

# **The Modern Reader's Guide to the Gospels by William Hamilton**

## **Chapter 1: Prologue to John's Gospel**

### 1. The prologue itself, 1:1-18

Mark began with the baptism of Jesus; Matthew and Luke, with the birth. But both these beginnings could be confusing, so John begins at the true beginning, with creation itself. The reflection of Genesis I is deliberate. For a true understanding of Jesus we cannot begin with one moment in his life, but with God at the beginning.

In the beginning was the word, the logos. Just what does this word mean? Many things. It has a complex genealogy, and this richness is probably intended by the author. To the Greek, the Stoic primarily, logos meant the rational structure of the universe. In the Old Testament, word means the creative word of God, present both in creation and given to the prophets to speak. It is God's action, God's power, God's purpose. In the Jewish thinker Philo, about the time of Jesus, we find that the Greek and Old Testament meanings are fused into one, though there is no reason for assuming that John was influenced by this fusion.

In Proverbs 8:22-31, we find the idea of God's wisdom used in a way similar to the way in which word is used here. God's wisdom is a personalized entity, actually a portion of God extended into the world. In the New Testament, of course, the Gospel is occasionally referred to as the word of God (Luke 8:11, 1 John 1:1). The Christian reading this prologue would also remember -- and perhaps this is as important as anything else -- that Jesus himself spoke words, and these words are interpreted as the very words of God himself.

So, this elusive word will mean something both to the secular mind, to the Jew, and to the Christian. Perhaps this ambiguity is deliberately intended by John; he is saying to Greek, to Jew, and to Christian: Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of each of your traditions and hopes.

Today, we can get closest to an understanding of this key word in the prologue if we interpret it as the outgoing, creative action of God in visiting and redeeming his people. This purpose was part of God from the very beginning; there may be more of God than this (though this is perhaps all man can know), but the very divinity of God is defined by this purposeful activity toward men (verse 1). And verse 3 reminds us that there are no intermediaries or levels between this redemptive God and his creation, as the gnostics held. The world is good because it was made by this creative, active God. Part of the divine activity, perhaps the decisive part for John, is that of imparting life, a full life here and now, and eternal life which begins here and now. This life is the means by which men see and understand; it is, therefore, the light of men (verse 4).

There is still darkness; man is often unable to see the light; he is still in unbelief. But this light, the divine gift by which man can see Christ, is shining in the midst of this darkness. It is shining (note the present tense of "shines"; it began to shine in the beginning; it shone with special power in Christ, but it is still shining now) not as a flickering candle but as a mighty searchlight hunting out man lost in his darkness. The word for "overcome" has a double meaning: here the meaning is that the darkness has not destroyed the light, and also that the darkness (unbelief in general and the Jews in particular) has not understood it.

Verses 6-8 briefly describe the function of John the Baptist. Gone is the story of his preaching and teaching; here his function is radically narrowed so that he has become the light that is in Christ. His function, like that of the author of the gospel, and like the Christian's of any time, is simply witness.

With verse 9 we return to the argument to argument in verse 5. In Christ, the logos or word, the life, the light, came into the world, but the world did not understand him. Not even his own people, the Jews, understood him. But some did, and to those he gave a new status as sons or children of God. This new beginning (it is called a new birth in the story of Nicodemus in 3:1-12) is not made by man; it is God's gift..

The word became flesh (verse 14). This has already been assumed in verses 9-13, and now it is openly declared. The word had been with God from the beginning; it had been spoken through the prophets of old; but this is something new. It has now come into history itself, to be seen and touched by men. (Compare the opening verses of I John and the epistle to the Hebrews.) The word "dwelt" really means that the word has built its tent in our midst, has come to live or to "tabernacle" with us; the reference is to the sacred presence of God in the Old Testament, described as his tabernacling presence. (See Exodus 25:8-9, 40:34.)

"We beheld," John writes. This is a past seeing, not a present one. The presence of Christ when John writes is not the same as it was in the days of his flesh. Then it was seeing of one kind; now it is still seeing, but different. "We" beheld; the true disciples, the true followers; not everyone. For the high priest didn't see; Pilate didn't; Judas didn't. What was seen? His glory. What does this mean? The same as "light" earlier in the prologue. We saw in him the light that made us able to know God. We saw in him the very power of God himself.

In verse 18, John introduces one of his favorite themes: man cannot see God, know God, have a direct union with God. But he is not thereby lost; we can know Christ, and Christ makes God known. "In the bosom of the Father" is an image of neither romantic nor parental love. It refers to the companionship of a common meal (see comment on 13:23-25, page 178).

The prologue is at an end, and the entire gospel -- indeed, the entire Christian story -- is here summed up. In Jesus Christ man has access to the living God himself, and through

this access come light and life, grace and truth. The rest of the gospel simply expands this affirmation.

2. The witness of John the Baptist and his disciples, 1:19-51

The Jewish authorities send a delegation to discover the status of John the Baptist. He responds with a threefold denial: he is neither the Messiah, Elijah (Malachi 4:5), nor the prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15). He has no positive messianic significance. He does describe his status in relation to a part of the Old Testament, but even this has the effect of reducing his meaning to a mere voice pointing beyond himself. It appears from verses 19-28 that John does not yet know that Jesus is the Messiah. He is asked about his rite of baptism; he defines it only in terms of purification and preparation for what is to come. But who is to come he does not yet seem to know.

With verses 29-34 the object of John's witness is revealed to him. He does not find it out himself, it is given to him. In Mark, only Jesus is aware of the meaning of his own baptism; in verses 32-34 God reveals the meaning to John. Now John the Baptist points explicitly to Jesus, and describes him in three ways. He is the Lamb of God (29), the one who baptizes by the Spirit (33), and the Son of God (34).

To describe Jesus as the Lamb of God is to go beyond the traditional messianic names and to make a statement about the meaning of his voluntary death. In the Old Testament, the lamb is both the victim provided by God as a substitute for Isaac (Genesis 22:8) and a means by which sin is removed.

Verses 35-51 describe the call of the first disciples, though Jesus directly calls only Philip (43). This should be read in connection with the call of Peter and Andrew, James and John, in Mark 1:16-20.

The next day John the Baptist again bears witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God, and two of John's disciples leave him and follow Jesus. One of these first two is Andrew, but who is the unnamed second? Is it in fact John, the beloved disciple, on whose witness this gospel is traditionally said to be founded? Andrew, having obeyed Jesus' call, gets his brother Simon Peter, and brings him to Jesus. This is almost all we ever hear of Andrew in the New Testament; he performs the humble act of bringing another man to Jesus. This is why he has been taken as the patron of the missionary activity of the church.

