> Luthardt; 296.

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utter inability to *'hear My word.'* "Their inability to expose sin in Him ought consequently to compel them to recognize the truth of His claim to be the Son of God."<sup>471</sup> But even this bold demand on the part of Jesus will have no impact on the Jews; it is likely, however, to have far greater impact on the bystanders, especially those of whom we are told back in verse 30, "*many came to believe in Him.*"

In a supreme act of irony, this same argument – the sinlessness of Jesus – will be presented to the Jews once again in about six months, only this time from the mouth of the Roman governor, Pontus Pilate.

*Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all.... Pilate then went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him."*

(John 18:38; 19:4)

*Then the Jews answered and said to Him, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. And I do not seek My own glory; there is One who seeks and judges. Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death."* (8:48-51)

Once again the theological content of the Jews' response reaches a new low. To call someone a Samaritan is, of course, a base insult among the Jews, though commentators are not in agreement as to what exactly would be the offense. It seems likely, in light of the previous comment regarding fornication, that they are again referring to the illegitimate nature of the Samaritans as half-breed, not fully Jewish. But the term also came to be regarded as synonymous with 'heretic,' and so the Jews could be using it in that sense. "the word 'Samaritan' had become practically equivalent in meaning to 'schismatic' or 'heretic,' and appears to have passed almost as a term of abuse."<sup>472</sup> In all, however, coupled with "*and have a demon,*" it seems probably that this was an unmistakable way of giving their opinion that Jesus was a crazy reprobate. For His part, Jesus completely ignores the comment about the Samaritans.

Jesus roundly denies having a demon (it was not the first time the Jews had indicated their belief that Jesus was motivated by a spirit other than the Spirit of God). At this point, however, Jesus seems to acknowledge that there is no one to adjudicate the

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<sup>471</sup> Hoskyns; 344-345.

<sup>472</sup> Morris; 467n98.

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conflict between Himself and the Jews, except, of course, the One who always judges in righteousness, His Father. Newbigin writes, “But there is no tribunal before which these rival accusations can be adjudicated except that of the Father whose humble and obedient messenger Jesus is.”<sup>473</sup> He may not be able to convince the Jews that He seeks only the Father’s glory and not His own, but He also knows that the Father seeks His glory and will glorify Him in the end. He is seeking the Father’s glory; they are seeking Jesus’ death. “The Jews suppose that they are protecting the honour of God by seeking to put Jesus to death. They sought Jesus, they judged Him, and finally they put Him to death. The ultimate truth is, however, precisely opposite. It is God who is *seeking*...and *judging* those who reject His Son. They and not Jesus, are under sentence of death.”<sup>474</sup>

Indeed, the Jews seek to put Jesus to death, but those who keep Jesus’ word (a connection with verse 31, the beginning of this particular discourse) *will never see death*. This is the second of three *Amen, amen* statements in this discourse (*cp.* vv. 34 and 58). As we have seen before, the *Amen, amen* of Jesus is an indication of a statement that is theological profound and is not to be taken merely *prima facie*. These are the statements that have most tripped up the Jews with their hopeless literalism regarding Jesus’ words; these are the statements that those who are unable to hear His Word will find incomprehensible.

The key to this particular *Amen, amen* is probably to be found in the position of the word ‘Death’ in the clause: it is at the beginning, the place of emphasis. Literally the phrase reads, “*Death he will by no means behold, even unto the ages.*” This indicates, for those who are able to hear Jesus’ *logos*, that Jesus is not speaking about physical death. Rather He is referring to the final death of judgment, a death that believers will truly never see. This Death is the true bondage, for it is the result and wages of sin. The liberty that the Son has granted to believers sets them forever (even unto the ages) free from the final Death. “*Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second **death** has no power...*”<sup>475</sup> The theological truth Jesus inculcates here is that the believer is absolutely free from this second death, and therefore has no need to fear

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<sup>473</sup> Newbigin; 114.

<sup>474</sup> Hoskyns; 346.

<sup>475</sup> Revelation 20:6

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

physical death. “Those who do not reject the word of Jesus but ‘keep’ it by trusting and obeying Jesus as he trust and obeys the Father (v. 55) are delivered from the power of death as they are delivered from the power of the lie. They become partakers of the life of God himself, a life which death cannot destroy.”<sup>476</sup>

*Then the Jews said to Him, “Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and You say, ‘If anyone keeps My word he shall never taste death.’ Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Who do You make Yourself out to be?”* (8:52-53)

Now the Jews have Jesus, or so they think. Even Abraham died, as did the prophets. Who is this man who claims that His word will prevent people from dying? “God had spoken to Abraham and the prophets, and they had kept His word and yet died, who then was this with a word more powerful?”<sup>477</sup> As it is likely that much of what Jesus had been saying was intended for the wider audience, so also the Jews are quite likely trying to sway the crowd back to their camp: ‘Clearly this man is insane (‘has a demon’) for we all know that our father Abraham is dead, as are the holy prophets.’



C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

Bruce writes, “If the word of God did not preserve from dying those who heard it and kept it, how can the word of this man serve as medicine against death? If he believes that, they reasoned, he is the victim of an illusion, and a demonic illusion at that.”<sup>478</sup> The Jews’ reasoning is really not all that wrong, though made wrong by their evil motives. They are admitting what C. S. Lewis stated two thousand years later, “Jesus Christ was either a liar, or a lunatic, or He was who He said He was.”

*Jesus answered, “If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God. Yet you have not known Him, but I know Him. And if I say, ‘I do not know Him,’ I shall be a liar like you; but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.”* (8:54-56)

Jesus is unperturbed by their insults. His reputation is firmly in the hands of His Father, whom He knows and to deny that He knows the Father would make Him out to be

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<sup>476</sup> Newbiggin; 114.

<sup>477</sup> Westcott; 139.

<sup>478</sup> Bruce; 203.

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a liar just like the Jews, who claim to know Him but do not. Whether a man knows God or not depends entirely on his response to the presentation of God in His Son, Jesus Christ. This is both the essence and the power of the Gospel, for it both places within the man and awakens (*from before the foundation of the world*) the relationship that alone constitutes saving faith: the *knowledge* of God in the face of Jesus Christ. No believer can deny that he knows God, because he knows Jesus Christ, who is the express image and radiance of the glory of God. This is why Christianity is and must be so exclusive: there can be no other Way to the Father but through the Son; there can be no other knowledge of God but that which comes from the only One who knows God, because He is the Father's bosom. Thus Jesus, and every believer because of Him, can resist the urge to strike back against insults. "It is wholly sufficient that the glorification of Jesus rests in the safe hands of Him whom the Jews name as their Father, and of whom they are wholly ignorant."<sup>479</sup>

Beasley-Murray points out that Jesus' answer to the Jews' question, "Who do you make yourself out to be," is a simple, "I don't make Myself out to be anyone...it is the Father who makes Me out to be who I am."<sup>480</sup> This is a strong lesson for Christian evangelism and apologetics: it is never the Church that makes Jesus out to be who He is, it is the Father who has made Him to be the fulness of deity in bodily form. So aware is Jesus of His identity, and His eternity, that He can speak of Abraham having looked forward to Jesus' day, and having seen it, to have rejoiced.

This phrase is undoubtedly enigmatic. Commentators are disagreed as to what event in Abraham's life (for the verbs in verse 56 are past tense) constituted the patriarch's having seen Jesus' day and having rejoiced in it. The corresponding Hebrew word for 'rejoice' is the root from which the name Isaac - literally, *laughter* - comes, so many conclude that the promise of a son through Sarah was the *looking forward* and the birth of Isaac was the *seeing* and *rejoicing*. Others believe that it was the provision of the ram in the thicket, a clear image of the provision of Christ for the sin of mankind, that constituted Abraham's *seeing* and *rejoicing*, to have his own son, as it were, back from the dead. Whatever specific event, if any specific event, is intended here, the language is

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<sup>479</sup> Hoskyns; 347.

<sup>480</sup> Cp. Beasley-Murray; 137.

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unmistakable even for the dense Jews: Jesus' relationship with Abraham can be spoken of in contemporaneous terms. *Who is this man?*

*Then the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." (8:57-58)*

There is no need, as some have done, to suppose that Jesus was older than the +/- 30 years generally agreed. The Jews' reference to fifty years is simply an approximation to show how ludicrous Jesus' claim with regard to Abraham really is. Again, it is likely that such a statement was as much directed at the gathered crowd as it was to Jesus Himself. But their derisive statement brings forth the most profound response from Jesus up to this point in the narrative (and perhaps beyond) concerning His divinity. The words of Jesus are more literally translated, "*Before Abraham came into being, I Am.*" This statement presents a categorical difference between Jesus and Abraham, a difference that the Jews - finally - did not fail to grasp. "The contrast is between an existence initiated by birth and an absolute existence."<sup>481</sup> Morris concurs, "It is eternity of being and not simply being which has lasted through several centuries that the expression indicates."<sup>482</sup>

This is true biblical Christology and a firm refutation of any notion (*i.e.*, Arian) that Jesus was Himself a creature with an origin in time. Westcott notes, "The phrase marks a timeless existence. In this connexion [*sic*] 'I was' would have expressed simple priority. Thus there is in the phrase the contrast between the created and the uncreated, and the temporal and the eternal."<sup>483</sup> One commentator points out the similarity in word construction between Jesus' statement and Psalm 90:2,

*Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You <sup>[b]</sup>had formed the earth and the world,  
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. (Psalm 90:2)*

This, of course, expresses nothing less than the Prologue of John's Gospel, "*In the beginning was the Word...*" and John 8:58 simply puts the truth of Jesus' eternal divinity in His own mouth for the first unequivocal time. It was certainly enough for the Jews to finally understand what He was saying about Himself; He had finally answered their

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<sup>481</sup> Hoskyns; 349

<sup>482</sup> Morris; 474.

<sup>483</sup> Westcott; 140.

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‘Who are you?’ in terms that even their hard hearts and heads could not mistake. But to them this was utter blasphemy.

*Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.* (8:59)

It is quite remarkable that modern critics cannot understand what ancient Jews saw so clearly, that Jesus claimed to be God. “It is the simple self-witness of his divine Sonship, which, as an unbearable blasphemy in the eyes of the Jews, call forth their rage so strongly that they at once make tumultuous endeavor to execute the law upon him.”<sup>484</sup> To claim divine identity, even divine essence, constituted the capital offense of blasphemy, and the Jews were ready to execute summary judgment – to kill Jesus without a trial, and to do so even within the Temple precincts. Their rage was irrational and immoderate, but the penalty for blasphemy was undoubtedly prescribed in the law: death.

*And whoever blasphemeth the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the stranger as well as him who is born in the land. When he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall be put to death.* (Leviticus 24:16)

The question was, of course, whether Jesus was blaspheming or whether He was who He said He was, the eternal Son of God, the I Am in the midst of His people. Considering the various messianic prophecies, especially the *Immanuel* prophecy of Isaiah 7, there was no *a priori* reason why God could not appear in the midst of His people in the form of His Son.

*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.* (Isaiah 7:14)

The Jews, however, have no intention of admitting that this Man might be the Son of God, God Himself in their midst. Jesus did not fit their model of a Savior, a Messiah. Their unbelief had blinded their eyes and stopped their ears; they were themselves in fulfillment of the Isaianic charge, “Render the hearts of these people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed.”<sup>485</sup> There was no sin in this Man, nothing but wisdom and truth.

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<sup>484</sup> Luthardt; 307.

<sup>485</sup> Isaiah 6:10

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Jesus' good works testified of His divinity, as did His teachings. But it was His self-attestation as the divine Messiah that threw the Jews over the edge of violent rage, and His blunt use of the name of God in verse 58 was the last straw. From this point on Jesus' path, insofar as the Jews have anything to do with it, goes directly to Gologtha.

The first *ego eimi*, ver. 12, had only called forth the contradiction of unbelief, which based itself on a word of the law. The last *ego eimi*, with which the self-witness closes, calls forth the passionate rage of indignant unbelief... This is a prefiguration of the issue. Nothing but Jesus' self-witness concerning his divine Sonship, in which the promise and the hope of Israel are fulfilled, is to bring him unto death, - a death the execution of which will adorn itself with the letter of the law, while it only has its basis in the heightened opposition of unbelief, which does not desire salvation in Jesus' person.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Luthardt; 308.

