

The Gospel of John

Seven Signs, Seven Statements

Lesson #1

It would be hard to overestimate the influence of John's Gospel on the history of the Church. Over the centuries of Christian history, individual followers of Jesus Christ have turned to the Fourth Gospel for encouragement, edification, and reassurance in their faith. Theologians have found in the elevated Christology of John's Gospel one of the highest and fullest expressions of who Jesus is in the entire Bible. Historians who study the early Church have debated whether and to what extent the Johannine Christians formed an isolated community, and whether or not they differed substantially in belief and practice from early mainstream Christianity.

Above all this, and sometimes in spite of it, the Fourth Gospel stands as a monumental literary work of incredible genius in its own right. Any Bible student who has taken more than a superficial glance at John's Gospel realizes it is filled with language, metaphor, and imagery which grips the readers and transports him or her to the world of the Evangelist. At the same time the text engages the reader with a subtle pressure to adopt the viewpoint of the Evangelist about who Jesus is, forcing the reader to see the decision for or against Jesus Christ as an either/or which ultimately determines one's eternal destiny. As the characters in the narrative choose to follow Jesus Christ and thus choose eternal life (like the Samaritan woman and the royal official from Capernaum in chapter 4 and the man born blind in chapter 9), or reject him and choose eternal darkness (like the obtuse paralytic in chapter 5 or the Pharisees at the end of chapter 9), so the reader of the Gospel is also drawn to make this incalculable choice.

As we begin this study of the fourth gospel we start with the basic questions of who, when and why.

Who?

There seems to be much debate on who actually wrote this gospel. Many scholars believe that the apostle John wrote this gospel. Others believe that it was someone else. There is even a school of thought that this gospel was written, like Mark who was a disciple of Peter, by someone who was a disciple of John.

Our study assumes that this gospel was written by the apostle John. There are two reasons for this:

1. B. F. Westcott's "concentric circles of proof," which was originally part of the introduction to his commentary is very helpful here. (see handout)
2. Evidence from early church fathers that attribute authorship to the apostle John.

When?

Most scholars date the writing of this gospel as early as 69 AD, and as late as 200AD. Since we choose to attribute the writing of this gospel to the apostle John, this would place the writing sometime between 69AD and 100 AD. The oldest surviving fragment of the New Testament is a portion of John 18, found in Egypt and dating well before 120 AD, indicating wide circulation by that early date.

Why?

Why are there four gospels? The early church father Origen (185-254 AD.) gave a good answer: there are not four gospels, but one four-fold gospel. Each gospel presents a different perspective on the life of Jesus, and we need all four to get the full picture.

John was probably the last gospel written, and written in view of what the previous three had already said. This is one reason why John is so different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Another was that John was written in response to early church heresy. A sect of early Christians believed that Jesus was not fully human and fully divine, that because He was good He was total spirit and had no human body. These people were known as Gnostics, and most of what we know about them today comes from their writings found in the Dead Sea scrolls.

The Gnostic heresy

It is not easy to give the basic doctrines of the Gnostics, since they were not one group, but rather several similar philosophies. This doctrine must have been one of the strangest ever believed by rational people. Here are a few of the leading points:

- i. **Dualism.** This was the most basic principle of Gnosticism. Evil was identified with matter, and good with Spirit. Everything depended on this distinction. Because matter was evil, the God who created the earth must also be evil. But Jesus was seen as the spiritual being that had brought salvation. Therefore he must not be the son of the God of the Old Testament, but must rather be indwelt by a higher power.
- ii. **Docetism** was a natural result of this kind of thinking. Jesus could not be thought of as truly a man. Even though he appeared as a man, this must have been only an appearance, not a reality, since the highest good could not truly be united with sinful matter. Therefore, he also did not die, and was not buried. The Christ spirit must have left the man Jesus before his death, or perhaps the death was simply a sham.