Jesus calls Philip directly, and Philip bears witness to Nathanael. Nathanael does not come from John the Baptist's followers but from Israel -- indeed, from the tradition of Jewish skepticism. How can the Messiah come from tiny and insignificant Nazareth, he asks. His questioning mind, his study of the Jewish law (the perplexing reference to the fig tree in verse 48 probably points to the fact that Nathanael was a student of the law, for the rabbis used to say that the best place to study the law was sitting under a fig tree) prompted Jesus to praise him as a true Jew and an honest man (1:47). It is not clear whether Jesus is meant to have some special foresight about Nathanael, or whether he was known to him already. Nathanael responds to Jesus' discernment, and calls him Son

of God, but limits his rule to Israel (1:49). His insight is not yet complete, and Jesus tells him he will understand even more. The reference to the angels in verse 51 is from the vision of Jacob in Genesis 28:10-17. The verse describes what Nathanael will be able to say: that the concrete man Jesus is the one on whom God has descended and acted; that Jesus himself is the unique relation between heaven and earth. Jesus does not promise Nathanael a vision, but an insight into who he, Jesus, truly is.

This second prologue in narrative form ends, as does the first (verses 1-18), with the positive statement of Jesus Christ's unique relation to God (compare verses 18 and 51).

## **Chapter 2: On The Meaning of Jesus Christ**

1. Christ as bearer of a new order of life, 2:1-4:42

a. two signs pointing to Christ's meaning, 2:1-22

1. The wedding at Cana, 2:1-11

The form of this story is that of miracle, a creative act of God whose methods cannot be described. More important, the purpose of this story is that of a sign, a pointer to the meaning of Jesus Christ. What meaning is intended here, is the question the reader should ask.

In 1:43 Jesus had decided to go to Galilee, and he has now arrived. He attends a wedding feast with his disciples, and his mother observes that the wine is running out. Jesus' reply to her (2:4) is not petulant, but it does point to the fact that the time of her authority over him is at an end. His "hour," he says, has not yet come. The reference is to the time of death and glorification. So until that time, his acts and his words must be in the form of signs or pointers to what his meaning is and is to be. The servants draw from the water jars (used for the Jewish rites of purification) and discover that the water has become good wine. The guests do not know what has happened; the servants know, but do not understand; the disciples know, partly understand (see 2:11, 22), and believe.

It is just possible that there are pagan sources for this story, perhaps from the rites of Dionysus. But it is more important to recall two facts from the synoptic tradition. In Mark 2:19 the disciples with Jesus are likened to guests at a wedding feast. And in Mark 2:22 the Gospel is compared to new wine that breaks old wineskins. This latter passage really gives us the clue to this sign. The water of purification (the Jewish faith) is inadequate, just as John the Baptist's baptism by water was inadequate (1:26), and Jesus' function is to give the true interpretation to the old rites. He does this by bearing the power of God

("glory" in verse 11), to which all men, like the disciples in the story, should respond in faith.

2. The cleansing of the temple, 2:13-22

This event takes place in Mark (11:15-19) at the beginning of the final week. John places it at the start of the ministry. It is not necessary to conclude that John had some better chronological source than Mark; he is always more interested in the meaning of Jesus' acts than in their setting, and his reason for placing the cleansing here is surely theological. The story of Cana is a story about purification, and the relation of the old and the new. That is the theme here as well. The disciples don't see this meaning; verse 17 suggests that they merely see the actions of a prophetic reformer. Indeed, unlike the miracle at Cana, the disciples don't really understand this incident at all. The Jews respond to Jesus' words in verse 19 (similar to Mark 14:58) by assuming he intends to destroy the actual temple and rebuild it in three days. The disciples later reflect on the saying, and interpret it as a prediction of the resurrection (2:22). Jesus presumably means

that his mission in fact involves a destruction of the old way of worship, and a new way of approach to God, and in that sense, a new "temple" is indeed present (see 4:21-24).

b. The theme of the new birth, 2:23-3:36

In Jerusalem, apparently there were many who believed in Jesus because of the signs. But Jesus knows that belief merely because of miraculous acts is likely to be transient when it does not penetrate to the meaning behind the act. He indeed knows the depth of sin and deceit in the heart of man, and the hollowness of easy belief.

1. The dialogue with Nicodemus, 3:1-21

Nicodemus, a distinguished Jewish teacher, seeks Jesus out under the cover of night. His words of praise to Jesus (3:2) should not be dismissed as pious flattery, though they do of course fall far short of Jesus' true meaning. Jesus' response can be divided into three rather unequal parts.

In verses 3-8, Jesus' main point is that repentance is a condition of knowledge of God. This is developed in three different images -- birth, baptism, and wind. You must be born anew (or from above -- the word can and probably does mean both) if you wish to see (3) or to enter (5) the kingdom of God. These two references to "kingdom of God" are unique in the gospel; the phrase appears nowhere else. John avoids the idea of kingship and kingly rule, preferring sonship and eternal life; but the use here reminds us of the rich meaning of this idea in the synoptics, particularly the idea that the kingdom is present in the words and deeds of Jesus himself.

Nicodemus, for all his claims to be a religious expert, is very literal in his understanding of Jesus' saying about being born again, and points out the physical impossibility of such a thing. Birth is an extremely powerful figure for repentance and conversion, perhaps the most accurate figure conceivable. The ideas of newness, mystery, and suffering are all

involved. In John 3:5-7 the figure shifts to that of baptism. Jesus says in effect that what is required is not a new physical beginning, but a new beginning from God, a new birth of the Spirit. Baptism of water, which John the Baptist has mentioned already (1:26) means purification; baptism of the Spirit means that the new beginning is a gift of God and not a human possibility. (Nicodemus is partly right, though for the wrong reasons, in saying that this rebirth is a physical impossibility. John likes to show how the Jewish literalistic misunderstanding of his words often has unintended insight.) Finally, in verse 8, he underlines his point by comparing the man of the Spirit to the wind. Just as the wind is not controlled by man, but comes from a source other than man, so the man of the Spirit is what he is, not by a human decision but by a gift that has come to him from above, from outside. Nicodemus again raises questions, and Jesus expresses his surprise that a religious teacher should not understand that repentance is God's gift.

