

JOHN – THE SPIRITUAL GOSPEL

1. JOHN – THE ‘SPIRITUAL’ GOSPEL

It used to be said that whereas Matthew, Mark & Luke give the bare facts of the story of Jesus, John gave us the facts plus interpretation. But this is an overstatement. All the Gospel writers were in the business of interpreting Jesus to their contemporaries. Matthew, Mark & Luke in their differing ways were as much theologians as John.

Yet, John’s Gospel has a markedly different approach from the other Gospels. So much so that Clement of Alexandria, the first-known Christian teacher and scholar, wrote in 2C: “*John, perceiving that the bodily facts had been made plain in the gospel, being urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual gospel*”.

I find Clement’s phrase: “*inspired by the Spirit*” significant.

“**All Scripture**”, as Paul said to Timothy, “**is inspired by God**” (2 Tim 3.16) – but John has a particular approach to inspiration.

The key to John’s understanding of the work of the Spirit is found in 14.25,26 where John records Jesus saying to his disciples: “**The Helper, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you**”.

The Spirit here is described as having a two-fold role:

- on the one hand, the Spirit has the task of helping the disciples to remember what Jesus had said,
- on the other hand he has also the task of teaching the disciples the meaning of what Jesus said.

This is what we see in John’s Gospel in particular. For John not simply tells the story of Jesus – he also explores the meaning of the story of Jesus.

This has caused some to question the trustworthiness of the Gospel.

However, we need to be aware that in the ancient world historical trustworthiness did not necessarily involve an exact quotation of what someone had said.

Ancient historians were more concerned to report the ‘gist’ of what was said, as distinct from the actual words.

Certainly this is true of John. John wrote his Gospel in a particular style of his own, paraphrasing and interpreting Jesus’ words to bring out what he believed were their full and true significance.

John, in a way that is not true of the other Gospels, is writing from a longer perspective. And not surprisingly, because almost certainly John was the last of the Gospels to be written – possibly toward the end of the 1st century, perhaps in the late 80s, if not early 90s.

It was because John’s Gospel was written at a greater distance from the events which he records, that John was able to interpret the significance of Jesus’ coming a little more clearly.

A Scottish NT scholar, AM Hunter, expressed it this way: *“Take an example from British history. What took place at Runnymede in 1215 was that King John very reluctantly signed the Magna Carta. When the King put pen to paper, a few may have dimly surmised what was really going on. But the modern historian, with the help of hindsight, sees clearly that what was being inaugurated was the birth of British Parliamentary democracy as we know it”*.

John, in writing up the story of Jesus, sees to the heart of its meaning.

This doesn’t mean to say that he is uninterested in detail – indeed, John’s Gospel contains more details of time and place than do the other three.

- E.g. it is only from John that we are able to determine that Jesus’ ministry lasted for three years – if we only had the first three Gospels, we could think Jesus’ ministry lasted little more than a year.
- In the last century or so archaeologists have identified the pools of Bethesda (5.2) and Siloam (9.11) to which John refers, as also to the so-called ‘stone pavement’ (19.13) where Pilate sat to give judgement. The accuracy is all the more impressive, since it is incidental – John clearly knew what he was talking about.

However, at the end of the day John was into painting the big picture – in a way which was not true of the other Gospels, he was concerned to draw out and develop the significance of Jesus.

2. JOHN AND THE OTHER THREE GOSPELS

As I mentioned at the very beginning of my sermon series on the Gospels, we call the first three Gospels the ‘Synoptic’ Gospels – for although each one of them is different, nonetheless they have a common approach to the way in which they tell the story of Jesus. They have a common view. John, by contrast, is different.

As a result, some people have wondered whether John was aware of the other Gospels.

At one stage it was assumed that he had access to them – now it is thought that he probably hadn’t seen Mark, Luke or Matthew in the form that we have them.

But what is certain, is that he did have access to some of the sources and traditions upon which those gospels were written.