**Week 13: Healing the Man Born Blind**

**Text Reading:** John 9:1 - 12

*“The providence of God  
is often a dark and impenetrable abyss for us.”  
(John Murray)*

*“Who sinned, the man or his parents?”* Simple Math; still used today: Affliction is due to Sin. Therefore, if calamity strikes, either the individual or the community, it must be due to sin – and the greater the calamity, the greater the sin. Job’s friends were representative of a great segment of the human race, both ancient and modern, seeking to establish causation. For believers, this means attempting to interpret divine providence. Modern examples of this among evangelical Christians involve earthquakes in Haiti and Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005. Televangelist Pat Robertson attributed the first to Haiti’s alleged ‘pact with the devil’ back in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and John Hagee claimed Katrina as God’s judgment on the homosexual community in New Orleans.

New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they ... were recipients of the judgment of God for that. The newspaper carried the story in our local area that was not carried nationally that there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came. ... I believe that the Hurricane Katrina was, in fact, the judgment of God against the city of New Orleans.<sup>487</sup>

Reformed believers scoff at these infantile and inaccurate associations between natural events and the divine will. Hurricane Katrina was not directed toward New Orleans because the city had a Gay Pride march scheduled for that Monday. Indeed, if Katrina was God’s punishment for the egregious sin of New Orleans, He missed – the hurricane made landfall east of the city, sparing it a much greater destruction. God did not miss Sodom and Gomorrah. G. C. Berkouwer writes



**G. C. Berkouwer (1903-96)**

<sup>487</sup> [God and Natural Disasters: It's the Gays' Fault? | HuffPost](#); Accessed 28June2021.

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“It may be said that no event speaks so clearly that we may conclude from it a certain disposition of God – as long as God Himself does not reveal that his disposition comes to expression in the given event.”<sup>488</sup>

So the basic lesson for believers is that divine providence is not written in natural events or in individual illness or physical affliction. Again, Reformed evangelicals seem to grasp this. But it may be said that their trouble is reading providence on the ‘positive’ side, thinking that every promotion, every new car, every ‘good’ things is evidence of God’s blessing and favor. This, however, is just as erroneous as reading God’s judgment in earthquakes and hurricanes. Spurgeon writes, “You cannot judge of a man’s state before God by that which happens to him in the order of providence.”<sup>489</sup> Again Berkouwer,

Where fragments of history are not interpreted by God Himself, we are not permitted to explain them out of their entire context as though their meaning were intuitively and, hence, irrationally perspicuous to us. This is underscored by the fact that prosperity and success can never be confused with God’s blessing, a fact which those who try to interpret God’s intent in a given event often ignore.<sup>490</sup>

Interpreting events, both national and personal, as evidence of divine activity, however, seems to be an activity doomed to perpetual practice. It may be argued that men do it because so many others want it to be done – like fortune-telling, only of current or immediately-past events. One wonders if men like Pat Robertson would continue to attempt to read God’s will into natural and political events if the audience of the *700 Club* stopped tuning in. He probably would, and because of another phenomenon that is pervasive within Western evangelicalism: the belief that the Bible is an ‘open book; that biblical prophecy is a *carte blanche* for interpreters to apply however they see fit to events in their own time. And integral to this hermeneutic is the belief that there is a direct causal link between affliction and sin, the same belief that motivated the thought and speech of Job’s friends. In a sense, as Lesslie Newbigin points out, this belief in the direct link between sin and suffering is better than the alternatives: either a capricious and arbitrary universe or one that is governed by deterministic fate. Newbigin writes, “That suffering

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<sup>488</sup> Berkouwer, G. C. *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1983); 170.

<sup>489</sup> Spurgeon, Charles H. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 39*; 241.

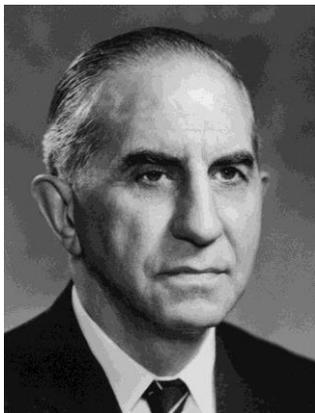
<sup>490</sup> Berkouwer; 172.

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and death are consequences of sin is a belief shared by a great part of the human race. It is a belief which has at least more of the seed of hope in it than the belief that these things are the result of blind fate or of mechanical causation."<sup>491</sup>

The 'science' that underlies the attempt to make sense out of suffering is called *Theodicy* – the attempt to explain divine providence and, in a sense, offer an 'apology,' or defense, on behalf of God. The concept of divine providence, and even of direct causation of events to behavior, has from time immemorial provided comfort, or at least some form of explanation, to the human mind. The questions *Whence evil* and *Whence sin* have challenged theologians and philosophers throughout time, and not just with Judaism or Christianity. That there is evil in the world has never been denied by the vast majority of mankind, and even the solution of Dualism – where Good and Evil are co-existing and opposing forces – always proves untenable, as no one doubts that the distinction between Good and Evil, between Light and Darkness, is a *moral* one, and that the Good and the Light are better than their counterparts.

Believers are often pressed to provide an explanation of tragedy or disaster from within the thought environment of Christian doctrine, and too often believer succumb to



**John Murray (1898-1975)**

the pressure and the temptation and attempt to do just that. Worse, they come to believe their own interpretation of events as being the will of God revealed to them. This is dangerous ground. Newbigin is much closer to the true perspective when he writes, "But if a good reason could be found for evil, then either the evil is not evil or the reason is not good...The only thing which can 'make sense' of a dark world is the coming of light, and the light does not come from below but from above, not from the past but from the future."<sup>492</sup> John Murray adds, "The providence of God is often a dark and impenetrable abyss to us."<sup>493</sup>

Yet it must be said that the incomprehensibility of divine providence in so many instances does not mean that there is no connection between sin and suffering. Scripture

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<sup>491</sup> Newbigin; 119.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*; 120.

<sup>493</sup> Murray, John *Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume Three* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust; 1982); 164.

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clearly links the advent of sickness and death, as well as of natural disasters, to the advent of sin in the world by Adam's fall. Ryle comments, "Now blindness, like every other bodily infirmity, is one of the fruits of sin. If Adam had never fallen, we cannot doubt that people would never have been blind, or deaf, or dumb. The many ills that flesh is heir to, the countless pains and diseases and physical defects to which we are all liable, came in when the curse came upon the earth. 'By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin.'"<sup>494</sup> As to the connection between sin and the natural world, we have Paul's own analysis to firmly set our thinking.

*For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.* (Romans 8:20-22)

The clear teaching of Scripture is both that there is causation on the one hand, while on the other hand the exact causation is rarely made known to man. The teaching of Jesus in this and other similar passages, is that all things are both ordered by God and work to His glory. Therefore, instead of attempting to define the specific will of God in every natural disaster, every political calamity (or triumph), or every instance of physical suffering (or prosperity), believers ought to rest firm in the fact that God remains sovereign over all time and space, all events and all causation. "We try to find some sense in the senseless, some reason in the irrational, and some legitimacy in the illegitimate."<sup>495</sup> Rather, Berkouwer continues, the Church must always stand firm on "the biblical *a priori* of the goodness, holiness, and spotless majesty of God."<sup>496</sup>

We can firmly and confidently assert that human sin has wrought each and every form of suffering, sickness, or catastrophe on the earth. We can with equal firmness assert that God will work all such events to His glory in a manner that will remain mysterious to man until the day reveals it. "Our rebellion has brought disorder to every aspect of our existence, and the way back to the beauty and peace and order of his kingdom leads

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<sup>494</sup> Ryle; 151.

<sup>495</sup> Berkouwer, G. C. *Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1971); 26.

<sup>496</sup> *Idem*.

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through suffering, as the cross make clear.”<sup>497</sup> But, as D. A. Carson notes, “Once theologians move from generalizing statements about the origin of the human race’s maladies to tight connections between the sins and the sufferings of *an individual*, they go beyond the biblical evidence.”<sup>498</sup> To those who still want to plumb the depths of “*the secret things of God*,” and to discern causation apart from anything written in God’s Word, Spurgeon responds, “Instead of enquiring how sin came into the world, we should ask how can we get it out of the world.”<sup>499</sup> The answer is the Light of the World.

*Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* (9:1-2)

We may shake our heads at the disciples, thinking them no wiser for having the Book of Job in their Scriptures, but their attitude was so prevalent within the ancient world, and within ancient Judaism, that it would have been truly remarkable if they did not attribute this man’s blindness to sin. “This question was based on a false personal application of a correct general principle, an application familiar to the Jews. They gave the correct general principle that evil is punishment of sin, the same false personal application as Job’s unjust friends did.”<sup>500</sup> But in this the disciples were in numerous company. The Babylonian Talmud, though written some time around the turn of the third century AD, still likely records views that had long been held among the Jewish rabbis. For instance, in *Shabbath 55a* we read,

The Gemara continues its discussion of punishment in general and the relationship between a person’s actions and the punishments meted out against him in particular: Rav Ami said: There is no death without sin; were a person not to sin, he would not die. And there is no suffering without iniquity.<sup>501</sup>

Indeed, the disciples’ question of Jesus probably indicates a deeper consideration of the matter than appears on the surface. Expecting causation between the blind man’s affliction and someone’s sin, the disciples are particularly challenged by the fact that this man had been *blind from birth*. No doubt they probably considered blindness to be a most

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<sup>497</sup> Whitacre; 237.

<sup>498</sup> Carson; 361.

<sup>499</sup> *MTP*; 16.422.

<sup>500</sup> Luthardt; 314.

<sup>501</sup> [Shabbat 55a:17 with Connections \(sefaria.org\)](https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat-55a:17-with-Connections); Accessed 28June2021.

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grievous punishment, and perhaps could not bring themselves to conclude that God was punishing this man in this way, for the sins of his parents. Yet the other option was no less confusing, for what sort of sin could a man commit in his mother's womb that would be deserving of so horrible a punishment as blindness? Morris writes, "There were grave difficulties in seeing how a man could have sinned before his birth. And it is not much easier to think that a man should bear such a terrible punishment for the sin of his parents."<sup>502</sup> Still, this latter option had the warrant of Scripture behind it, though it remains very difficult to attribute to God such a horrendous punishment on an unborn child on account of his parents.

*The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.* (Numbers 14:18)

As to the possibility of a man committing sin in the womb there is the possible example of Esau, who was placed beneath his younger brother Jacob even from the womb. Attempts to explain why God chose Jacob over his older twin Esau were often attempts to assign specific sin to Esau, mainly derived from the trajectory of his actual life and superimposed back on his being in Rebekah's womb. For instance, in the Mishnaic commentary on Genesis 25:22, the *Genesis Rabbah*, we read that when Rebekah passed by one of the rabbinic schools of Torah, Jacob strove to be born, but when she passed by the door of a pagan temple, it was Esau who convulsed.

Our Rabbis explain that the word ויתרוצצו has the meaning of running, moving quickly: whenever she [i.e., Rebekah] passed by the doors of the Torah (i. e. the Schools of Shem and Eber) Jacob moved convulsively in his efforts to come to birth, but whenever she passed by the gate of a pagan temple Esau moved convulsively in his efforts to come to birth.

(*Genesis Rabbah* 63:6)<sup>503</sup>

Appeal is made by the rabbis to Psalm 58 to defend the doctrine of pre-natal commission of sin (not to be confused with 'Original Sin').

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<sup>502</sup> Morris; 478.

<sup>503</sup> [Rashi on Genesis 25:22:1 with Connections & Bereishit Rabbah 63:6 \(sefaria.org\)](https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit-Rabbah-63-6); Accessed 28June2021.

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*The wicked are estranged from the womb;  
They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.* (Psalm 58:3)

Of course, such notions as Esau being an idolatrous pagan even in Rebekah's womb arise from the confusion that inevitably arises when men attempt to explain every outward circumstance by some specific, inward or outward sin. Jesus would have none of it and answered in a manner totally unexpected by His disciples. "There *was* a Divinely intended relationship between Providence and this man's blindness, but a relationship quite different from that of simple causality."<sup>504</sup>

*Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.* (9:3)

This response, of course, is what we should expect from Jesus, who had earlier commented on other tragedies in a similar manner.

*There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."*

(Luke 13:1-5)

In both cases Jesus negates the conventional thinking that affliction and tragedy have a direct connection with sin. But he goes further, to note that what was about to happen – foreordained by God – could not be understood if His disciples continued in this erroneous way of thinking about suffering. If this man was blind because of some pre-natal sin or some grievous offense of his parents, would be a signal act of mercy on Jesus' part, but that is not the point of the healing at all. "To regard his recovery as the result of a merciful action towards one who has been peculiarly sinful, or who has been especially harshly punished for the sins of his parents, is to misunderstand the representative significance of the miracle."<sup>505</sup> Therefore Jesus declares the 'purpose' of the man's blindness, "*that the works of God might be revealed in him.*"

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<sup>504</sup> Berkouwer, *Providence*; 172.