In John 3:11 - 13 we get the second main point of the discourse: that an answer to the question about Jesus will not be given by scanning the heavens, but by attending to the human words and deeds of the one standing before you, the Son of man-that is, this concrete earthly man. The man of faith does not have to go up to heaven to discover God; in the Son of man, God has come down to where man is. If Nicodemus can't even grasp that, how can he be expected to understand "heavenly things"?

The third and final point of the discourse is contained in verses 14-21. It has to do with the relation of death, love, and judgment. The reference to Jesus' death is easy to miss, and it is contained in verse 14. In Numbers 21:6-9, Moses cures the people of the bites of poisonous serpents by holding up before them a standard on which an image of a serpent is attached. And so, Jesus must be "lifted up" -- in glory, but "lifted up" also on the cross -- to be seen by men, before they can be "cured" of their sin, and receive eternal life. The descent of the Son of man that is described in verse 13, then, is a descent that ends in a death. It is also a descent and death that defines God's love (verse 15). But if Christ's death is God's love, God's love is also God's judgment.

With verse 16, we seem to move to John's words of comment on the discourse. Nicodemus has now left the scene altogether, and we do not know the results of his discussion with Jesus, though we may pick up some hints from the other references to him in the gospel, 7:45-52 and 19:39-42.

To relate judgment to love is to say that God does not directly condemn any man; the purpose of Christ is not condemnation but salvation or life (3:17). But there is a judgment; it is not what God does to man, but what man, in his rejection, does to himself. Here is a radically new conception of the judgment of God. Notice, in verses 18-21, that this judgment is even now coming into the world. It is not merely a future superhistorical event, as in the synoptic gospels. It begins with Christ, when men reject him. Apart from Christ the light, men's deeds are their own deeds, and are evil. In Christ the light, men's deeds become true, but they are not their own deeds; they are the deeds that God has worked in them (verse 21).

## 2. John the Baptist bears witness to the newness of Christ, 3:22-36

Here, the relation of Jesus Christ to Judaism is dealt with once more, before the narrative moves into Samaria and to the problem of Jesus' relationship to those outside of Israel.

In Mark 1:14, Jesus' ministry starts only after John the Baptist's arrest. Here, in John's gospel, they are both at work, but separately. A Jew reports to John that Jesus is also baptizing, and that some of John's followers are going over to Jesus. As before, John makes no claims for himself. In two vivid figures he merely points to the new reality in Jesus Christ. Verses 29-30 liken John to the best man, Jesus to the bridegroom. As the best man plays only a minor role at a wedding, and as the bride (Israel?) is not his but the groom's, his only purpose is to share in the wedding joy and withdraw, once his work is done. Verses 31-36 develop the contrast between Jesus and John more fully. John compares himself to a man of the earth, Jesus to a man from above, from God. Jesus' unique witness is that of the Son to the Father; John witnesses only to the Son.

### c. Jesus and the Samaritans, 4:1-42

To avoid the Pharisees, Jesus makes a journey again to Galilee, and passes through Samaria on the way. The Samaritans are partly Gentiles racially, but consider themselves the true inheritors of the Jewish tradition. The mission of Jesus beyond Israelis perhaps the main point of the story.

In verse 9, the woman is surprised that a Jew would speak to a Samaritan. But the real tension is not between Jew and Samaritan, but between Jesus as Son of God and a sinner.

The paradox here is that he who asks for water is the true giver of water, and she who has ordinary water is the one who needs true or living water. The woman is irritated at Jesus' claim to be able to give her living water. She thinks he means running water from a stream in contrast to well water, and she accuses him of claiming to be greater than Jacob who dug the well because he had no access to running water. Jesus further describes what he means by living water, and now the woman asks for it. He first had asked; now she asks. But she still does not understand, for she apparently is asking for water that will not make it necessary to make the daily trip to the well.

Since she had asked for the water, Jesus offers the true and living water of eternal life. This water is forgiveness of sin, so he begins by laying bare her inner disorder. We need not bother with the question how Jesus knew these details of her domestic history.

The discussion about the true place of worship (4:20) is directly relevant to the confession of sin, for the place of worship is the place of forgiveness. Her sin being revealed, it is appropriate that she ask about the true place of forgiveness. She refers to the controversy between the Samaritans and Jews about the true place; the Samaritans claimed it to be the near-by Mount Gerizim, the Jews claimed the Jerusalem temple. Jesus undercuts this argument by saying that now neither of these two places is fully adequate. The God of the Samaritans is an unknown God, while the God of the Jews is the true God. But "the hour is coming, and now is," (verses 21, 23) when the true character of the God to be worshiped will solve this ancient controversy. Prophecy is at an end, and the new age is at hand. God is spirit, but this does not mean that he is

something apart from matter. In our day there is a good deal of vagueness in the way we use "spirit" and "spiritual," and we often call God spirit when we can think of nothing else to say. Here it does not mean that God is nonmaterial, it means that he is power, grace, and action, and that because of his freedom he can be worshiped at all times and in all places.

The lesser questions have been left behind: living water, sin, the true place of worship and forgiveness. The ultimate problem for the woman is the character of God who gives the water, who forgives sin, and who is truly worshiped. She rightly sees (4:25) that this is a question about the nature of the Messiah, but wrongly says that it cannot be settled until he comes. Jesus abruptly completes the discussion by declaring himself to be the Messiah. He himself is the answer to the problem of sin, worship, and the character of God.

The disciples return from buying food (4:27), and are surprised to find Jesus talking alone with a woman. The disciples bid Jesus eat; he replies that he has food, and they wonder if someone had already brought him something. Their literal misunderstanding about "food" is the same kind as the literal misunderstanding about "water" that the woman had just been freed from. Jesus declares that his food is to accomplish God's work. This leads him on to talk about the harvest. By harvest he means the understanding of eternal life; the disciples mean a literal harvest and point out that it is still four months from harvest time. But Jesus sees the Samaritans, brought by the woman, approaching the well, and he tells the disciples that the time is ripe for harvest now. He is the one who sows; the

disciples are the reapers; the time to act is now. "Reaping," in the synoptics, was in the future. Here, it is to be done at once.

The story concludes (4:39-42) with a description of the Samaritans' belief, not merely on the basis of the woman's words, but because they had come to understand for themselves. The woman partly saw, then fully saw. The disciples saw only dimly. The Samaritans know fully that he is the Savior of the world.