However, John was not interested in telling everything he knows.

When he wrote toward the end of his Gospel: **“In his disciples’ presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book”** (20.30), he was to all intents and purposes admitting that he had been selective in his treatment of his sources.

So, e.g., although he devotes four whole chapters (13-16) to Jesus spending the last night of his life in the Upper Room, he never mentions the Lord’s Supper once.

He certainly knew about the Lord’s Supper – for in his teaching following the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, he speaks about people eating his flesh and drinking his blood (5.53-56) – and yet he does not refer to the actual institution of the Supper.

Instead, he prefers to depict Jesus interpreting the significance of his death in terms of the washing of the disciples feet rather than of the broken bread & the poured out wine. This is just one instance of his selectivity.

Many other things which are central to the first three Gospels are also absent in John’s Gospel:

- Although John tells of John the Baptist, he omits the baptism of Jesus. He also omits any reference to the temptation of Jesus or to the transfiguration of Jesus.
- There are no parables in John, or at least not parables in the style that we find them in the first three Gospels
- Although John records Jesus healing people, there are no exorcisms – there is no record of demons being cast out in John.
- John records that Jesus worked miracles – but he limits himself to speaking only of seven.
- John depicts Jesus as a teacher – but his style is very different from the first three Gospels. In John’s Gospel Jesus has long conversations with people. John, e.g., devotes a lengthy section to Jesus conversation with Nicodemus about the need to be born again: and he devotes even more space to Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well and the thirst-quenching water of life which Jesus could give.
- John’s setting of the ministry of Jesus. Whereas in the first three Gospels almost all of Jesus’ ministry is conducted in Galilee, in John’s Gospel Jesus spends much more time in Judea: indeed, according to John, Jesus had a ministry in Judea before the Galilean one began; and then he had an extended ministry in Jerusalem when the Galilean one was over.
- Although some of John’s stories, such as the Feeding of the 5000 and perhaps the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, are to be found in the synoptic Gospels, many are not. Nowhere else, e.g., do we hear of the Samaritan woman by Jacob’s well or of the night-time conversation with Nicodemus; other stories peculiar to John are the healing of the Bethesda cripple, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the washing of the disciples’ feet in the Upper Room, and the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene in the garden on the first Easter morning.
- There are apparent differences of dating: in John the cleansing of the temple comes at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry; indeed, it is possible that the date of the crucifixion appears to be a day earlier than in the first three Gospels.
- There are differences in the way in which Jesus speaks about himself. Whereas in the first three Gospels Jesus seeks to hide his identity for fear of people misunderstanding the kind of Messiah in John’s Gospel Jesus speaks freely of himself as the Son of God;
- Furthermore, whereas in the other Gospels Jesus speaks about the kingdom, in John’s Gospel Jesus speaks about life.

There are indeed many differences. And yet, we mustn’t over-emphasise these differences. E.g.

- The central focus of John’s Gospel is the same as the other three Gospels: viz the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Although in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus tends to hide his identity, nonetheless Matthew & Luke record one particular occasion when Jesus spoke in very similar terms as to how we find him speaking in John: **“My Father has given me all things. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him”** (Matt 11.27//Luke 10.22).

- Although John prefers to depict Jesus speaking about eternal life rather than the kingdom of God, the life of which Jesus speaks is actually life in the Kingdom of God.
- Furthermore, in spite of all the differences the other three Gospels share John’s concern to show that Jesus is “**the Christ, the Son of God**”.

3. JOHN THE ‘BELOVED DISCIPLE’

So far we have been speaking about John as being the author of John’s Gospel. But nowhere in John’s Gospel does it say that it was written by the Apostle John. Like the three other Gospels, the fourth Gospel is anonymous.

Who wrote the Gospel? The answer is ‘*the Beloved Disciple*’ – literally “**the disciple whom Jesus loved**”. We discover this in John 21.