<sup>505</sup> Hoskyns; 353.

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This statement must be carefully interpreted, for it might be concluded that God made this man blind for the sole purpose of his awaiting Jesus' arrival many years later. The cause of the man's blindness from birth has no connection to either his own sin while in his mother's womb, or to any punishment due his parents; this much Jesus asserts. "Jesus bids the disciples have done with their talk of the man's blindness being caused by somebody's sin. The purpose of his blindness was that a divine work should be wrought in him and the divine glory be revealed."<sup>506</sup> God is the Author of the healing, not of the original blindness; it is the healing that brings glory to God, not the affliction.

This does not mean that God deliberately caused the child to be born blind in order that, after many years, his glory should be displayed in the removal of the blindness; to think so would again be an aspersion on the character of God. It does mean that God overruled the disaster of the child's blindness so that, when the child grew to manhood, he might, but recovering his sight, see the glory of God in the face of Christ.<sup>507</sup>

The individual incident of the man born blind is merely one example of a general principle concerning God's purpose in permitting evil into the world. Ryle provides the standard Reformed understanding of this mystery, "God has thought fit to allow evil to exist, in order that He may have a platform for showing His mercy, grace, and compassion. If man had never fallen, there would have been no opportunity of showing Divine mercy. But by permitting evil, mysterious as it seems, God's works of grace, mercy, and wisdom in saving sinners, have been wonderfully manifested to all His creatures."<sup>508</sup>

The purpose of this particular miracle, and hence the 'purpose' of the man's blindness, is twofold. First, the healing of the blind man serves as a brilliant object lesson of Jesus' claim in John 8:12 – which He reiterates here in Chapter 9, "*I am the Light of the world.*" Nothing, perhaps, could emphasize this self-witness more than the giving of sight to someone who had never seen the light, who had been blind from birth. Thus the miracle also constitutes a 'sign,' as do most, if not all, of the miracles recorded in the Fourth Gospel. Therefore Jesus' words regarding the "*works of God*" – notice the plural, *works* – attest to the fact that this particular miracle does not stand alone, even as a sign. It forms

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<sup>506</sup> Bruce; 209.

<sup>507</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>508</sup> Ryle; 159.

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part of the overall ministry of Jesus, God's Son, through which He continually and consistently testifies of His Father, and shows forth His glory. "It therefore means not merely the following healing in itself, but that healing in so far as it is a *sāmeion* ('sign') of the revelation and the activity of God in Christ as the light."<sup>509</sup>

The second feature of the significance of the miracle is its representative character in regard to the blind man himself. This significance is tied to the first and follows from it. If Jesus Christ is the Light of the world, then it follows that the world is in darkness until the Light shines upon it. Therefore, "The blind man represents fallen humanity languishing in the darkness of ignorance and sin without hope of salvation."<sup>510</sup> This connection is not evident in the passage immediately before us, but flows from the concluding words of Jesus in this chapter. To the Pharisees, who considered themselves to be of 20/20 vision or better, Jesus says, "Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains."<sup>511</sup> Carson writes, "It is not just a miracle; it is a sign, the work of the Father, mediated through the sent one, to shed light on those who live in darkness."<sup>512</sup>

*We must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.* (9:4-5)

There is some textual variation with regard to the subject of the clause in verse 4. The first-person personal pronoun is either singular, ('I'), or plural, ('We'). Many Bibles have the singular simply because it makes more sense that Jesus would be talking of His own work, as He does immediately afterward in verse 5, "As long as I am in the world..." Furthermore, some ancient manuscripts do have the first-person singular in verse 4. However, it is by no means foreign to the Gospels for Jesus to include His disciples in His labor and while it is true that He would be working while it is day, it is also true that they are to be working while it is day. "The will of God determines the day; this will appoint to each man his calling within the limits of the time set for him."<sup>513</sup> If we apply the critical question, 'Which is the variant more likely to be *added*?' the answer is 'I,' for it would be an

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<sup>509</sup> Luthardt; 316.

<sup>510</sup> Hoskyns; 353.

<sup>511</sup> John 9:41

<sup>512</sup> Carson; 363.

<sup>513</sup> Luthardt; 318.

odd addition indeed for a copyist to change the 'I' of Jesus to the 'We' of Jesus and His disciples. Thus it is perhaps more likely that the first-person plural is original.

But the point of the phrase does not really change if the subject is singular or plural. Jesus is emphasizing the temporal limitation that exists for any man, including Himself, with regard to the work assigned to him by God. Thus Jesus' statement is a general principle that has special application to Himself, for His 'day' of ministry was fast closing. From the standpoint of His working day, the night would come in less than six months with His death at Jerusalem. The disciples' workday would really only then begin, but it would also be circumscribed by the duration of their years. Thus we need not assign any moral component to the 'day' and 'night' here; they simply represent a common feature of the ancient world (the world before artificial lighting): work was done in the day, not at night. "The day is for work, the night for rest. The salvation of men is effected by the incarnate Christ, who, having completed His redemptive and creative work, passes to His rest."<sup>514</sup>

As noted above, Jesus' workday is unique, for He alone is the Light of the world. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls His disciples the light of the world (Matthew 5:14), but this is always to be understood as a derivative light. It is not that believers are light in themselves; only Jesus is that. Therefore we find no textual disagreement to the first-person singular in John 9:5, "*While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world.*" There is a sinister aspect to this discussion, as Jesus again is alluding to the fact that the world would not have His presence, His Light, with them indefinitely. It is gloriously true that the Light would continue after Pentecost through the Person of the Holy Spirit within the Church, but that is not Jesus' focus here. Rather, as He has been doing for some time, He is highlighting the tenuous state of those who are witnessing His Light but are rejecting it. "This does not mean that Jesus stops being the light of the world once he has ascended. It means, rather, that the light shines brightly while he lives out his human life up to the moment of his glorification. Throughout that period he is the light that exposes the world, judges the world, saves the world. Those who enjoy his light will be engulfed by darkness when he is taken away."<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> Hoskyns; 353.

<sup>515</sup> Carson; 362.

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*When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing. (9:6-7)*

A great deal of ink has been spilled on the topic of Jesus making this clay mixture with His own spittle. This is not the only place in the Gospels in which Jesus used some means other than His mere word to effect a miracle healing. Two such are recorded by Mark.

*Again, departing from the region of Tyre and Sidon, He came through the midst of the region of Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee. Then they brought to Him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, and they begged Him to put His hand on him. And He took him aside from the multitude, and put His fingers in his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue. Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly. (Mark 7:31-35)*

*Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him. So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. And he looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking." Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly. (Mark 8:22-25)*

None of these three instances provide an explanation as to why Jesus performed the particular miracle in the unusual manner that He did. It is noteworthy that Jesus' spittle was involved in all three, but what the 'note' of it is remains a mystery. Some commentators point out that in the ancient world spittle was often considered to have curative powers, though it was also considered to be a source of sickness, too. There is the legend that the Emperor Vespasian healed a blind man by spitting on his eyes.<sup>516</sup> While we may very well believe that a Roman Emperor spit in another man's eyes, it is doubtful that this produced sight. "The reason why our Lord used the action we cannot tell. There is, of course, no special virtue either in spittle, or in clay made from spittle, which could cure a man born blind."<sup>517</sup>

There are, however, a couple of allusions that arise when one considers the methodology of the healing. The first is to Genesis 2:7, where God made man out of the dust of the ground, though there is no mention of either spittle or clay. Nevertheless, many

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<sup>516</sup> Tacitus, *Histories* 4:81.

<sup>517</sup> Ryle; 161.

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ancient Church commentators latched on to this ‘connection’ and surmised that Jesus’ actions were intended to point to Himself as the Creator – the One who formed this man in his mother’s womb was now giving to him the functionality of his eyes, which he had lacked his whole life. “He that healed these blind eyes with clay, was the same Being who originally formed man out of the clay.”<sup>518</sup> Indeed, a few patristic fathers went so far as to conclude that the blind man *did not have eyes* and that Jesus was here forming the eyes that he lacked. So notable a theologian as Irenaeus wrote, “that which the artificer, the Word, had omitted to form in the womb, He then supplied in public, that the works of God might be manifested in him.”<sup>519</sup> This is pure unsupported speculation; one would think that the condition of not having eyes at all would have been mentioned by John in the narrative.

The other allusion that comes to mind when one reads Jesus’ command for the blind man to go wash in the Pool of Siloam, is the narrative of Naaman the Syrian in the days of Elisha. Naaman’s affliction was leprosy, not blindness, but the prescription given to him by God’s prophet was also to wash, though in the River Jordan. If there is a connection here – and it may be nothing more than to show that a greater one than Elisha was present – that connection would be in the contrast between Naaman’s response and that of this blind man.

*And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean.” But Naaman became furious, and went away and said, “Indeed, I said to myself, ‘He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy.’ Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage.* (II Kings 5:10-12)

In contrast, we read of the man born blind, “So he went and washed, and came back seeing.” As with the clay, “The water of this pool had no inherent healing efficacy any more than other water. But the command was a test of faith, and in obeying the blind man found what he wanted.”<sup>520</sup>

Writers have often allegorized the washing as signifying Christian baptism, but this, too, is unsupported speculation. “From early times there have been those who say in it the passage of the

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<sup>518</sup> Ryle; 162.

<sup>519</sup> Quoted in Whitacre; 239.

<sup>520</sup> Ryle; 163.

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convert from darkness to life and from spiritual blindness to illumination by Christ in baptism. Tertullian began his work on baptism, 'Happy is the sacrament of our water, it that by washing away the sins of our early blindness we are set free unto eternal life.'<sup>521</sup> But there is no contextual basis for incorporating baptism into Jesus' thought here in John 9; such a linkage has more to do with magnifying a Church ordinance than with sound biblical exegesis. "The Evangelist's profound use of symbolism in his delineation of the word and works of Jesus should not be extended to an allegorizing of details of which the Evangelist himself provides no hint."<sup>522</sup> Frankly, to the question of why Jesus healed the man in just this way we must answer, 'We don't know.'

*Therefore the neighbors and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, "Is not this he who sat and begged?" Some said, "This is he." Others said, "He is like him." He said, "I am he." (9:8-9)*

This is a humorous scene, almost a version of Keystone Kops or Abbot & Costello. Who is he? Is he him? No, but he looks like him. I am he! Several factors were at work in this comedic opera scene. First, there is the likelihood that the man's appearance did, in fact, change noticeably (no pun intended) now that his eyes were functional (this is especially true if Jesus had just created eyes for the man). The facial aspect of a blind man and a man who sees is starkly different, and so it may have seemed that this man both looked like the well-known blind beggar and did not. Another phenomenon at work was the sheer lack of any expectation that a man born blind might see. Morris notes, "There is no story of the giving of sight to the blind anywhere in the Old Testament."<sup>523</sup> This fact would mitigate against an identification of the now-seeing man with the man who had for so long begged at the Temple gates. But the man's own assertions finally win over the crowd: he is one and the same man, and though "once he was blind, now he sees."

*Therefore they said to him, "How were your eyes opened?" He answered and said, "A Man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and I received sight." Then they said to him, "Where is He?" He said, "I do not know." (9:10-12)*

There is a wonderful progression of comprehension that may be traced through the rest of the chapter with regard to the man born blind. Here, having experienced a great

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<sup>521</sup> Beasley-Murray; 162.

<sup>522</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>523</sup> Morris; 475

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miracle, he confesses almost total ignorance as to the true identity of the man who healed him. He is *“the man called Jesus.”* The article indicates that the healed man did know Jesus to be a famous personage, no doubt the name of Jesus was on everyone’s tongue in Jerusalem. The blind man’s response is more literally rendered, *“the man, the one called Jesus.”* Thus far the healed man’s understanding only goes so far as to recognize that a famous person – a famous rabbi, perhaps – had effected a wonderful blessing in his life.

This will progress through the man’s interrogation at the hands of the religious leaders, so that by verse 17 he confesses Jesus to be a ‘prophet,’ and by verse 33 claims boldly that Jesus was a man ‘come from God.’ The wonderful path to full comprehension ends with the formerly blind man confessing Jesus as the Son of Man, and believing in Him (9:38). This progress contrasts notably with the man in John 5 whom Jesus healed of paralysis. Both were significant miracles, but this one far more so as it exhibited Jesus’ identity as the Light of the world. Bringing Light into the life of the man born blind did not stop with merely giving him sight. Rather this physical miracle signified a far greater spiritual truth, bringing the man to spiritual sight and salvation.