## 2. Christ as giver of life, 4:43 -- 5:47

The passage in 4:43-54 gives the first healing miracle in the gospel, the first of two in this section. The Galileans' faith is based on their having seen "all that he had done in Jerusalem." We are reminded of the faith of the Samaritans just before, which was not based on signs or miracles; and we shall see in the faith of the official (4:46-54) a faith which is tempted to base itself on a seen miracle, but which finally does not require such evidence.

This healing is done in Cana, site of the first sign of the Gospel (2:1-11). Verse 48 suggests a rebuke to a faith that needs to be buttressed by signs, but Jesus speaks the word that is requested. The man believes, however, before he verifies the efficacy of the act of healing (4:50).

The second healing (5:1-18) of the cripple beside the pool (which was apparently believed to have healing properties, hence the collection of invalids around it) relates healing and forgiveness (5:14) in a way that reminds us of the story in Mark 2:1-12. The man at first does not know who healed him, but he later finds out, and reports the fact to the Jews. They find two grounds for opposition to Jesus: he healed on the Sabbath (5:16), and, far more serious, he claims some sort of identity with God, calling him Father, and thus is guilty of blasphemy.

The accusation of blasphemy leads to the first extended discourse delivered against the Jews by Jesus (5:19-47). He begins by denying that he claims equality with God; his true relation to the Father is one of obedience and dependence. The Son works now, and will continue to work (5:20). This points, not to some transhistorical future hope, but to the immediate future in the life of the concrete historical Jesus. The greater works referred to are the raising of Lazarus (11:1-44) and perhaps Jesus' own resurrection. But if verse 19 stresses the lowly obedience of the Son, verses 22-25 stress the authority of the Son, his judgment, and his gift of life. But, as verses 25-29 go on to reveal, the real "work" of the future is the final resurrection, the final passing from death to life. In one sense it is a future event. In another sense the future event (which the synoptics emphasized more than John does) is merely a completion of the movement from sin to forgiveness, unbelief to belief, that is going on here and now, in the person and presence of the Son of man (5:27), Jesus himself.

In verses 30-47, the authority of Jesus is further defined and distinguished from other authorities which are its basis: that of John the Baptist (verses 33-35), Jesus' own works (36), and the witness and voice of God in the Old Testament (37-40). These three witnesses are the true condemnation of the Jews; their condemnation of Jesus (verse 18) is false. Their own tradition judges them. Since they hold to the law of Moses that reveals sin, why can they not acknowledge Christ's forgiveness of that sin?

This contrast between Jesus and the Jews (and the similar contrast between church and synagogue at the time John writes) gives us the true theological meaning of the two healings at the beginning of this section, and further portrays the radically new thing that is catering the world in Christ.

### 3. Christ as bread of life, Chapter 6

This section also begins with two miracles from the synoptic tradition, and proceeds to a discourse based on them. Previously we were dealing with the unbelief of the Jerusalem Jews; here it is the unbelief of the Galileans.

In verses 1-15, John retells the story of the feeding of the 5,000 (Mark 6:35-44). John, like Mark, interprets the story as a creative miracle of God, and offers no other explanation. Note the Passover reference in verse 4. At Passover, the people eat unleavened bread and the flesh of an unblemished lamb. Without this imagery, the movement in the discourse from the idea of bread to that of flesh is difficult. In verses 14-

15 the people acclaim Jesus as a miraculous giver of food and as a king. Of course, he is, but not in the popular sense; and so he quickly withdraws.

Verses 16-21 retell the miracle of walking on the water (see Mark 6:45-52), and it is interesting to note that John offers no special interpretation of it.

The rest of the chapter, 6:22-71, is the discourse itself. Verses 22-25 are a somewhat obscure explanation of how the crowd gets across the sea. In 26-40 Jesus speaks to the crowd he had fed: in 41-59 he speaks to the Jews in the synagogue; 60-71 is addressed to the disciples.

The discourse to the crowd in verses 26-40 is similar in form to 4:7-15 on the water of life. The woman becomes the Galilean; the well of Jacob becomes the manna given by Moses; and the water of baptism becomes the bread of the Lord's Supper. Jesus accuses the crowd of seeking him for ordinary bread, and not for that of which the bread is a sign. (Jesus says that the Son of man "will give" in verse 27 -- this points to the death and resurrection as the final seal of the gift; but he says in verse 32 that "my Father gives you the true bread," showing that the gift can now be received.) The crowds ask in verse 28 what work they must do for his bread, knowing that they have to work for their actual bread. The answer is faith or belief in the Son; that is their work, even though it too is a gift of God (verse 29). They cite the gift of manna from Moses as part of their objection to Jesus, but Jesus will not allow this, for God himself provided even that.

In verse 30, they ask for a clear sign so that they may believe. But there can never be as clear a sign as they wish. Jesus will not so much do a sign as be one. So verses 35-40 are the only answer to their question that they will ever receive, and the answer is simple: Jesus is the true bread of life because he comes from God and does God's will. Note in verses 39, 40, and later in 44 and 54 the reference to the future resurrection. We have often noted that John, like Mark, maintains this temporal tension.

The Jews have listened to this, and the discourse directed to them in verses 41-59 is based on two main objections that they raise. The first concerns Jesus' origin. How can he come from heaven, they ask, when we know him to be the son of Joseph? He declares again that he is the bread of life, but makes it even more explicit by pointing to his flesh and to

eating his flesh as the real meaning of receiving his bread. Here the Passover setting is recalled; both the death of Christ and the Lord's Supper are suggested by verse 51. This leads the Jews to their second, and even more irritated, objection: How can a man give us his flesh to eat (52)? As with the first objection, Jesus does not so much answer it as reaffirm the basis for it. The word for "eat" in verse 53 is a crude one: it means to eat the way animals do, to munch. Eating the flesh and drinking the blood have overtones of the Lord's Supper, and many scholars have tried to point out in these words the influence of the mystery religions, which often spoke about eating the body of the dying and rising savior god. But the basic meaning here, remembering that according to Hebrew psychology flesh-and-blood means simply human nature, is that eternal life comes by attending to the concrete historical words and deeds of Jesus. He, therefore, is the true

bread (here is a shift back from flesh to bread); unlike the manna given by Moses, whoever eats this new bread shall be united with Christ and shall therefore "live."