Now John 21 did not originally belong to the Fourth Gospel. The Fourth Gospel originally ended at John 20.30, 31 where the author concludes by stating the purpose for his writing: “**In his disciples’ presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life**”. Full stop – over and out.

But very early an extra chapter was added – John 21- in this extra chapter we have another story of Jesus appearing to his disciples, and in particular appearing to Peter. Here too we have a statement as to the source of the Gospel For after recounting the Easter conversation of Jesus with Peter the author refers to the “**disciple whom Jesus loved**” (21.20), and then says: “**He is the disciple who spoke of these things, the one who also wrote them down; and we know what he said is true**” (21.24)

Who is this “**disciple whom Jesus loved**”?

- The term first occurs in John 13.23, where the disciple whom Jesus loved was “**sitting next to Jesus**” – the very seating at the table presumably was an indication that he was special to Jesus.
- It next is found in 19.26, where Jesus entrusted Mary his mother into the care of “**the disciple he loved**”.
- It was also this same disciple, whom Jesus loved, who went with Peter to check that the tomb was empty (20.2).

Incidentally, before we answer the question of the Beloved Disciple’s identity, one thing must be said: since it is made clear in the Gospel that Jesus loved all his disciples (see 13.1,2; 15.12-15) the expression must mean, “**the disciple whom Jesus especially loved**”.

Although some have suggested that this special disciple was Thomas or Lazarus, it was almost certainly one who belonged to the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. If the other three Gospels are any guide, we know that Peter, James and John made up that inner circle. It was these three that Jesus took up to the so-called Mount of

Transfiguration (Mk 9.22); it was these three whom Jesus took to pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mk 14.33).

1. Now it could not have been Peter: for on two occasions the 4th Gospel mentions Peter as separate from & paired with the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn 6.67,70, 71)
2. Nor could the fourth disciple have been James: for James, the son of Zebedee, was martyred in AD 44 (Acts 12.1-2) and therefore too early to be this Gospel’s author.
3. This only leaves the apostle John. Interestingly this John never appears by name in the Gospel, while the John that does appear is always the Baptist, without ever being called by that title.

Certainly the understanding that John the son of Zebedee was the author of the Fourth Gospel has tended to be the verdict of later Christian tradition.

E.g. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, wrote: “*John the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned upon his breast, himself issued the Gospel while living in Ephesus*”.

On the other hand, Papias, who lived around AD 60-AD 130, a Bishop of Hierapolis, appears to have suggested that it was written by another John, John ‘the elder’.

Certainly, there are some difficulties if John the apostle was the author. E.g.,

- the Judean focus of the Gospel seems inappropriate for someone of Galilean origin
- the author appears to have been connected with Caiaphas, the high priest (18.15,16)
- it seems difficult for the apostle to called himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved”

If the author was not the apostle John himself, then maybe he had access to John, in the way in which Mark had access to the Apostle Peter. We don’t know.

[GRB-M: “*We must be satisfied to know that he was privileged to be exceptionally close to Jesus and therefore exceptionally well acquainted with the thought of Jesus*”]

4. JOHN – A GOSPEL IN TWO HALVES

Consult any commentary, and you will discover that there are various ways of arranging the Gospel. Essentially, however, the Gospel may be structured in two halves, with a prologue and an epilogue

The Prologue: John 1.1-18

John’s Gospel opens differently from the other gospels – it opens not at the Jordan or at Bethlehem, but in eternity: “**In the beginning the Word already existed.**”

Right at the beginning of his Gospel John seeks to interpret the person of Jesus in terms that everybody would understand. For although the term ‘Word’ may ring no bells for us today, to his contemporaries it was an international term of enormous significance.

- The ancient Assyrians & Babylonians composed hymns about the Word of God.
- The Greeks & the Romans had long speculated about the nature of the Word of God.
- Similarly the Jews were familiar with this figure.

John by speaking about Jesus as the Word of God was pointing to the fact that Jesus has significance for people of every culture.