**Week 14: The Dialectic of Unbelief**

**Text Reading:** John 9:13 - 34

*“The restoration of sight to the blind  
should have softened even minds of stone.”  
(John Calvin)*

Logic has been defined as the ‘art of thinking.’ Its application to human thought is

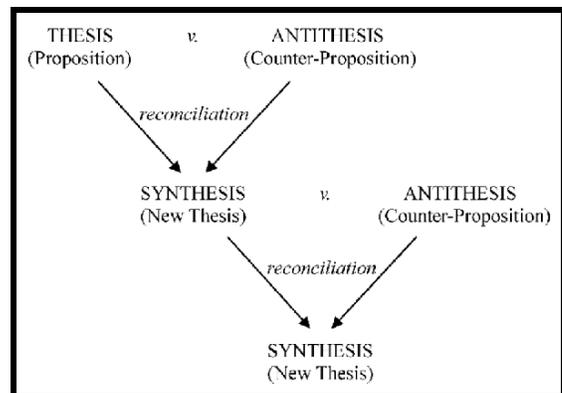


**G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831)**

designed to lead from valid premises to substantial conclusion via a recognized path of inference: one idea flowing ‘logically’ from its precedent. Logic tends to follow the path of thought in a linear manner, however, and human thought is rarely linear. It is often circular and sometimes helical, but rarely does any man’s path from premises to conclusions follow the step-by-step pattern of a geometric proof. In reality, human thought processes tend to ‘bounce’

between premises that are often only tangentially related, eventually arriving at conclusions that are at times quite tenuous, but usually serve as foundational to one’s epistemology. In other words, humans are rarely ‘logical.’ In place of linear logic, modern philosophy, following the writings of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, emphasizes the ‘dialectic.’ The term itself indicated a duality, rather than a singularity, of thinking, as the process highlights the back-and-forth of contrary thoughts used to arrive at a conclusion.

One definition of *dialectic* describes it as “A method of argument or exposition that systematically weighs contradictory facts or ideas with a view to the resolution of their real or apparent contradictions.”<sup>524</sup> In Hegel’s usage, the process begins with a ‘thesis,’ which is then countered by an ‘antithesis.’ The back-



<sup>524</sup> [Dialectic \(cpp.edu\)](http://Dialectic.cpp.edu); Accessed 05July2021.

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and-forth between contradictory thoughts eventually produces a reconciliation called the ‘synthesis,’ which then becomes the new ‘thesis,’ and is countered by a new ‘antithesis,’ thus continuing the process almost *ad infinitum*. Hegelian dialectics have had an outsized impact on modern thought, being influential in such modern thought systems as Marxist Communism and Nazism. The utter failure of both political/economic systems does not speak well of the Hegelian epistemology behind them. Nonetheless, Hegel’s theory often accurately describes human thought patterns *in retrospect*, though its faculty in predicting human thought has a very spotty record.

The passage before us in this lesson shows that there is a ‘Dialectic of Unbelief,’ which is fully on display among the Pharisees as they grapple with the on-going ministry of Jesus. As with many epistemological systems, unbelief possessed a central core ‘belief.’ The facts of experience (and even of revelation) then correlate and often conflict with this core belief, causing the back-and-forth of the dialectic. In the case of unbelief, the core ‘belief’ – the central epistemological theme – that guides the path of the entire thought process, is the *unwillingness to believe*. Luthardt comments on the interchange between the Pharisees and the healed blind man, recorded in John 9:13-34, “In no previous section has the not-willing of unbelief come forward so strongly as it does here. Unbelief’s own dialectics strike it itself.”<sup>525</sup> What he means by this is that the dialectic of unbelief inevitably turns in upon itself, destroying itself logically yet not freeing itself to believe. In the passage before us, the various points that both correlate and conflict in the minds of the Pharisees are these: (1) the Sabbath is holy and must be kept so; (2) Jesus has done a notable miracle by healing a man born blind; and (3) Jesus did this miracle on the Sabbath. These aspects of the whole event govern the almost comical exchange that we read between the Pharisees and themselves, and the Pharisees and the healed blind man.

The fact that the Pharisees cannot get around, and cannot get rid of, is that this man who was born blind has been healed. That is the *thesis* of the whole debate. However, the healing took place on the Sabbath and in a manner almost designed to violate the traditional Sabbath restrictions on several levels. This is the *antithesis*. This antithesis sets out Jesus, in the eyes of the majority of the Pharisees, as a notorious sinner. Therefore, a

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<sup>525</sup> Luthardt; 325.

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miracle cannot have been done. But, unfortunately, a miracle has undeniably been done, and even some of the Pharisees are able to note the holes in their compatriots' logical fabric. Nonetheless, the 'not-willingness' of the majority of the Pharisees render the whole process self-destructive. "The reasoning, that Jesus is a sinner because of the breach of the Sabbath, and therefore cannot have performed this miracle, must in view of the evidence for the fact turn its point against itself."<sup>526</sup> This is the dialectic of unbelief, and its pattern can often be traced in the arguments of the most inveterate unbelievers. Like the Pharisees, "They are resolved that no evidence should change their minds, and no proofs influence their will."<sup>527</sup>

It is interesting that the current passage brings the conflict to a different level. Previously the verbal warfare has been between 'the Jews' and Jesus Himself; now the Jews are tangling with the man whom Jesus had healed of congenital blindness. Unable to conquer Jesus in their attempts to destroy His influence among the masses, the Pharisees must have considered this formerly blind man to be low hanging fruit. In many ways the blind man represents all of Jesus' disciples: not in possession of infinite wisdom and eternal omniscience, yet by the grace of God able to withstand the onslaught of unbelief and often – as the blind man does here – to triumph. Perhaps because of his pedestrian status, the blind man's apologetic here in John 9 is one of the most profound lessons for the 'lay believer,' the man or woman untrained in the art of logic or dialectic or theology, yet able to spot the fallacies in the unbeliever's thought and to exploit them to great advantage.

Even the knowledge of the dialectic of unbelief is therefore useful to the believer in argument with the unbeliever. Rather than preparing an air-tight, logical and systemic apologetic with which to astound the unbeliever into faith – something that rarely, if ever, actually happens – the believer need only listen carefully as the unbeliever ties himself in verbal and logical knots, progressively fashioning the noose with which he will ultimately hang himself. The formerly blind man was not Apollos, mighty in Scripture and eloquent in argument. But he could spot logical contradictions and confusion as it came out of the Pharisees' collective mouth, and simply turned it back on them. The result, of course, is

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<sup>526</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>527</sup> Ryle; 168.

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also something that every believer will learn to expect from the committed unbeliever, violent anger when it is finally revealed that his entire thought system is a logical sieve. The inveterate unbeliever is beyond logical argument, beyond the give-and-take of dialectics, truly beyond hope. “Of all states of mind into which unconverted men can fall, this is by far the most dangerous to the soul.”<sup>528</sup> It is a fitting end to the section of the Fourth Gospel that deals most emphatically with the conflict between Jesus and ‘the Jews,’ with the religious leaders of Israel being confounded and humiliated by a former blind beggar.

*They brought him who formerly was blind to the Pharisees. Now it was a Sabbath when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also asked him again how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.”* (9:13-15)

As noted at the beginning of this particular section of John’s Gospel, the healing of the man born blind forms the second ‘bookend’ to that of the healing of the paralytic in Chapter 5. As in the previous narrative, the Pharisees are again involved here. Both healings took place on the Sabbath and in both cases this fact provoked the ire of ‘the Jews.’ But there are notable differences between the two events, particularly relating to the two beneficiaries of Jesus’ mercy and grace. It is significant that both narratives involve the man who was healed and the Jews on one side of the action, with Jesus on the other. But in Chapter 5 the man whom Jesus healed becomes an *accomplice* with the Jews, whereas in Chapter 9 the formerly blind man becomes their *antagonist*. It is very doubtful that the paralytic progressed to the spiritual healing to which all of Jesus’ miracles point; it is wonderfully evident that the formerly blind man did.

Commentators have often found a sinister basis for the blind man’s neighbors ‘bringing him to the Pharisees,’ but this is not necessary. It is evident that a signal miracle has been done – later we read that such a miracle had not been heard of since the dawn of time – and the man himself has precious little information to offer as to the One who performed it. It was therefore perfectly reasonable to bring the matter before the group of Jews who were widely considered the religious experts, the masters of Torah, to see what

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<sup>528</sup> *Idem.*

they thought of it all. “Not being able to make up their own minds they decide to lay the matter before the recognized religious leaders.”<sup>529</sup>

Yet, at this late stage of the overall narrative of Jesus’ ministry, it is hard to believe that those who brought the man to the Pharisees were themselves unaware of the animosity that the Jewish leaders possessed toward that Galilean rabbi. “Hardly one of them but knew how much the Pharisees hated Christ.”<sup>530</sup> We are, after all, still in Jerusalem and not long after the contentious events of the Feast of Tabernacles. Perhaps the crowd, being a typical crowd, wants to stir up the pot again and see some fireworks. It appears that they will be disappointed, as the interrogation of the blind man seems to have taken place in a private setting, perhaps one of the minor judicial assemblies which were common in Jerusalem during the Second Temple era.<sup>531</sup>

Once again, however, the Jews latch on to just one aspect of the event: it was done on the Sabbath. Coupled with the previous miracle at the Pool of Bethesda, also done on the Sabbath, one might reasonably conclude that Jesus was, in fact, goading the Jews with the manner in which He performed the two miracles. In the former case, Jesus commanded the healed paralytic to “*take up your pallet and walk,*” a clear violation of the rabbinic strictures regarding ‘work’ on the Sabbath day. This command caused the healed man himself to ‘break’ the Sabbath as far as the Pharisees were concerned. Here in Chapter 9, however, it is Jesus Himself who ‘breaks’ the Sabbath, and this in two ways. First, He kneads clay from spittle and dirt; second, He applies eye salve to the blind man. It may be that He also caused the blind man to ‘break’ the Sabbath restrictions in walking to the Pool of Siloam; but we do not know how far a trek that was. ‘Kneading’ is one of the activities specifically forbidden in the Mishnah, *Sabbath* 7.2 and applying eye salve was also forbidden on the Sabbath by many rabbis. The underlying logic for the Pharisees with regard to acts of healing on the Sabbath was that they are only permitted if life is immediately in danger; a man born blind is in no need of being healed of that blindness on

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<sup>529</sup> Morris; 484.

<sup>530</sup> Calvin; 243.

<sup>531</sup> In spite of some commentator’s opinions, it is unlikely that the formerly blind man was brought before the Sanhedrin; this assembly of the Pharisees was likely a smaller court, the likes of which we can ascertain from the writings of Josephus and others. “But we must think of an assembly of an official character, in which the questioners were chiefly concerned about the judgment of the representatives of orthodoxy.” (Luthardt; 326)

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the Sabbath. “Why then does He not avoid the offense, as He could easily have done, save because the malignant reaction of His enemies would magnify the power of God.”<sup>532</sup>

This may go far in explaining the manner in which Jesus performs the healing of the man born blind. There was no inherent healing power either in His spittle or in the clay salve He applied to the man’s eyes, and probably none in the waters of Siloam. But in so egregiously ‘breaking’ the Sabbath – at least according to the meticulous rabbinic rules which had come to govern the ‘righteous’ observance of that day – Jesus intensifies the conflict between Himself and the Jews by drawing attention both to the power and goodness of His works and the pettiness of His enemies’ opposition. “The healing *on the Sabbath* made what was a source of amazement a source of offense, and the Pharisees were faced with a dilemma: on the one hand the miracle shows Jesus as a man accredited by God, but on the other the breach of the Sabbath shows him to be a sinner.”<sup>533</sup> But, as Calvin notes, “their first inquiry ought to be whether a divine work is a violation of the Sabbath...For the words of the Law command men to rest only from their own works and not from the works of God.”<sup>534</sup> Still, there are a few among the Pharisees that at least feel the tension between what Jesus did and when He did it, and again a brief controversy will arise within the assembly, to be quickly put down by the reactionary majority.

*Therefore some of the Pharisees said, “This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.” Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” And there was a division among them.* (9:16)

The discourse among the Pharisees has a great deal of authenticity, as they were by no means a monolithic group. They approached the healing of the blind man dialectically, taking two different approaches and thus causing the ‘contradictions’ of thesis and antithesis. The majority presents the thesis: “*This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.*” It was axiomatic within Second Temple Judaism that Sabbath observance was the very essence of the Jew’s obedience to Torah, never mind the fact that the ‘observance’ required by the rabbinic statutes went far beyond anything promulgated by Moses. Yet it leads to a simple premise and to a summary judgment: “Any man who

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<sup>532</sup> Calvin; 244.