The unbelief of the Jews is contagious, and in John 6:60-71 we read that some of the "disciples" began to wonder at Jesus' words: not the twelve, but some of the larger group of followers. His was a hard saying, not because it was unintelligible, but because it was offensive and coarse. True, the flesh must be eaten (6:53), but it is just as true that the flesh is of no avail (63). By themselves, the historical events of Jesus mean nothing: many saw them and did not respond. God, the spirit, must give them life; there is no life without the fleshly events, but there is no life either without God's spiritual gift of faith, the ability to discover the true meaning of the events of fleshly history. And so the real contrast of verse 63 is not between flesh and spirit (in the modern sense of nonmateriality), or between history and some realm of eternity; but between living historical reality (flesh), illumined by God's gift of faith -- and dead flesh, dead events, uninterpreted and barren.

Verses 66-71 suggest the confession of Peter (Mark 8:27-30). Here, Peter confesses that Jesus' words are not merely teaching words about God, but creative and life-giving. Man does not know God; only Christ knows the Father. But man, like Peter here, can believe, not so much in God but rather in the assurance that Christ is the Holy One of God, the true and only access to God. Only if he begins with this belief, will knowledge ever be granted.

#### 4. Christ: revelation and rejection, 7:1 -- 8:59

##### a. Introduction, 7:1-13

The Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was an autumnal feast of harvest thanksgiving, celebrating the miracles wrought during the stay of Israel in the desert. Jesus' brothers approach him and, like his mother in 2:1-11, ask him to use his miraculous power openly to prove himself. They show themselves unbelievers in their misunderstanding of the nature of his power and of the distinction between his public and private ministry. The apparent contradiction between verses 8 and 10 can be explained by seeing verse 8 as a refusal to go to the feast publicly; though it is possible to read it also as a refusal to "go up" at the time of the feast, in the sense of be lifted up, glorified, going up to the Father, as in 3:13, 6:62, 20:17.

Finally Jesus does go to Jerusalem, and the crowds are beginning to argue about him (verses 10-13).

b. Jesus at the feast, 7:14--8:59

1. Dialogue on Moses and Christ, 7:14-24

Verse 21 reminds us that this section is a further interpretation of the healing of the cripple in 5:1-18, and a continuation of the controversy that the miracle stirred up. Jesus

defends his healing on the Sabbath by pointing out that according to the law, circumcision must be done on the eighth day, even if that day falls on a Sabbath. So the law requires that the law against work on the Sabbath be broken in regard to circumcision. If it can be broken for circumcision (which is the opposite of healing), why can it not be broken for healing?

2. Dialogues on Jesus' messiahship, 7:25-52

The defense of the healing is valid only if Jesus is in fact the Messiah, so this now becomes the issue. The crowds wonder whether the Jews have changed their minds about Jesus since he is apparently being allowed to speak openly. Perhaps the authorities now believe him to be the Messiah, they speculate. But they conclude he cannot be; the origin of Jesus is well-known, and the origin of the true Messiah will be hidden and obscure. In verses 28-29 Jesus enters the argument and declares that they do not in fact know his origin at all, for his origin is God whom they do not know. This effrontery provokes an attempt to arrest him; it also provokes a sort of partial belief based on the miracles, particularly the one (5:1-18) under discussion (7:31).

The half-belief of the crowds is contrasted with the unbelief of the priests and the Pharisees who now send soldiers to arrest Jesus (7:32). But they either do not or cannot, and he speaks about his departure to a place where they cannot come. The Jews misunderstand, thinking he is referring to some sort of escape, perhaps to the Jewish community in the Gentile world (verse 35). This is literally false, but true in the sense that Jesus' message does in fact ultimately "escape" beyond Israel to the Gentile world. Notice the implications of judgment in Jesus' words to the Jews about their inability to come where he is going.

The word of judgment is followed by a promise of eternal life in verses 37-39. Anyone who believes, he says, can now receive eternal life, and will ultimately receive the gift of the Spirit. This "any-one" has already included the Samaritans (4:42), and this saying may be taken as the response to his brothers' request (7:4) to manifest himself to the whole world.

These words of promise lead to further controversy about his messiahship among the crowd (verses 40-44). He is called various things, but apparently the belief that the Messiah was to come of David's line from Bethlehem remains a serious obstacle. Is it that John does not know the tradition about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem in Matthew 1 and Luke 1? Or does he refrain from using it because he does not believe it?

The soldiers sent out to arrest him in verse 32 now return to the Jewish authorities (verses 45-52), and they apparently have become infected by his words. The Jews

contemptuously reject Jesus' claims and the half-belief of the crowd in him, saying (wrongly, as it happens, for Jonah was from Galilee) that no prophet has ever come from Galilee.

Note on 7:53--8:11, the woman taken in adultery

It is certain that this section is not part of John's gospel. It is more like Luke than either of the other gospels, and was apparently a piece of floating tradition that came to rest here because of the sayings in John 7:24 and 8:15. The mount of Olives and the temple locate the incident in Jerusalem and, therefore, in the final week of Jesus' life. The scribes and the Pharisees had caught a woman in the act of adultery and had brought her to Jesus: not to seek guidance on a difficult moral issue, but to trap him. The assumption is that adultery is a violation of the law of God and that the Jew has a responsibility to be an agent of God's punishment. The issue is simply this: witnesses to adultery are required by law to stone the adulterers. What will Jesus say to this law? Verse 7 is the key. Its meaning is that only a sinless one can be a true agent of God's judgment, and so Jesus refuses to allow the Jews' claim.

After the Jews leave the scene, Jesus neither condemns nor forgives. There can be no forgiveness, for there is no repentance. He does not condone her act; he merely issues a call to righteousness; she is an object of mercy, but not yet forgiven. Both judgment and forgiveness are withheld. The tension between the prohibition of judging in Matthew 7:1 and Jesus' "judgment" of the Pharisees is thus resolved in this story. He does not judge; he issues the call of God to righteousness, and judgment is brought on the sinner if he refuses this call.

### 3. Dialogue on Jesus' witness against the Jews, 8:12-59

The first discourse against the Jews was 5:19-47, and this is the second extended one. Verses 12-20 concern the character of Jesus' witness. Darkness, we have already noted, stands for sin and unbelief; light, therefore, suggests the opposite. Not merely insight and knowledge, but forgiveness and eternal life. Again, as before, the accusation of egotism is leveled against Jesus. Jesus admits that he does bear witness to himself, but adds that his Father also bears witness to him. Jesus' witness leads to judgment; not to a judgment that he exercises, but to a judgment that comes upon all men when they reject his witness. The Jews ask Jesus where his Father is located (8:19). This is partly an accusation against him, related to the rumor that he was an illegitimate son of Mary, but it is also a theological question about his spiritual paternity. Jesus ignores the first meaning of the question and accuses the questioners of a complete misunderstanding of the character of God. A demand to be shown the concrete visibility of God will never be met directly; Christ, the Son, is the only answer to that question.