- iii. The God of the OT was explained by theorizing that the Supreme Being could "emanate" or produce other spiritual beings, which could also emanate other beings. Each level of spirits would be lower and weaker than the previous level. It was explained that there was "'a long chain of divine creatures, each weaker than its parent,' and we come at last 'to one, who, while powerful enough to create is silly enough not to see that creation is wrong.' This was the God of this world, the God of the Jews." This was not the only theory that was advanced, but it serves to illustrate the point.
- iv. "Christ" was sent by the good, supreme God, not the Creator of this world. Christianity/Gnosis ("knowledge") was the supreme God's attempt to liberate the spirits of some of mankind from the bondage to matter and to the other foolish practices of this world, many of which were commanded by the Creator of this world. In some versions of the theory, even the serpent in Eden was a representative of the supreme God, trying to save Adam and Eve from the foolishness of the Creator.
- v. Since matter was evil, it contributed nothing to our salvation. In some versions of Gnosticism, this resulted in an extreme asceticism, or abstinence, in which the flesh was denied as much as possible. In a few versions, it was believed that since the body was irrelevant to salvation, one could act as immorally as he wished; behavior and Gnosis were unrelated.

John's gospel, if nothing else depicted the "logos" as both fully human AND fully divine, a direct repudiation of Gnosticism.

There are significant events in the ministry of Jesus that Matthew, Mark, and Luke include that John leaves out, including Jesus' birth, baptism, temptation in the wilderness, the Last Supper, the agony in Gethsemane, the Ascension, demonic confrontations, and parables.

The first three gospels centered on Jesus' ministry in Galilee. John centers his gospel on what Jesus said and did in Jerusalem.

Each of the gospels emphasizes a different origin of Jesus.

Matthew shows Jesus came from Abraham through David, and demonstrates that He is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament (Matthew 1:1-17).

Mark shows Jesus came from Nazareth, demonstrating that Jesus is a Servant (Mark 1:9).

Luke shows Jesus came from Adam, demonstrating that Jesus is the Perfect Man (Luke 3:23-38).

John shows Jesus came from heaven, demonstrating that Jesus is God.

Luke tells us Jesus was born in Bethlehem; John tells us the Word became flesh.

However, it is wrong to think that the Gospel of John completes the story of Jesus. John makes it clear that the story of Jesus can never be completed (John 21:25).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the three synoptic gospels. Synoptic means "see-together" and the first three gospels present Jesus' life in pretty much the same format.

The first three gospels focus more on **what** Jesus taught and did; John focuses more on **who** Jesus is.

John shows us who Jesus is by highlighting seven signs (miracles) of Jesus. Six of these miracles are not mentioned in the first three gospels.

John shows us who Jesus is by allowing Jesus to speak for Himself in seven dramatic "I Am" statements.

John shows us who Jesus is by calling forth witnesses who will testify about the identity of Jesus. Four of these witnesses speak in the first chapter alone.

John is a gospel written for a specific purpose: that we might believe. A key verse for understanding the Gospel of John is found at the end of the book: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).

Perhaps the most pervasive theme in John, which in many ways is the master key that unlocks the Gospel as a whole, is the revelation of God as a family. Nearly every chapter is marked by familial language that explains the inner life of God as well as our relation to God through the grace of divine generation.

Seven signs, seven statements

To study this gospel in detail would require an investment of at least 25 sessions. With a six to seven week time frame we are going to narrow our scope of study to the seven signs.

The Prologue

The first 18 verses of Chapter one function as a prologue, kind of like a musical overture, introducing the main themes of the Gospel to be developed in subsequent chapters: **Light** (1:4), **Life** (1:4), **darkness** (1:5), **Testimony** (1:7), **Faith** (1:12), **Glory** (1: 14), **Truth** (1:17). This network of images and ideas is held together around Jesus the Word, who is portrayed as the Creator and Redeemer of all things. In language that is evocative of the beginning of Genesis, John lays the groundwork for his assertion that Jesus is God.

So let's open up our bible and read the first chapter.

1. What is the opening words of John's Gospel intended to remind us of? Who or what is the Word?

List the all the parallels you can find between the opening verses of John and the opening verses of Genesis.

2. Is the "Word" in verses 2-3 a creature or the Creator, according to John? What does John mean by "all things"? (See 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Colossians 1:16.)

3. Verse 4 states that "the life was the light of men". What are some of meanings of "life" for John? (See John 3:16, 3:36, 6:27, 10:10 and 14:6.) **What are some of the meanings of "light"?** (See Proverbs 4:19, Isaiah 60:1-3, John 3:19-21 and John 8:12.)