<sup>533</sup> Beasley-Murray; 156.

<sup>534</sup> Calvin; 244.

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breaks the sabbath law is not a man of God.”<sup>535</sup> Per the rabbinic definitions of what constituted ‘work’ forbidden on the Sabbath, Jesus was a Sabbath-breaker, and therefore could not be a man of God. This conclusion was met with approbation by the majority of those gathered, as we see in the subsequent narrative.

Instead of acknowledging the gift of God, and rejoicing at the benefit done, at least a part of the Pharisees cannot get over the supposed breach of the Sabbath. The Sabbath law forbade all work. According to rabbinic ordinance, help was allowed on the Sabbath only in case of danger to life; and aside from this, healing was forbidden. The externality of orthodoxy showed itself in this cleaving to the outward letter.<sup>536</sup>

If one accepts this Pharisaic interpretation of the Sabbath, and of the works prohibited on that day, then the judgment against Jesus has biblical warrant and is, in fact, irrefutable. For the performance of a miracle alone does not authenticate a man as from God.

*If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’ – which you have not known – ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst.*

(Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

For the majority of the Pharisees, Jesus’ offense against the traditional view of Sabbath observance was decisive. However, this is exactly what is to be proved: Did the healing of the blind man, and the exact manner in which Jesus performed the healing, truly constitute a violation of the Sabbath? There were some among the gathered scholars who were asking themselves this question, and were bold enough to ask it out loud. “*How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?*” In this question we hear echoes of Nicodemus’ greeting on that night that he visited Jesus, “*Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from*

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<sup>535</sup> Bruce; 212.

<sup>536</sup> Luthardt; 327.

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*God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.*"<sup>537</sup> Some commentators conclude that Nicodemus was probably among the Pharisees at this inquisition, though it seems odd that the evangelist does not mention his presence. The line of inquiry may simply mean that Nicodemus was not alone among the Pharisees, a situation borne out after the Ascension by many Pharisees becoming believers.

In the dialectic of unbelief, however, we see the conflict here between the 'not-willing' of the hardened Jews and the doubts of those who are still wavering. Doubt itself is not unbelief; but neither is it faith. The conflict within the Pharisaic council divides itself, therefore, between hardened unbelief and doubtful curiosity. "One group starts from the sabbath breach. Since the Pharisaic rule has been broken Jesus cannot be from God. The other start from the miracle. Since He has performed such signs He must be from God."<sup>538</sup> The ensuing confusion, in which the Pharisees take a probably unprecedented step of asking a layman for his opinion, becomes almost comical if it were not so serious. "This scene is like an underground political cartoon that deflates the self-important persecuting officials."<sup>539</sup>

F. F. Bruce references the analysis of the German theologian Adolf Schlatter, that the disagreement within the Pharisaic council may have represented the broad division among the Pharisees between the two rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai. "The school of Shammai tended to argue from first principles (so here: anyone who breaks the law is a sinner); the school of Hillel tended to have regard to the established facts of a case (so here: Jesus has performed a good work). In a case like this, their conclusions were bound to conflict with each other."<sup>540</sup> Into this maelstrom the formerly blind man is thrown – *invited*, in fact – and he makes confetti of the rabbinic dialectic of unbelief.



**Adolf Schlatter (1852-1938)**

It is interesting to note that the pattern of the interrogation, including the calling of witnesses and the adjuration, "*Give glory to God*," foreshadows the ultimate trial of Jesus

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<sup>537</sup> John 3:2

<sup>538</sup> Morris; 485.

<sup>539</sup> Whitacre; 242.

<sup>540</sup> Bruce; 213.

Himself. This blind man is, in a sense, on trial because of Jesus. He will be condemned by the Pharisees but acquitted by God.

*They said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him because He opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."* (9:17)

It is easy to imagine the minority among the Pharisees who had commented on the fact that sinners are not usually found doing such great works, asking the formerly blind man his thoughts, not that they were truly concerned to hear his opinion – as an unlettered man, a former beggar, he had no credential among this crowd. But perhaps the doubting minority was playing for time, and introducing a platform upon which to extend their own line of reasoning. It is also possible that the question arose from the hardened unbelief of the majority, serving as it does the beginning salvo of what will become a brow-beating of the formerly blind man to come into line with their own predetermined conclusion regarding Jesus. "Moreover, when they ask the blind man for his opinion, it is not because they want to abide by his judgment, or think it has the slightest value, but because they hope the man will be frightened and give them the answer they want."<sup>541</sup> The succinctness of the man's answer does not bode well for this strategy: "*He is a prophet.*"

In this answer we see the beginnings of saving faith in the heart of the healed blind man. His subsequent argument with the Pharisees indicates that he had given the matter some thought and could only conclude that the Man who healed him was someone quite special, and most certainly was from God. Morris comments, "And for him 'prophet' was probably the highest place he could assign to a man of God." This was, of course, not the answer the majority wanted and so they summarily dismissed not only the man's testimony, but even the miracle that had allegedly occurred. Perhaps acknowledging that the healing of a man born blind constitutes a very unusual miracle indeed, the Pharisees take a bold line of argumentation: they will deny that the miracle ever happened, that this man was in fact ever blind, much less *born* blind. That this was a bold move is seen in the fact that, if proven wrong – which is not that difficult to do – the entire argument of unbelief is undermined and must fall.

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<sup>541</sup> Calvin; 246.

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In this we do see the benefit of the field of study known as Apologetics. Accepting that no man will be reasoned or argued into the kingdom, it nevertheless stands that by defending the historical veracity of Christian propositions – especially that of the Resurrection- Christian Apologetics can serve to undermine the dialectics of unbelief, *“casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”*<sup>542</sup> The blind man will hold fast to what he knows to be true, and by doing so he will be victorious in the battle.

*But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind and received his sight, until they called the parents of him who had received his sight. And they asked them, saying, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” His parents answered them and said, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself.”* (9:18-21)

The Pharisees were intelligent men; there must have been at least a few among them that surmised that this was not going to end well. But their situation was truly desperate: not only were they on the brink of having to acknowledge that a ‘sinner’ had just performed one of the most powerful miracles possible, Jesus had done so quite publicly and the blind man’s neighbors were all aware of what had transpired. Calling the man’s parents could only have been an act of desperation, or a ploy to intimidate the parents into influencing their son to ‘back off’ his confession. We will see in the next verse that a serious threat already loomed over all who aligned themselves with this Galilean rabbi. The parents’ answer gives proof of where the blind man received his savvy, though sadly their answer betrays no indication of faith on their part. Still, they recognize the danger into which they have been brought, and give perhaps the only answer that an unbelieving person could safely give in the circumstance. *“He is of age, ask him.”*<sup>543</sup> Morris writes, “It is plain that they discerned danger, and had no intention of being caught up in it with their son.”<sup>544</sup> Spurgeon adds, “This was very shrewd on their part; but I think that I must add that it was very cowardly to throw all the testimony on their son.”<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>542</sup> II Corinthians 10:5

<sup>543</sup> This statement does not help us in determining the man’s age, only that he was older than thirteen.

<sup>544</sup> Morris; 487.

<sup>545</sup> Spurgeon, *MTP* 39.251.

One has to wonder if the Pharisees were truly trying to establish that this man had either never been blind or at least had not been blind from birth. Those who brought him to the Pharisees had already, no doubt, established the facts of the case. The parents make those facts irrefutable. Bringing them into the midst of the controversy, “only serves to make the two actual cardinal points incontestable: that the man was born blind, and that he has not suddenly received his sight.”<sup>546</sup> One can almost imagine the Pharisees laboring with their spades and shovels, digging an ever deeper hole for themselves.

*His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”* (9:22-23)

Scholars deny that there could have been such a decree of ‘excommunication’ so early, since later disciples were still allowed to function within the synagogue system of Judea and the Diaspora. The argument does not stand. Decrees of excommunication were not all of one stripe, and were not observed by all synagogues, as the synagogue was largely an autonomous entity. Jews could be ‘un-synagogued’ – for that is the literal word used in the Greek – for a variety of infraction and for different lengths of time, from a week to a lifetime. Whitacre references later sources indicating that there were “different degrees of exclusion that were exercised, from a week-long exclusion from the congregation, to a thirty-day exclusion, to an unlimited exclusion from the congregation with avoidance of all contact, to an exclusion from the entire community of Israel.”<sup>547</sup> It was a very serious judgment, for it essentially excluded the Jew from all social and business interactions with his fellow Jews.

That such a judgment had already been promulgated among the religious leaders, at least at Jerusalem, indicates just how much they despised Jesus and wanted Him out of the way. It also indicates just how great a threat He was considered to be. “This man had become so hateful to them, that he may no longer be acknowledged in any way. They are not willing that that which is real should really be.”<sup>548</sup> Their hatred is irrational and visceral, as will be illustrated as the comic council progresses.

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<sup>546</sup> Luthardt; 329.

<sup>547</sup> Whitacre; 244.

<sup>548</sup> Luthardt; 313.

*So they again called the man who was blind, and said to him, "Give God the glory! We know that this Man is a sinner."* (9:24)

"Give glory to God!" was first used in Scripture by Joshua in adjuring Achan to admit his sin in regard to the banned loot he had stolen from Jericho.

*Now Joshua said to Achan, "My son, I beg you, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me." And Achan answered Joshua and said, "Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done: When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. And there they are, hidden in the earth in the midst of my tent, with the silver under it."* (Joshua 7:19-21)

Achan had already been identified by lot, and Joshua's admonition was basically an opportunity for the sinner to repent. Guilt was already established and in the current instance guilt is assumed. "The man is solemnly put on oath to declare the truth and to own that he is guilty of deception."<sup>549</sup> The Pharisees know Jesus to be a sinner because He broke the Sabbath; now it is time for the blind man to confess that he has been mistaken in the events and that the man who healed him could not be a prophet of God. "They present to him thus the strongest argument that was possible: for the sake of the honour of the God of Israel, the miracle cannot be acknowledged; for how can the holy God give his miraculous gifts to a Sabbath-breaker?"<sup>550</sup> That he has been healed of congenital blindness they can no longer deny, but they will not allow this man to go around confessing to his neighbors that Jesus was the source of the healing, for that would be tantamount to acknowledging Jesus as from God, and perhaps even as God Himself. Having established unshakably in their own minds the sinfulness of Jesus, they can only persist in their belief that some lie is being perpetrated here. "'Own up,' they meant; 'whatever you say, we know that this man Jesus is a sinner, and therefore cannot have performed such a miracle of healing as you pretend. Tell the truth; what are you hiding?'"<sup>551</sup> Beasley-Murray comments, "'Give glory to God' is a command to the man to confess his sin...and to admit that the authorities are right and that Jesus is a sinner. The formerly blind man obliges: he

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<sup>549</sup> Hoskyns; 356.

<sup>550</sup> Luthardt; 330.

<sup>551</sup> Bruce; 216.

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gives glory to God – not by denial, but by fearlessly reiterating the truth that he knows and has experienced.”<sup>552</sup>

*He answered and said, “Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see.”* (9:25)

The sarcasm fairly drips from the man’s tongue as he answers. It is as if he says, “As to the matter of Jesus’ sin, I will leave that to you religious experts. As for me, I was once blind and now I see.” In saying this, however, the man turns the matter on its head. For if he was truly healed of congenital blindness, and such a mighty work of God could not conceivably be done by a sinner, then the only ‘logical’ conclusion is that Jesus is no sinner. “Of the alleged sinfulness of Jesus he knows nothing; but one thing he does know, and not even the Pharisees can shake its certainty: once he was a blind man, and now he can see. And as he and they know perfectly well, that sets in question the assertion that Jesus is a sinful man.”<sup>553</sup> Luthardt adds, “He opposes to this knowledge: *I do not know*. He lets their logic alone. One thing, however, he does know: the fact. That is the point in which his logic rests, and from which it reasons.”<sup>554</sup> Bruce points out the comic nature of this dialogue and the consequences for the Pharisaic inquisitors.

‘You know that this man Jesus is a sinner; well, you are the authorities whose business it is to know that sort of thing. You wouldn’t expect *me* to know anything about that. But here is what I do know: I was blind, and now I see.’ It was frustrating for his interrogators that neither of those statements could be refuted: the former statement was confirmed by the evidence of the parents; the truth of the latter they could see for themselves.<sup>555</sup>

*Then they said to him again, “What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?” He answered them, “I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?”* (9:26-27)

At this point the council descends into farce. The only plausible explanation for their repetition of the question, “*How did He open your eyes,*” is that they hope to trap him with a contradiction from his earlier testimony. Instead of participating in their charade, the man answer their question with a question, one even more ridiculous than theirs: “*You*

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<sup>552</sup> Beasley-Murray; 158.