In verses 21-30 he continues to explain his relation to the Father. As in 7:33-36, the Jews misunderstand his reference to going away. Jesus means his death and glorification; the Jews think that he means suicide. Of course this misunderstanding obliquely points to a truth, for Jesus' death was a voluntary one. Note that verse 24 suggests that there is nothing inevitable about the Jewish rejection of Jesus. Indeed, verse 28 suggests that some Jews actually believed after the crucifixion. (On "lifted up," see comment on 3:14, page 157.) And verse 30 suggests that some believed even as he spoke.

Verses 31-59 seem to be spoken to those in verse 30 who partially believed. If so, this final section of the discourse is a study of the disintegration of partial belief into hostile

and complete unbelief (see 8:37 and the final verse, 59). The subject of this discourse is freedom, freedom from sin (8:34) and death (8:51). The Jews don't like the suggestion that as Jews they are not already free, thinking that Jesus is referring to political freedom. John's conception of freedom should be compared to Paul's liberty of the Christian man in Romans 8:1-4, 21 and Galatians 4:21-5:1. In verses 39-41 Jesus enjoins them to do as Abraham did, for a true son must do as his father does. The reference here is possibly to the faith of Abraham, or more likely to Abraham's receiving the angels as true messengers of God in Genesis 18:2. If you really did what he did, Jesus says, you would receive me as a true messenger of God. In verse 41 they compare their unexceptionable paternity to Jesus' paternity, and Jesus levels his final and crushing accusation: your true father is the devil, for it is his action you are really imitating, and that is the action of unbelief (verses 43-44).

The argument over Abraham continues in 8:48-59. The Jewish accusation that Jesus is a Samaritan is related to their hint in verse 41 that his parentage is irregular. The Samaritans were originally products of illegitimate unions between Gentile immigrants and Jewish women. In verses 52-53, they misunderstand his reference to eternal life, thinking he means that it involves freedom from natural death. Jesus meets this misunderstanding by openly describing his superiority to Abraham: he points to his resurrection as a gift of God (verse 54), to his knowledge of God (55), to Abraham's witness to him (56), and to his priority to Abraham (58). The "not yet fifty" in verse 57 should be taken generally, not literally. Literally, it cannot be reconciled with all our other evidence about Jesus' age. The point is the contrast between the great interval from Abraham's time to that of Jesus, and the age of Jesus himself.

## 5. Christ as the triumph of light, 9:1-10:42

### a. The healing of the man born blind, 9:1-41

Jesus is Messiah because he is the true Son, truly witnessing to the Father. This has been the message of the previous section. Now we turn to a closely related problem: insight or sight or clarity of vision, what it means, and how it comes about.

Jesus replies to the question (John 9:3) by refusing to accept the traditional view of the relation of sin to suffering. His actual answer is difficult, but it seems to point to the man's unique value as illustrating the meaning of God's grace. In this story the real drama is the movement from unbelief to belief, not from blindness to sight, and the man must be seen primarily as a sinner moving to faith. Jesus makes clay compounded of dust and spit, anoints the eyes, and invites the man to bathe in a near-by pool which is named "the one who was sent," thus symbolically identified with Jesus himself. The bathing accomplishes the cure. It is interesting to notice the four stages in the man's apprehension of Jesus:

1. In verse 12 he doesn't even know where Jesus is. In verse 16 we see that not all the Jews acquiesce in the accusation of Jesus as sinner.

2. In verse 17, after being questioned by the Jews about the Sabbath violation on Jesus' part, he defines Jesus as a prophet because of his act of healing.

3. In verse 30, the man himself moves to a deeper level of insight; he at least knows Jesus' origin; he is from God, for he has performed the unique act of curing a man born blind. For this confession the man is excommunicated from the synagogue (9:34).

4. The final stage of insight follows Jesus' questioning of the man. Here Jesus is confessed as not merely a prophet from God, not merely a performer of unique miracles, but, as the Lord, one to be worshiped (9:38). The man's faith is contrasted to the unbelief of the Jews in verses 39-41. Jesus' answer in verse 41 means: "If you were unable to see or to believe, you would not be responsible for your unbelief; but since you are able to see or believe if you choose, you are guilty of unbelief."

b. The shepherd and the sheep, 10:1-21

1. The parable, verses 1-6

This chapter is a comment on rather than an extension of Chapter 9, and it begins with a simple parable that defines the setting for the two main affirmations that follow: that Jesus is the door to the sheepfold (in verses 7, 9) and that he is the shepherd (11, 14). The picture is that of a courtyard of a house, surrounded by a wall through which is but a single entrance. The sheep are kept in the courtyard at night; the gatekeeper will allow only the shepherd in at the gate; thieves and robbers must climb over the wall to steal the sheep.

2. Interpretation of the parable, verses 10:7-21

This parable is interesting because it receives a twofold interpretation. First, Jesus is the door to the sheep. He is the way (see 14:6), the only way to life, just as the one door through the wall is the only way the sheep have of entering the courtyard. "All" in verse 8 does not refer to the Old Testament prophets, but probably to the Jews of Jesus' day and the day of the gospel's writing. But second, Jesus is the shepherd himself, for the way of life is through a continuing relationship to Jesus as God's Son.

The figure of the shepherd is a familiar one in the Old Testament (Psalm 23), and it is used in the other gospels as well (Mark 6:34 and Matthew 9:36; Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7). Here it receives its profoundest interpretation: the true shepherd voluntarily gives his life for his sheep (verse 11). Thieves and robbers threaten the disciples and the church from the outside; hirelings like Judas flee from within when danger comes.

Observe John 10:14-15 carefully. The disciples' security is not that they know Jesus or that Jesus knows them, but that Jesus knows the Father, the Father him, and that he gives his life for the sheep.

The parable closes with the idea of the shepherd and the sheep receding into the background. This image must give way to the deeper truth that Jesus is the true door and the true shepherd because of his death and resurrection. Verses 19-21 reveal the Jews again divided; some say he is possessed, others that he cannot be possessed because of his acts of healing.

c. Conclusion, 10:22-42

The Feast of Dedication, today called Hanukkah, celebrated on December 25 the restoration of the Jewish temple by Judas Maccabaeus in 165 B.C. The Jews ask for a plain nonparabolic witness from Jesus, but he refuses, partly because his conception of the messiahship cannot be made to fit the Jewish expectation, and partly because their unbelief is perceived to flow not from inadequate evidence but from the will not to believe (10:26). In verses 27-30 Jesus again points to the basis of the security of the elect who have chosen him, and once again defines his messiahship in terms of Sonship: "I and the Father are one" (30).