4. What kind of darkness did John have in mind in verse 5? (See Proverbs 4:18, Psalms 82:4-5, 2Corinthians 4:4, Ephesians 5:8, and Acts 26.18.)

5. Who is John? What was John's mission, according to Gospel? What was not John's mission? Why would the Evangelist need to emphasize that John was not the light?

6. Read Acts 14:16-17, Romans 1:19-20 and Romans 2:14-16. In John 1: 9-10, what does John mean by "the light that enlightens every man"? What does this foreshadow about the reception Jesus was to receive?

7. What is "grace"? (See the Catechism of the Catholic Church [hereafter CCC], paragraph no. 257.)

8. Read verse 18. How does God reveal Himself to us? What is the "bosom" of the Father? (See CCC, paragraph no. 151.)

Summary

John, like all the New Testament writers, sees Scripture as having multiple layers of meaning. So, for instance, when the Old Testament describes God feeding Israel with manna in the wilderness, John sees the Scripture as having a literal sense, but also a more-than-literal sense. It records a historical event, but that event itself points to something greater: Jesus the Bread of Life revealed in the Eucharist.

The perception that Scripture has both outer and inner realities influences the way in which John thinks and writes. So, for instance, John begins his Gospel with the assumption that the New Covenant is hidden in the Old and the Old is only fully understood in light of the New. You can't fully understand John's prologue, for instance, if you don't know anything about Genesis. This is true because John is peppering what he writes with allusions to Genesis. At the same time, you can't fully understand Genesis if you don't understand that Jesus is the eternal Word through whom God created everything in Genesis.

This interplay between the Old and New Testaments is what the Fathers of the Church call the "economy" of the divine plan. The economy shows us who God is and what He is like, just as a work of art shows whom the artist is and what he is like. Likewise, as knowing the artist helps us to understand his work, so knowing God (what the Fathers call "theologia") leads to greater understanding of His works and words.

As the *Catechism* says: The Fathers of the Church distinguish between theology (*theologia*) and economy (*oikonomia*). "**Theology**" refers to the mystery of God's inmost life within the Blessed Trinity and "**economy**" to all the works by which God reveals himself and communicates his life. Through the *oikonomia* the *theologia* is revealed to us; but conversely, the *theologia* illuminates the whole *oikonomia*. God's works reveal who he is in himself; the mystery of his inmost being enlightens our understanding of all his works. So it is, analogously, among human persons. A person discloses himself in his actions, and the better we know a person, the better we understand his actions (CCC no. 236).

In short, we know who God is by what He does and we come to understand the meaning of what He does by coming to know better who He is.

As we read through John we will find that themes first articulated in the prologue recur again and again throughout John's Gospel: light, life, word, believe, dwell, and so forth. These various ideas, upon which John will ring the changes for the next 20 chapters, are first seen in the prologue. These ideas are not something John simply pulls from thin air. As the first three words of the Gospel suggest, John intends our minds to hark back to the very roots of Old Testament revelation. There, in the book of Genesis we will find these same ideas of light, life, the creative word of God, belief, dwelling and others being articulated for the first time. Now, John is telling us that all that was present in the

beginning is being revealed in fullness in Christ. Jesus, in short, is not an afterthought or a break with the revelation of the Old Testament. He is the fulfillment of it.

The first verses of John simultaneously recall the book of Genesis (thereby rooting all that follows in the revelation of the Old Testament), and reveals with amazing compression the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. The reference to the "Logos" or "Word" refers not to Scripture or some sounds uttered by human beings, but to God the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity, who is God from all eternity and yet a distinct person from God the Father. It is God the Father's perfect Self-Expression, uttered from all eternity, through whom God made all things.

Because of this, He is "in the beginning" or "first" in a double sense. That is, He is first in that He exists before creation but He is also first in that He is the author and Lord of Creation. He is "in the beginning" both in terms of sequence and in terms of rank. Colossians 1:15-17 echoes the same theme: **"He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."**

In short, while man is in God's image, Christ *is* God's image. The Word then, is not the first thing God created. He is God the Son, through whom all things were made. The Word *is* God.