<sup>553</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>554</sup> Luthardt; 330.

<sup>555</sup> Bruce; 216-217

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*do not wish to become His disciples, too, do you?"* This answer was bound to set off the powder keg, and it did not fail.

*Then they reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from."* (9:28-29)

Spurgeon writes, "It is a bad case, so abuse the plaintiff."<sup>556</sup> Calvin surmises, "They probably call him everything that in the violence of their fury they could lay their tongues to."<sup>557</sup> With this pathetic retort, the narrative comes full circle as the Pharisees once again pit Jesus against Moses, 'siding' with the latter as the known entity compared to this unknown and uneducated Galilean. Their protestation reminds us of the earlier exchange between the Jews and Jesus, in Chapter 5,

*Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you – Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?* (5:45-47)

In this statement of the Pharisees concerning Moses versus Jesus, all of their simplistic objections to Him are summarized here at the end of this section in the Fourth Gospel. Moses' origins are known, and there was no doubt that God had spoken to him. Jesus' origins are mysterious and suspect, and therefore His testimony invalid – they had said it all before. "The question at issue between the Jews and the Christians concerned the origin of Jesus, His home and parentage, and the authority upon which His mission was based. The Jews asserted that His home was the unclean district of Galilee, that His parentage was obscure, with the suggestion that He was born out of wedlock, and that He was, therefore, a man and a sinner, possessing no divine authority."<sup>558</sup> In this the Pharisees show themselves to be more truly blind than this healed man ever was. "The proud insight of the Jews was, in fact, blindness, for not only were they unable to see the Christ, but they could not even see the meaning of the law given by Moses, which was accepted by them as authoritative."<sup>559</sup> So long as they pitted Jesus against Moses they would remain blind in the deepest sense, blind in sin and bound in darkness.

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<sup>556</sup> Spurgeon, *MTP* 39.252.

<sup>557</sup> Calvin; 250.

<sup>558</sup> Hoskyns; 357.

<sup>559</sup> *Idem*.

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*The man answered and said to them, "Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from; yet He has opened my eyes! Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him. Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing."* (9:30-33)

The formerly blind man now unloads both barrels. Arguing from the fact of the miracle rather than the minutiae of the rabbinic Sabbath laws, the man runs a straight path from his opened eyes to God Himself, for *"we know that God does not hear sinners."* Though the man's confession of Christ is not where it will shortly be, yet he will not accept the prejudicial Pharisaic conclusion that Jesus could not be from God on account of performing the miracle – of which *he* is the great beneficiary – on the Sabbath. "Indeed, far from shaking him, their arguments caused him to clarify his position, and he finished the interrogation with a deeper appreciation of Jesus than he had had at the beginning."<sup>560</sup> He credits God with the miracle itself, as an answer to Jesus' prayer. "Jesus' deed passes with the man as a hearing of prayer; for only God can work miracles; - as a consequence of the unquestionable hearing (i.e., God hearing Jesus' prayer), this includes the fact: that the healing act on the Sabbath appeared to him to be not a breach of the law, but a performance of the will of God."<sup>561</sup>

The miracle itself is beyond question a marvelous one, which had *"never been heard of since the world began, that anyone opened the eyes of one born blind."* This was no mere healing of a paralytic or a leper, though 'mere' is certainly a relative modifier in regard to any miracle. This is such a miracle that a counterfeit is inconceivable. "And to show up their stupidity or malice the more clearly, he magnifies the excellence of the miracle, from the fact that from men's earliest remembrance it had never been heard that such a deed had been done by man."<sup>562</sup> We need not conclude that this man had any knowledge of, or reference to, the records of antiquity outside of Israel; he was almost assuredly speaking in reference to the history of mankind as recorded in the Old Testament, in which there is no record of such a miracle having been done. Beasley-Murray concurs,

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<sup>560</sup> Morris; 490. This same phenomenon occurred when Martin Luther was brought before the Diet of Worms and ordered to recant his writings and teachings. Given time to investigate further, Luther returned even more convinced of the truth of his writings, and of what would become the Protestant religion, than he had been at first. 'Hear I stand; I can do no other.'

<sup>561</sup> Luthardt; 332-333.

<sup>562</sup> Calvin; 251.

Moreover, this power was unique: to restore sight to one who had lost it was miraculous enough, but to give it to one who never had it is unheard of. This unprecedented act therefore shows that God is with Jesus in an unprecedented way. Hoskyns observed, 'If once it be assumed that a miracle proclaims the presence of a prophet, a miracle without parallel since the world began proclaims the presence of the Christ.'<sup>563</sup>

The formerly blind man has bested the Pharisees, though that will not lead to their conversion and will inevitably lead to his condemnation by the religious leaders. Still, "His chain of reasoning is complete. Jesus could not possibly have done such a thing, a thing unparalleled in all history, unless He were from God. For the man the proposition is incontestable. It is not a bad chain of reasoning for one who had hitherto been a beggar all his life, and presumably a stranger to academic and forensic argument."<sup>564</sup>

*They answered and said to him, "You were completely born in sins, and are you teaching us?" And they cast him out.* (9:34)

Finally, *someone* answered the disciples' question with which this whole episode began, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" The Pharisees answer in the affirmative, that the man's congenital blindness was due wholly to sin, concluding that as a sinner from the womb, he has no business attempting to teach them, the righteous ones of Israel. The Pharisees assume what Jesus denied, that the blindness had anything to do with personal sin. But it suits their narrative, though by stating it they perhaps unwittingly admit that the man *was* indeed born blind, thus also confirming that a signal miracle *has* been done. At this point all that is left to them is the exercise of excommunication, '*putting out.*' "The context suggests that they not only pushed him out of the place where the interrogation was held, but expelled him from synagogue membership, as his parents had feared might be done to them."<sup>565</sup> But as they pushed this man out of their fellowship, he was being drawn into the kingdom. "But they reject the man, and the miracle, and the One through whom God wrought it. In so doing they reject the shining of the Light upon them, and plunge further into their darkness."<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>563</sup> Beasley-Murray; 158-159.

<sup>564</sup> Morris; 492-493.

<sup>565</sup> Bruce; 219.

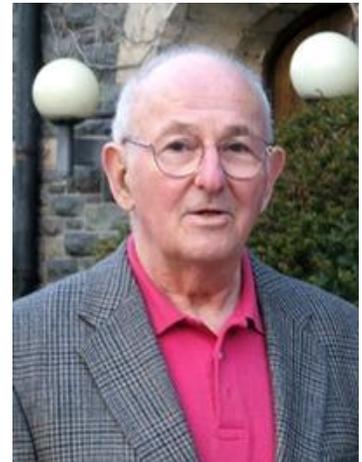
<sup>566</sup> Beasley-Murray; 159.

**Week 15: “I See!” Said the Blind Man**

**Text Reading:** John 9:35 - 41

*“At many points in this protracted account of Jesus’ specific teachings, we now recognize that at issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all.”*  
(Jacob Neusner)

John’s account of the Jews as they argue with Jesus and then with the healed blind man has often seemed so much like a parody that some have contended that it is historically inaccurate, that the Jews would not have been so obdurate in their opposition to the Galilean rabbi. Modern New Testament studies have worked hard to paint Second Temple Judaism, and especially the peculiar sect of the Pharisees within that era, as much more docile and amenable to teaching and revelation than is depicted in the Gospels. Indeed, an influential contemporary Jewish rabbi, Jacob Neusner, has ardently maintained that Jesus’ teachings would not have been so offensive to him as to elicit a violent reaction, merely an agreement to disagree and a parting of the ways. Neusner, in his *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*, presents a remarkable modern-day re-enactment of a Jew conversing with Jesus. Neusner’s work is remarkable for at least two reasons. First, he maintains that a dispassionate debate could be held between Jesus and an unbelieving Jew who was knowledgeable in the Torah, and second, that the modern Jew would hold the very same position relative to Jesus and Moses as we read in John’s Gospel. Neusner’s account reads very much like the chapters we have been studying in the Fourth Gospel – the ongoing conflict between the Jews and Jesus - though without the hatred directed toward Jesus.



**Jacob Neusner (1932-2016)**

Indeed, it is Neusner’s fundamental premise that ‘debate’ is the highest form of respect and admiration and is a fundamental plank of all rabbinic dialogue. Neusner’s rejection of Jesus’ teachings – and of Jesus Himself – is entirely amicable on both sides, just two rabbis talking, disagreeing, and parting ways. “I can see myself meeting and arguing with him, taking up specific things he says and challenging them on the basis of our

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

shared Torah...but I can also imagine myself saying, 'Friend, you go your way, I'll go mine. I wish you well – without me. Yours is not the Torah of Moses, and all I have from God, and all I ever need from God, is that one Torah of Moses.'"<sup>567</sup> Neusner's account offers an interesting perspective into both modern Judaism and Second Temple Judaism – their similarities and their differences – and shows that the blindness that has come upon Israel still remains, even darker than it was in Jesus' day.

Neusner chooses to interact with 'Matthew's Jesus' because Matthew was the more Jewish of the Gospel writers. He specifically refuses to interact with 'John's Jesus' because that Jesus clearly hates the Jews and Israel. "Matthew's picture of Jesus describes him as a Jew among Jews, an Israelite at home in Israel, unlike the portrait, for instance, given by John, who speaks of 'the Jews' with hatred...John and therefore his Jesus simply loathes 'the Jews' – and enough said."<sup>568</sup> Neusner's exegesis is horrible, but he presents it as both humble and scholarly.<sup>569</sup> We have seen on several occasions how John delineates 'the Jews' from the 'the crowd' and 'the Jerusalemites,' marking a clear definition of the phrase as referring exclusively to the Jewish religious leaders whose animosity toward Jesus was both inveterate and homicidal. It is impossible to conclude from John's account that Jesus hated the Jews rather than the other way around: 'the Jews' hated Jesus. But Neusner does not hate Jesus; he has the highest respect for the man, though he considers Jesus to be dead wrong. Still, in Neusner we hear an eerie echo of the Jews of Jesus' day regarding Jesus' authority relative to Moses. The Jews who opposed Jesus knew that God had spoken to and through Moses, but had no such confidence regarding Jesus. Neusner writes,

Where Jesus diverges from the revelation by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai, he is wrong, and Moses is right...*We Jews maintain, and I argue here, that the Torah was and is perfect and beyond improvement, and that Judaism build upon the Torah and the prophets and writings, the originally oral part of the Torah written down in the Mishnah, Talmuds, and Midrash – that Judaism was and remains God's will for humanity.*<sup>570</sup>

It is well that Neusner places this emphatic assertion so early in his treatise, because it establishes the basis of his authority – not *merely* the Torah, but also the Mishnah (c. AD

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<sup>567</sup> Neusner, Jacob *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press; 2015); 20.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*; 8.

<sup>569</sup> Neusner himself was an ordained conservative rabbi and a professor at several universities in the United States.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*; 4 (italics original).

200) and the Talmud (c. AD 600) – in much the same manner as Catholicism has appropriated tradition into their corpus of authoritative writings.<sup>571</sup> Neusner will argue throughout his book that it is upon *the Torah* that he and Jesus would disagree, but he admits at the outset that his understanding of the Torah is mediated through later, uninspired writings.<sup>572</sup> Indeed, throughout his treatise Neusner quotes more from the rabbinic writings in the Mishnah and Talmuds than he does from the actual Pentateuch. This makes him essentially the same sort of rabbi as those who arrayed themselves against Jesus in John's account.

Neusner's ecumenical spirit, however, is pure 21<sup>st</sup> Century. He loves Christians and wants Christians to love Jews. He sees no problem with the two religions happily coexisting as equal truths to those who have placed their faith therein. He does not yield in his contention that his way is the right way, but refuses to say that the Christian way is the wrong way. "My goal is to help Christians become better Christians, because they may come in these pages to a clearer account of what they affirm in their faith; and to help Jews become better Jews, because they will realize here – so I hope – that God's Torah is the way (not only our way, but the way) to love and serve the one God, creator of heaven and earth, who called us to serve and sanctify God's Name."<sup>573</sup> The parenthetical statement is original to Neusner. The modern rabbi also believes that his spirit of honest dialogue and amicable separation represents the spirit of Israel in Jesus' day, in spite of the fact that Israel of Jesus's day conspired to bring about His death. Neusner writes of his position, "It is the position that I think most of Israel, familiar with Jesus when he lived and taught, did take, and the one I take in this book: neither to follow nor to conspire against, but only to say a polite no, and to go on to other matters."<sup>574</sup> Neusner's adherence to the Torah is nowhere near as visceral as was, say, Saul of Tarsus.