This clear blasphemy (from the Jews' point of view) leads again to an attempt to take his life. Jesus appeals to his works of healing, but the Jews rightly insist that this is not the cause of offense, but rather his claim to identity with the Father. Jesus cites a passage in the Old Testament where a sort of divine status is ascribed to men, justifying himself on evidence that they are obliged to take seriously. Look at the acts of healing, Jesus adds in 37-38: are these the works of a blasphemer? Even if you cannot believe me when I speak of the Father, you must take the acts seriously. But their anger is not appeased, so Jesus goes to a place of safety from which he will finally move back to Jerusalem for the events of the last week. He goes to where John the Baptist first baptized (1:28), and the unbelief of the Jews is deliberately contrasted with John's first witness to Jesus (1:8,29).

#### 6. Life and death, 11:1-57

Life and light have been general descriptions of the meaning of Christ, but John is not satisfied with general, nonhistorical description. In Chapter 9 he has given a specific description of Jesus as light; Chapter 11 is the specific description of Jesus as resurrection and life. In part, the chapter can be taken as an extended comment on 5:21; in part it finds its true meaning in 11:25 -- that the resurrection and life are not mere events of future expectation, but are beginning in the present. Finally, the story is designed as a climax to Jesus' whole controversy with the Jews, and to serve as the event which sets his arrest and crucifixion into motion (11:53).

There are synoptic events that slightly resemble this story of Lazarus: Mark 5:35-43, Luke 7:11-17. But these are isolated from their contexts in a way this story is not. And they are stories of resurrections that took place immediately after the death. Here there is an interval of four days between the death and the resurrection. It is not possible to give the reader any definite guidance on what actually took place in this event. We can, of course, decide on principle that this did not happen, merely because this kind of thing cannot happen. But perhaps it should not be quite so easy for us to make our peace with

these difficult portions of the New Testament. If God is really doing something in Jesus Christ that is unique, can we decide on the impossibility of incomprehensible or improbable events with assurance?

We must, of course, take seriously the rules of probability that we inherit as modern men and women. But we must try also to give full weight to the implications of such faith in God as we happen to hold. Recognizing this inevitable and permanent tension, it is better not to go through this gospel wondering about the factual historicity of each event as it comes, but rather to devote ourselves to the task of understanding what the author is trying to do and say as he shapes his material and presents his witness. So, if it is difficult

to say what actually happened, it is easy to say what is meant by the story: the new life coming from God in Jesus' person and work is powerfully present now. It is not merely a hope, it is a present fact; and it is a fact that is far greater than anything we deserve or expect.

John assumes the reader's familiarity with the household of Mary and Martha at Bethany, as recorded in Luke 10:38-42 and in Mark 14:3-9. The actual events as recorded are not particularly elusive. Jesus' response to the sisters in John 11:4 is ambiguous: he means that Lazarus' death will be temporary; his hearers seem to interpret him to mean that the illness is not serious. Two meanings also may be found in Jesus' statement that the Son of God will be glorified by means of the illness (11:4): his power will be manifest through it, and the raising will actually lead to the arrest, death, and resurrection, which will finally validate his glorification.

Martha comes to meet Jesus and mildly reproaches him for his delay (11:21). Jesus' reply in verse 23 is taken by Martha as a word of pious consolation, but Jesus sharply defines his meaning: the power of the resurrection life is not something to be waited for in the future; it is now present. Martha responds in verse 27 with a far deeper confession of faith than she had offered in verse 22.

Verses 33-38 offer us a deeply moving portrayal of Jesus' grief, though verse 33 suggests anger as well as grief in the original Greek. The grief may be taken as a mark of his true humanity, as a kind of agony in the presence of death (like the synoptic accounts of Jesus' Gethsemane prayer). Or we may say that the real source of the grief and anger is the unbelief of the Jews (11:37) and the half-belief of Martha (11:39).

The miracle itself is described vividly and simply, verse 44 being in some ways the most striking and the most incredible touch of all. (The reader may want to refer to the parable in Luke 16:19-31 in which a reference is made to the hypothetical resurrection of Lazarus. Some have thought that John's story is a development in narrative form of this parable.)

The miracle, as usual, causes a division among the Jews, who meet to decide on some action. In John 11:49-50 the high priest, Caiaphas, decides to move against Jesus. His decision is in fact a shrewdly calculated political move to avoid Roman intervention. But

John interprets his saying in verse 50 as a curious kind of prediction of the universal significance of Jesus' death (11:51-52).

Jesus withdraws, the Passover draws near, the Jews in the temple prepare to arrest Jesus should he come to Jerusalem. Verse 57 is doubtless added to explain the cause of Judas' betrayal that may have been confusing in the earlier synoptic tradition.

7. Life through death, 12:1-36, and the author's summary of the material in 2:1-12:36, 12:37-50

The story of the anointing has a similarity both to Mark 14:3-9 and to Luke 7:36-50. John seems to have combined both these pieces of material. Judas is identified as the one who complains about the waste of money. John 12:7-8 means that although the poor are always to be served, Mary's humble act is a worthy one and cannot be criticized as wasteful; for, in anointing Jesus, she does two things: she declares him to be the anointed

one or Messiah, and she points forward to his death, since the dead are prepared for burial with costly ointments.

John's treatment of the entry into the city is also closely related to the synoptic versions. The crowds seem to greet Jesus as a political or royal Messiah, but apparently (12:16) the disciples do not betray any understanding of what is going on. Verses 17-18 mention that the crowd's enthusiasm is based on Jesus' miraculous act of raising Lazarus.

The world has gone after him, the Pharisees complain in John 12:19; and verse 20 gives an example: the Greeks seek out Jesus. The Greeks are always on the edge of the gospel, for they do not really "come to" Jesus until the resurrection; but the Jews are passing from the center of the picture now; from Chapter 13 on, everything concerns Jesus and the disciples. Jesus' words in response to the Greeks' request (verses 23-26) are familiar descriptions of the meaning of obedience and discipleship.