In Jesus all our longings for God are met. For Jesus is God’s self-expression. As JB Phillips put it in his paraphrase: “*At the beginning God expressed himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God, and was God*”

The Book of Signs: John 1.19-15.20

Here John describes Jesus ministry to the world.

In particular, in this section John tells of 7 “signs” or miracles performed by Jesus. Incidentally, it is significant that John uses a different word from the Synoptics: for Matthew, Mark & Luke miracles are ‘acts of power’ (*dunameis*), whereas for John they “signs” (*semeia*), signs not just of what Jesus was able to do, but what he continues to do in people’s lives.

1. Changing water to wine at Cana (2.1-11) As Jesus transformed life for the happy couple at Cana, so he continues to transform the lives of his followers
2. Healing of the official’s son at Cana who was at death’s door (4.46-54) As Jesus gave life to the boy in response to his father’s faith, so Jesus gives eternal life to all who believe
3. Healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda (5.1-15). As Jesus ‘raised’ the paralytic to a new life, so he raises those who believe to new life. Its significant that the Greek word underlying the command “rise up” (v8 *egerei*) is the same word found in 5.21: “**As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, in the same way the Son gives life to those he wants to**”
4. Multiplication of the loaves in Galilee (6.1-15). As Jesus fed the 5000, so he as the Bread of Life continues to satisfy the longings of the human heart.
5. Walking upon the Sea of Galilee (6.16-21) As Jesus overcame the hostile elements of the storm, so he can overcome the hostile elements today. “**It is I**”, says Jesus – literally ‘I am’. The strange expression recalls the divine name. Because Jesus is one with the Father, there is no need to be afraid.
6. Healing of a blind man in Jerusalem (9). Jesus not only opened the eyes of that blind man, he also as the Light of the World, continues to open the eyes of blind men & women to the truth and to God.
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (11). This is more than the story of the bringing back to life of a man who was dead - it is a story which tells that JX is constantly bringing victory over death to men and women. He is the Resurrection & the Life.

The Book of Glory: John 13-20

Sometimes also known as ‘The Book of the Passion’ (CH Dodd), we have here not only Jesus’ instructions to his followers (13.1-17.26) but also the accounts of his passion & resurrection appearances and conclusion (18.1-20.31).

It is the Book of Glory in the sense that, for John, the death of Jesus is the highpoint of Jesus’ life. So as Judas goes off into the night to betray his Master, Jesus declares: “**Now the Son of Man’s glory is revealed through him**” (12.31). Yes, the glory of the Cross is that when Jesus is lifted up, he draws everyone to himself (12.32)

The Epilogue: John 21.1-25

As we have already mentioned, the epilogue never really belonged to the original Gospel. How good, however, it is to have it. For here we have the story of Jesus appearing to seven disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee, and then restoring Peter.

5. JOHN – THE EVANGELIST

Why did John write his Gospel? The answer is found in the Gospel’s original conclusion - 20.30,31: **“In his disciples presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have eternal life”**.

John wrote his Gospel with an evangelistic purpose. Like Luke in his Gospel, John was concerned to present the Good News of Jesus to an unbelieving world.

And yet, John’s Gospel, is also written with the church in mind. Indeed, this could well be indicated in the conclusion itself. For there is an alternative reading, which involves the use of a present tense rather than a past tense, which were it to be true would mean that John wrote: **“But these have been written in order that you may continue to believe”**

Certainly not all of John’s Gospel is evangelistic in nature - the discourses in the Upper Room, e.g., have very much future disciples in mind.

And yet for all that, it does seem to me that John’s Gospel is more in the business of awakening faith than confirming faith.

With the John 20.30, 31 in mind we can say that

1. John seeks to show that Jesus is the Messiah
2. John seeks to show that Jesus is the Son of God
3. John seeks to show that Jesus offers eternal life
4. John seeks to show that this life is for those who believe

1. Jesus is the Messiah

For John ‘Christ’ is not a name, but a title. Jesus is God’s Anointed One. E.g.