In his treatise Neusner chooses to interact with Jesus primarily on the basis of the latter's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5-7. His choice is reasonable

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<sup>571</sup> Neusner writes, "The single most influential book of Judaism is the Talmud of Babylonia (ca. A.D. 600), which is a sustained commentary on a philosophical law code called the Mishnah (ca. A.D. 200). That Talmud is simply one long argument, or rather, it is notes on how today we can reconstruct the argument they had long ago." (29-30)

<sup>572</sup> Neusner's comment would seem to accord divine inspiration to the Mishnah and the Talmuds, but this is not the case; only the Torah was given divinely to Moses at Sinai; the other writings are, however, equally authoritative.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*; 5.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*; 24.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

considering that in this particular teaching Jesus does reflect most directly upon the Law (Torah) and He does establish Himself relative to that Law: “*You have heard it said, but I say to you...*” Neusner gives away his conclusion early in his book, “*My point is simple. By the truth of the Torah, much that Jesus said is wrong.*”<sup>575</sup> Later he writes, “What I do is simply reaffirm the Torah of Sinai over against Matthew’s Jesus Christ: Moses would want no less of any of us, or Matthew’s Jesus, I think, no more.”<sup>576</sup>

Neusner realizes that in Jesus – ‘Matthew’s Jesus’ – he is dealing with someone presented to the audience as divine, and that is okay with Neusner. “So my intent is not to give offense, only to take issue. That again explains why I isolate for debate only the this-worldly component of a wholly supernatural figure – and no one can encounter Matthew’s Jesus without concurring that before us in the evangelist’s mind is God incarnate. In every line of these pages I realize I am writing about somebody else’s God, to whom prayer and devotion and lives of service are sanctified, not a man but God incarnate, to whom vast masses of humanity turn with their hope for life eternal.”<sup>577</sup> But in statements like this Neusner betrays the deep fallacy of his entire position. He, a conservative rabbi devoted to the Torah, is accepting the principle of *another God* – indeed, another *Jewish God*. This, if not true, is clearly denounced in the Torah as blasphemy and is a capital offense. In this the Jews of Jesus’ day were far more ‘Torah-minded’ than Jacob Neusner. But, of course, in this Neusner simply adheres to the worldwide motto of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:



Through the balance of his treatise, Neusner ‘interacts’ as a Jew with some of Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, teachings that Neusner does not find overly offensive in and of themselves. Indeed, he spends a fair amount of time showing that much of what Jesus said had been said before and after by other rabbis. He does, however, hit early upon what it is that really bothers him about Jesus’ teaching: “Here is a Torah-teacher who says in his own name what the Torah says in God’s name.”<sup>578</sup> Neusner

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<sup>575</sup> *Idem* (again, italics original).

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*; 32.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*; 31.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*; 46.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

probably never realized just how close to the truth (the Light) he got when he detailed his imaginary 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish self struggling with the teachings of Jesus.

For what kind of torah is it that improves upon the teachings of the Torah without acknowledging the source – and it is God who is the Source...So we find ourselves right where we started: with the difficulty of making sense, within the framework of the Torah, of a teaching who stands apart from, perhaps above, the Torah. At many points in this protracted account of Jesus' specific teachings, we now recognize that at issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all.<sup>579</sup>

This is ultimately what troubles Neusner in an insurmountable way, and he expresses his discomfort in much the same terms as we read in the objections of 'the Jews' in John's account. "At Sinai, God spoke through Moses. On this Galilean hill, Jesus speaks for himself."<sup>580</sup> Sometimes, when reading Neusner's book, one feels like one is reading a Jewish commentary on the Fourth Gospel, at least Chapters 5 – 9. Consider, "So even on that first day, it begins to dawn on me that if I don't already believe in this 'I' who stands over against the Torah, I must find exceedingly difficult understanding the address I am hearing."<sup>581</sup> And John records, "*If any man is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself.*"<sup>582</sup> And further,

*Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word.* (John 8:42-43)

In an ironic twist, Neusner powerfully refutes the modern *Christian* scholarly distinction between 'the Jesus of history' and 'the Christ of faith,' maintaining that such a distinction is untenable given the only literary witness that we possess of 'either' Christ – the Gospels of the New Testament. Neusner writes, "But I have to ask myself why we cannot identify in the sayings of Matthew's Jesus not only the Jesus of history but also the Christ of faith. The distinction between the one and the other, important for some forms of Christianity and for some theologians and apologists for both Judaism and Christianity, strikes me as not well founded...Jesus makes sense, as we have seen, only in the context of

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<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*; 47.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*; 48.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*; 49.

<sup>582</sup> John 7:17

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

the Christ of faith.”<sup>583</sup> It is as if Neusner is playing blind man’s bluff – occasionally even the blindfolded man will grasp something. Only, and sadly, what Neusner is dabbling in is no game.

In the end, as he foretold at the beginning, Neusner’s fictitious 1<sup>st</sup> Century self must part ways with Jesus. But he makes clear that it is not really on the basis of Jesus’ teachings – even those teachings that Neusner considers to be faulty vis-à-vis the Torah. It is the *person* of Jesus that the 1<sup>st</sup> Century (and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) Neusner must disavow. “At issue here as everywhere else is the person of Jesus himself...What matters most of all is the simple statement that no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”<sup>584</sup> Neusner concludes that he – and Israel and, even, the world – has no need of Jesus so long as the Torah is there. Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven, but Neusner concludes that the kingdom is obedience to Torah in the here and now. “The kingdom of heaven may come, perhaps not even soon enough, but until it is upon us, the Torah tells me what it means to live in God’s kingdom – in the here and now.”<sup>585</sup> Neusner fails to see what his ancestors failed to see, that in Jesus the kingdom has come upon them. In this he illustrates the same blindness that overwhelmed ‘the Jews’ of Jesus’ day, a blindness into which they proudly retreat as ‘ones who see,’ thus making their blindness Stygian in its darkness. But there was another Jew of that age who knew all too well what blindness was about, and to him was given true sight.

*Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him, He said to him, “Do you believe in the Son of God?” He answered and said, “Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?”* (9:35-36)

There is a textual variant here that deserves at least a cursory review. Many manuscripts have Son of *Man* in place of Son of *God* in verse 35. The manuscript evidence in support of each is substantial, so the decision as to the original reading must be made on other criteria. There are two considerations that tend toward *Son of Man* as original as opposed to *Son of God*. First, the connection between the ‘Son of Man’ from Daniel and the promised Messiah is far more established in Second Temple Israel than a connection

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<sup>583</sup> Neusner; 69.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*; 86.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*; 156.

between the Messiah and the Son of God. In context, therefore, it would have been more likely for Jesus to ask the man if he believed in the ‘Son of Man’ – a familiar eschatological figure in Second Temple Judaism, rather than of the Son of God. Second, the question of which variant would be more understandably *added* or used to *replace* the other also tends in favor of the Son of Man. As Hoskyns concludes, “When the original significance of the title *Son of man* was forgotten, and it was used to express the human nature of the Christ as distinct from His divine nature, the substitution of the *Son of God* in such a passage as this, is easy to understand. The substitution of *Son of man* for *Son of God* would, on the other hand, be difficult to explain.”<sup>586</sup> Though it has no bearing on the interpretation of the passage itself, it does seem reasonable to view *Son of Man* as original and *Son of God* as a later emendation.

Be that as it may, the meaning of the passage should not be impacted by discussions of textual variants, for it not only forms the completion of the wonderful story of the healing of the man born blind, but also segues into the Shepherd Discourse of Chapter 10. “*I am the Good Shepherd.*” (10:14) and the Good Shepherd faithfully brings this lost sheep – the man born blind – into the fold of God. We are told that Jesus, “*finding him,*” asks him about his knowledge and belief in the Son of Man. Several commentators point out that the Greek words translated ‘finding’ or ‘found’ does not necessarily mean that Jesus conducted a search, but that such a meaning is practically demanded by the subsequent discourse. “The Greek word need not imply a search but, since in the Fourth Gospel the word is only used either of an action of the Christ which is a definite and conscious fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (xii.14), or of a meeting which issues in discipleship (i. 41, 43, 45, v. 14), it is never descriptive of a merely fortuitous meeting.”<sup>587</sup> Jesus did not come upon the man by happenstance; rather, *hearing* that the man had been put out of the synagogue, Jesus *found* him. “Jesus finds the man whom the Pharisees had thrown out, since he urgently needs help, and above all needs to know the identity of the one who had healed him and whom he had steadfastly refused to deny.”<sup>588</sup> A poignant illustration of the coming verse, “*I am the Good Shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me.*”<sup>589</sup>

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<sup>586</sup> Hoskyns; 359.

<sup>587</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>588</sup> Beasley-Murray; 159.

<sup>589</sup> John 10:14

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

Jesus question to the formerly blind man is intriguing. It seems to draw out of the man himself the process of enlightenment that we witness during the man's interrogation by the Pharisees. It is apparent that Jesus is not asking the man for a theological opinion concerning the Son of Man, but rather for *trust* in the Son of Man. At least this is how the man himself understood the question, "*And who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him.*" Rodney Whitacre writes, "Belief is not merely an intellectual assent to a proposition, but an attachment of trust to an individual as the one who comes from God."<sup>590</sup> The development of the blind man in his path to spiritual sight is set in contrast to the healed paralytic in John 5, but clearly parallels the coming to faith of the Samaritan woman in John 4.

### **John 4**

*The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."*

*The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things."*

*Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."*

### **John 9**

*They said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him because He opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."*

*Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him, He said to him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered and said, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?"*

*And Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you."*

The significance of these dialogues is to illustrate just the sort of people that Jesus came to save, and the sort of people that He *did not* come to save.

*And Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you." Then he said, "Lord, I believe!" And he worshiped Him. (9:37-38)*

The poignancy of Jesus' response to the blind man is quite powerful. Not having seen light for his entire life, and not yet having seen the Man who suddenly granted him the ability to see, this man would naturally be quite emotionally impacted by the Lord's response, "*You have both **seen Him** and it is He who is talking to you now.*" Morris comments,

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<sup>590</sup> Whitacre; 249

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

“His use of the verb ‘thou hast seen’ must have meant a good deal to the man who up till that day had seen nothing.”<sup>591</sup> Beasley-Murray adds, “But there is a poignancy in the words to the formerly blind man; this is the first time he has been able to see the face of Jesus; and he learns that he is actually looking on the Son of Man!”<sup>592</sup> One cannot help but think that in Jesus’ use of the word ‘see’ He means more than just physical sight. As will become evident in the next verse, physical sight is the least of the blessings this man has received. “To see Him and recognize Him is perfect sight and enlightenment.”<sup>593</sup>

The simplicity of the man’s response is also quite beautiful, “*He worshipped Him.*” It is odd that commentators feel the need to mention that the Greek term translated ‘worship’ – *proskuneō* – does not necessarily mean ‘worship.’ It means to ‘kiss toward’ and is often used in ancient Greek with reference to the deferential behavior of a subordinate to a lord. But who would think that this is the meaning of John in the verse? Commentators argue that if the man truly bowed down to worship Jesus, the Pharisees standing by would most certainly raised an objection. That is an argument from silence, and it may be that these Pharisees, whom we will meet shortly, were not of the hardcore Jesus-haters we have encountered elsewhere. The most common meaning of the Greek term in the New Testament is ‘to worship,’ and there is no reason to deny that meaning here. “The man has already recognized that Jesus came from God (v. 33). Now he goes a step further. He gives to Jesus that reverence that is appropriate to God.”<sup>594</sup>

This is not the only place in the Gospels where we find men worshipping Jesus, though it appears to be the only place in the Fourth Gospel where this term is used. These instances where Jesus receives from men that worship that is reserved only for God are powerful indications that Jesus was well aware of His own divinity, for otherwise He was guilty of countenancing an act of sacrilege. “It would be idolatry to worship Christ if he were only man, and Christ would have been an imposter if he had allowed this man to worship him if he had not been God.”<sup>595</sup> One of the clearest principles of the divine self-revelation in the Old Testament is that the one God is a jealous God, and absolutely

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<sup>591</sup> Morris; 495.

<sup>592</sup> Beasley-Murray; 159.

<sup>593</sup> Hoskyns; 359.