- Andrew comes to Peter and declares: **“We have found the Messiah”** (1.41)
- Jesus, in response to the Woman at the Well saying **“I know that the Messiah will come”**, replies, **“I am he, I who am talking to you”** (4.25,26)

John describes Jesus as Israel’s King: e.g.

- Nathanael, as a result of his encounter with Jesus, describes him as “**the King of Israel**” (1.49);
- as Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in a way which is not true of the other three Gospels, the crowds acclaim Jesus as “**the King of Israel**” (12.13)
- After the feeding of the 5000, John alone of the Gospel writers tells us that the people wanted to make Jesus “**king**” (6.15) – true, Jesus refused to allow them to make him king, but that was because he refused to have anything to do with a nationalistic Messiah.

John brings out the fact that the Scriptures point to Jesus: e.g.

- Philip says to Nathanael: “**We have found the one whom Moses wrote about in the book of the Law and whom the prophets also wrote about. He is Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth**” (1.43)
- Later Jesus said: “**You study the Scriptures, because you think that in them you will find eternal life. And these very Scriptures speak about me**” (5.39)

2. *Jesus is the Son of God*

Although all the other Gospels are in agreement that Jesus is the Son of God, in John this comes to fullest expression.

Whereas, e.g., in Mark’s Gospel Jesus calls God Father 4 times, [in Q 8 or 9 times] in Luke 6 times, in Matthew 23 times, in John Jesus calls God “**Father**” 107 times.

- To the people Jesus declares “**The Father and I are one**” (10.30);
- Later to Thomas he says: “**no one goes to the Father except by me**” (14.6);
- He elaborates on his relationship with God, when he says to Philip “**I am in the Father and the Father is in me**” (14.11).
- This special relationship of Jesus with the Father comes to the fore when Jesus says to Mary at the tomb: “**I am returning to him who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God**” (20.17)

Another difference between the Gospels is that the absolute use of “**the Son**” with reference to Jesus occurs only once in Mark & Luke, just twice in Matthew, but 18 times in John.

- So following his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus declares: “**The Father loves his Son and has put everything in his power. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not have life, but will remain under God’s punishment**” (3.35,36). What an amazing way of speaking.

Not surprisingly it has been said: “*The ‘Father-Son’ relationship is the key to the understanding of Jesus as portrayed*” by John (Schnackenburg)

3. *Jesus offers eternal life*

Whereas the first three Gospels stress a future hope and the return of Christ, John defines eternal life and death as beginning in the here and now.

- So immediately after declaring that **“God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life”** (3.16), John goes on to speak of judgement in the present tense: **“Those who believe in the Son are not judged; but those who do not believe have already been judged”** (3.18).
- A little later he records Jesus saying: **“those who hear my words and believe in him who sent me, have (present tense) eternal life”** (5.24).

The nature of this eternal life is described in the “I am” sayings found alone in John, each one of whom point to an aspect of the life which Jesus brings

- **“I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be hungry”** (6.35)
- **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness”** (8.12)
- **“I am the gate”** i.e. the gate to life (10.7,9). Indeed, Jesus goes on: **“I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness”** (10.10)
- **“I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep”** (10.11) – the implication is that they might live.
- **“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die”** (11.25) – eternal life may begin in this world, but goes on into the next.
- **“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”** (14.6)
- **“I am the real vine”** (15.1) – the implication is that those who remain in Jesus share his life

4. *Jesus offers life to those who believe*

Jesus offers people a choice – a choice between life and death – and the key to that choice is faith. So, e.g. in John 3.16 we find Jesus speaking of people living or perishing – those are the only alternatives. God’s purpose of love is to save – but, by rejecting Jesus, we reject life, we reject God’s salvation.

The Gospel of John involves a challenge. A challenged to respond to Christ. Everything depends on the response we make to Christ (5.22; 9.39ff)

That challenge, of course, is not just to the people of Jesus day – or even the people of John’s day – but also a challenge to us today.