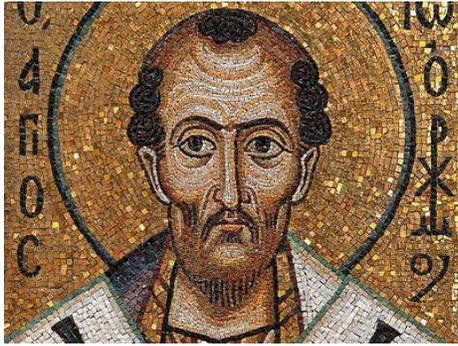
<sup>594</sup> Morris; 495-496.

<sup>595</sup> Spurgeon, *MTP* 39.252.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

refuses to share His glory with another. Idolatry was a great sin within pre-exilic Israel; it is unlikely that any Messianic pretender would take matters so far as to accept personal worship. While this may not prove that Jesus *was* God, it definitely proves that Jesus considered Himself *to be* God.

The overarching meaning of this episode is paradigmatic of all believing Israel. The



**Chrysostom (c. AD 347-407)**

threat of excommunication – being *de-synagogued* – for faith in Jesus Christ was experienced by many who put their faith in Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. But Jesus’ encounter with this blind man shows that being kicked out of the Temple or synagogue is not a curse, so long as one is then received into the true Temple of Jesus’ body, His church. Chrysostom wrote in his homily on

this passage, “The Jews cast him out from the Temple, and the Lord of Temple found him.”<sup>596</sup> Luthardt adds concerning Jesus’ treatment of the formerly blind man, “He recompensed him in the very bringing of his belief to perfection. He recompensed him by bestowing on him His person and its fellowship, in the place of the lost fellowship with the synagogue.”<sup>597</sup> Throughout history, being cast out of the religious establishment has not always been a bad thing, and many times has worked for the far greater good of the one excommunicated. Calvin comments on the example of Martin Luther, and the impact that the excommunication meted out against the German reformer by Pope Leo X had on Luther’s evangelical zeal. Speaking of the blind’s man’s situation, Calvin writes,

If he had been kept in the synagogue, he would have run the danger of becoming gradually alienated from Christ and plunged into the same destruction of the ungodly. Christ now meets him wandering about outside the Temple and embraces him who is cast out by the priests, raises him who is fallen and offers life to him who had been sentenced to death. We have know the same thing in our own time. For when Luther, and others like him, were beginning to reprove the grosser abuses of the Pope, they had scarcely the slightest taste for pure Christianity. But after the Pope had fulminated against them and cast them out of the Roman synagogue by terrifying bulls, Christ stretched out His hand and made Himself

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<sup>596</sup> Chrysostom, *Homily LIX On John*; [CHURCH FATHERS: Homily 59 on the Gospel of John \(Chrysostom\) \(newadvent.org\)](#); Accessed 13July2021.

<sup>597</sup> Luthardt; 335.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

fully known to them. So there is nothing better for us than to be far away from the enemies of the Gospel so that He may come near to us.<sup>598</sup>

Furthermore, recognizing where John's discourse is going (the dialogue of the Good Shepherd), we also see in this episode the drawing together to Jesus of a people – His sheep – that are entirely His own, having been given to Him by His Father. This episode, then, foreshadows the spiritual and the physical end of the Jewish religion, typified most powerfully in the eventual destruction of the Temple (*cp.* John 2:19). "Christian adoration of the Christ, the intuitive and impulsive expression of insight and faith, is the true and spiritual worship of God, by which Jewish worship in the Temple and all other worship is superseded."<sup>599</sup>

*And Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind."* (9:39)

This verse is the theological crux of the entire passage and the meaning of the entire episode of the healing of the man born blind. It is the summary of Jesus' repeated assertion, "*I am the Light of the world,*" and the underlying power of both His Person and His work. At first glance, however, Jesus' words seem to be in contradiction with those spoken earlier in this same Gospel.

*For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.* (3:17)

The apparent contradiction is just that, for in the earlier verse we are simply told that the mission of Jesus at His First Advent was not a mission of judgment, whereas in the passage before us in Chapter 9 we are told of the inevitable and unavoidable consequence of that mission, of the Light coming into the world. It has already been established from the start of the Fourth Gospel, that the darkness will oppose the Light, though it will not be able to overpower it. "*For this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil.*"<sup>600</sup> John has also established that those who refuse to place their trust in Jesus Christ will remain in their darkness, for

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<sup>598</sup> Calvin; 253.

<sup>599</sup> Hoskyns; 359.

<sup>600</sup> John 3:19

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

*“the wrath of God abides upon him.”*<sup>601</sup> Thus the judgment is automatic whenever the presence of Jesus enters into the life of any man – the Light encountering the darkness, *“He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does believe in Him is judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”*<sup>602</sup> Luthardt writes, “Here, the self-judgment of the world is taught as a conclusion of his revelation in the world.”<sup>603</sup> This is no less true today whenever Christ is set before men through the Gospel. “The converted Christians, whether born Jews or Gentiles, have passed from darkness to light; the unconverted World, whether Jewish or Gentile, with all its proud authority and wisdom (I Cor. 1:18-25), is condemned to darkness and ignorance by the advent of Christ and by the effectual mission of His disciples.”<sup>604</sup>

Though the Day of Judgment be not at this hour, yet our Lord Jesus is now carrying on a form of judgment in the world. ‘His fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor.’ He sits as a refiner separating ever and anon his silver from the dross. His cross has revealed the thought of many hearts, and everywhere his gospel is acting as a discoverer, as a separator, and as a test by which men may judge themselves, if they will.<sup>605</sup>

Even the nature of the ‘judgment’ to which Jesus refers in verse 39 indicates that it is not the final judgment of which He speaks. Rather, it is the fact that the presentation of Himself – *the Light of the World* – to the world brings about the effect that He describes: *“those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”* This is the interim judgment that precedes and foreshadows the final judgment: that men who claimed to see will become blind, and those who acknowledge their blindness will receive true sight. “He has not come for judgment in the sense of condemnation, but such condemnation does take place as he who is the light of the world is revealed. When the light shines, judgment takes place.”<sup>606</sup> This is, of course, especially manifested in the unbelieving Jews. “We saw above that the very knowledge of the letter of the law, in which they so prided themselves,

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<sup>601</sup> John 3:36

<sup>602</sup> John 3:18

<sup>603</sup> Luthardt; 339.

<sup>604</sup> Hoskyns; 360.

<sup>605</sup> Spurgeon, *MTP* 30.481.

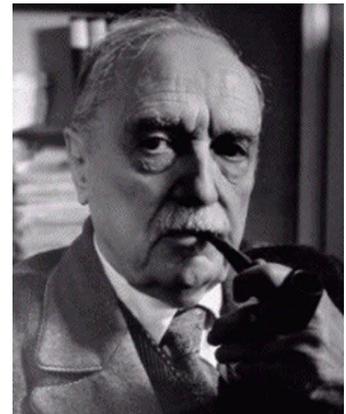
<sup>606</sup> Whitacre; 250.

## The Theology of the Gospel of John – Part II

became to the Pharisees a hindrance to seeing in Jesus the fulfilment of the promise. They have therefore become blind to the essential contents of the Old Testament.”<sup>607</sup>

And is not this judgment a common consequence of Christ’s Gospel coming to a place or a people for the first time? Minds previously quite dead receive sight. Mind’s previously self-satisfied and proud of their own light are given over to utter darkness and left behind. Those who once saw not, see. Those who fancied themselves clear-sighted are found blind.<sup>608</sup>

The structure of Jesus’ proclamation is purposely convoluted, as were so many of His sayings: “*He who has ears, let Him hear.*” The blind will see and those who see will become blind. This is not only the impact of His presence and His teaching, this is the act of God through Jesus Christ. It is evident that Jesus is here referring to natural capacity within the spiritual realm. The blind cannot see, and therefore cannot give sight to themselves; it must be given to them. Those who ‘see’ cannot consider themselves blind, and therefore consider that they have no need to be healed. This is the self-condemnation of the latter group, and the venue of divine grace for the former. “Unless God opens our eyes we will not see, but he is offering sight to all who will receive it – such is the biblical antinomy of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.”<sup>609</sup> It may be said that the longer a sinner hears the Gospel and remains unresponsive and unrepentant, the harder his or her heart will grow, and the darker his true situation. “The more light a man has, the more sin, if he does not believe.”<sup>610</sup> Even



**Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)**

such a scholar as Rudolf Bultmann, hardly an evangelical, saw this necessary impact of the Gospel. “This is the paradox of the revelation, that in order to bring grace it must cause offense, and so can turn to judgment. In order to be grace it must uncover sin; he who resists this binds himself to his sin, and so through the revelation sin for the first time becomes definitive.”<sup>611</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*; 340

<sup>608</sup> Ryle; 191.

<sup>609</sup> Whitacre; 253.

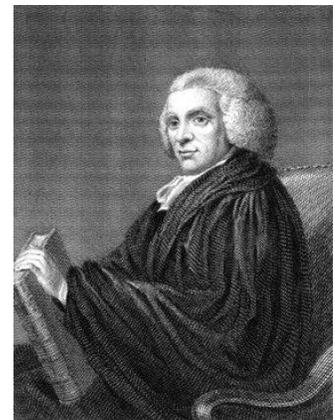
<sup>610</sup> Ryle; 194.

<sup>611</sup> Quoted by Beasley-Murray; 160.

*Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, "Are we blind also?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains.* (9:40-41)

The Pharisees were like a Secret Service detachment sent to shadow Jesus wherever He went – not, of course, to protect Him, but rather to report back to ‘the Jews’ the things Jesus was saying and doing and how the crowds were responding to the ‘Messiah.’ The presence of the Pharisees here has caused some commentators great discomfort, reasoning that there must be an interval between the blind man’s worshipping of Jesus and this short discourse, for the Pharisees would never have stood by silently while a Jew offered religious adoration to anyone other than Israel’s God. This is a plausible argument, but the text reads too smoothly and consecutively to introduce an interval of time. Perhaps it is the case that these particular Pharisees were, like the Sanhedrin officers earlier, so captivated by Jesus’ power and authority that they were at least temporarily rendered incapable of opposing Him in the manner they would normally do. It is also possible that these Pharisees were some of the few who were not fully on board with their compatriots’ full condemnation of Jesus; they remained in doubt. If we assign a measure of sincerity to their question, this may be the most accurate description of those mentioned in verse 40.

If these Pharisees hoped to hear an encouraging response from the Galilean rabbi, they were sorely disappointed. The Pharisees, perhaps like no other group within Second Temple Judaism, were self-assured to the point of arrogance in their own ‘sight’ through the Law. This pretended knowledge would be their downfall because it would stand in the way of faith. Claiming to ‘know God’ through Moses, they will not come to know God through His Son. “The sin of the Pharisees is set off against the faith of the man born blind, and the unbelieving and arrogant Jews are placed solidly within the sphere of darkness.”<sup>612</sup> It is their confidence in themselves that both sets them apart from other Jews and places them out of the reach of divine grace. “They are the embodiment of the condemnation of which Jesus has been



William Jones (1726-1800)

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<sup>612</sup> Hoskyns; 360.

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Jesus has been speaking. It never occurs to them that they can possibly be blind.”<sup>613</sup> Ryle quotes the 18<sup>th</sup> Century English theologian William Jones of Nayland as praying, “Give us, O Lord, the sight of this man who had been blind from birth, and deliver us from the blindness of his judges, who had been learning all their lives, and yet knew nothing.”<sup>614</sup>

Using a different metaphor, though one quite common in all presentations of the Gospel and well within Jesus’ own discourses in the Fourth Gospel, the Apostle Paul recognizes this dual effect of the Gospel, bringing life and death by the same message.

*For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life.*  
(II Corinthians 2:15-16)

Jesus’ comment at the end of this pericope applies to every sinner presented with the Gospel of salvation in His Name. Despite Jacob Neusner’s ecumenical spirit, an encounter with Jesus is never neutral. One cannot simply ‘discourse’ or ‘debate’ with Jesus. Even as Neusner himself recognized but could not (would not) come to grips with, it is *who Jesus is* that matters most, even more than what Jesus said (though that also matters a great deal). Thus it is the case perennially that when the Gospel is preached in truth and by the power of the Holy Spirit, it does not leave men untouched. Sinners cannot simply decide to ‘go separate ways’ with Jesus. “Neither to the right nor to the wrong is Christ indifferent. Whoever you may be, if you hear the gospel at any time it must have some effect on you...The Lord’s approach to a soul will lift it into the light more and more gloriously; or else it will plunge it into deeper darkness, deeper responsibility, and consequently deeper woe.”<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>613</sup> Morris; 497.

<sup>614</sup> Ryle; 193.

<sup>615</sup> Spurgeon, *MTP* 30.482-483