However, (in 12:27-36) the obedience of the disciple is based on the radical obedience of the Son. Verses 27-30 reflect the agony at Gethsemane, reminding us that Jesus' obedience is unto death. The Jews object that they have never heard anything about a suffering Messiah; Jesus affirms himself to be the suffering Son of man and Messiah, and invites them once more to choose. Note the tension between the apparent inevitability of Jewish unbelief (12:39) and the affirmation that some did in fact believe (12:42). John's predestinarian views are never consistent.

John 12:44-50 sums up the message of the whole gospel up to this point: obedience, the meaning of Christ, judgment, and eternal life. The obedience means suffering and death.

## **Chapter 3: The Passion of Jesus Christ**

### **1. The farewell discourses, 13:1-17:26**

These chapters contain discourses given by Jesus to his disciples that prepare them for what is to follow. For Christians they are John's profound interpretation of this central event for the life of the church in any day.

#### **a. The footwashing and its meaning, 13:1-30**

John 13:1-3 gives the theological context for the story. The time has come for the disciples to be prepared. The synoptic gospels record at this point the Lord's Supper; John has chosen another way to make his point. There are reflections both of baptism and of the Lord's Supper here, but we are likely to recall primarily the description of Jesus

in the other gospels as servant of all (Luke 22:27, for example). But this is not merely an example of humility (girding with a towel is the action of a slave, 13:4); the deeper point is that the disciple's real cleansing from sin will be consummated in an even greater act of humility than this one -- in the death of Christ itself. "To the end" (13:1) thus means "to the end of his life, unto death."

John 13:12-17 interprets the act of foot-washing. The disciples must show the same humility to all men that Jesus has just displayed to them. In verses 21-30, the betrayal is predicted. Jesus is portrayed here with a special kind of foresight into Judas' treachery, and the only "explanation" of that treachery is that Satan entered into him. The "beloved disciple" -- presumably John -- is explicitly mentioned in verse 23, and he alone is told the identity of the betrayer. Verse 23 also reminds us that the disciples do not sit at table, but recline on couches, generally resting on the left elbow; John, on Jesus' right, would thus be described as "close to the breast of Jesus" (13:25).

b. the first discourse: Christ's departure and the security of the disciples, 13:31-14:31

This section, apparently concluding with the dismissal of the disciples from the upper room (14:31) is sometimes called the first discourse. But there is some evidence that 13:31-14:31 is a version of the same discourse that we have in longer form in Chapters 15-17. The structure and many of the themes are repeated in the second and longer passage. This is the most adequate explanation for the otherwise puzzling words at the end of 14:31 which seem to indicate a full break.

With 13:31 the hour of glorification has now fully arrived. It had partly been coming up to now (2:4, 7:30, 8:20, and see also 17:1) but the last hour is decisively present and the disciples can now receive it fully. However, it will mean Jesus' separation from his disciples, a separation that the disciples cannot now overcome. Why? Because the "hour" for their death has not yet arrived. Their function now is not to die, but to love one another. In this "not yet" interval between Jesus' death and their own, the love commandment must be put to work. To love one another is not a narrowing of the universal love of neighbor found in the Sermon on the Mount. It is a mutual love in the church that has as its purpose the salvation of all. What we do not find here is the command to love the neighbor "as thyself" (Matthew 19:19, 22:39).

Peter (verses 36-38) does not entirely understand this departure of Jesus, just as he partly misunderstood the footwashing (13:8). He is still too proud to follow Jesus in his humility, but verse 37 suggests that Peter's way may ultimately involve martyrdom, as 21:18-19 clearly states. His denial is predicted.

Chapter 14 is a word of consolation to the disciples facing the loss of their Lord; their security must be firmly based so that they can face the coming events without fear or despair, and so that they can serve the Lord in his absence. Their security rests on Christ, and on his preparing a place for them with God. "I will come again" in John 14:3 may mean the disciples' death, and it may mean the new union with Christ in the resurrection and gift of the Spirit. This

point on the goal of human life is so important that John moves into a dialogue form to clarify it. Thomas tells Jesus that he does not know either the way or the goal; and the answer is that the way is Jesus in his humility and death, and that God is the goal. Philip wants a miracle to render this goal as clear as possible (verse 8) and he is told that he has already had all the miracle he is ever going to get, Jesus Christ himself.

With John 14:12 we are reminded that belief or faith in Christ involves both works and prayer. The greater works of the disciples (verse 12) may refer to the conversion of the Gentiles and the expansion of the church in the world. These greater works of love require Jesus' departure before they can begin, but God's presence will be with them, now in a different form from that of the historical Christ: the Counselor, the Spirit of Truth. Verses 15-17 are the first of the sayings on this subject, which we also find in John 14:25-26, 15:26; 16:5-11, and 16:13-15.

There is no explicit doctrine of the Trinity in the gospels, but these sayings about the Counselor became important material for the formation of that doctrine when, because of certain external pressures in the fourth century, the relation between God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit needed to be made explicit. The early Christians found that God was present with them in a special way after the death and resurrection, but in a way that was closely dependent on Jesus' actual life and ministry. They came to formulate this unique presence in terms of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and these sayings about the Counselor bear directly on that later formulation. The church became Trinitarian not

because of some speculative interest in the number three, but because certain events had happened in their midst which they could interpret only by saying that Father, Son, and Spirit, though one God, are somehow three distinguishable forms of his presence.

But the final and deepest assurance of all is the resurrection of Christ. This is the meaning of John 14:18; it does not refer to a future second coming. Through the resurrection the mutual involvement of Father, Son, and disciples will be consummated, but this involvement still requires the obligation of love.

Thus the disciples are prepared to face the coming tragedy with the security and peace (14:27) that only Christ can give them. It is not the absence of conflict, which the world

calls peace, but the peace of confidence in God's rule and his promise of life to those who believe in him.

c. The second discourse, Christ and his church, 15:1-16:33

1. The relation of the Christian to the risen Lord, 15:1-17

In 6:56 the relation between the disciple and Christ was described as eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Chapter 6 itself dealt with Jesus as living bread; here we come (in the upper room, notice) to the second half of the Lord's Supper symbolism: Jesus as the true vine.

Vineyard imagery is familiar in both the Old and the New Testament; see Mark 12:1-9. There the vineyard was Israel; its rejection of Christ and its unfruitfulness was the point. Here the vine is Christ himself, and the context is not the rejection of Christ by the Jews (John has already dealt with

this extensively) but the life of the church and the presence of Christ in the church to the true believer.

Here the true believer is simply defined as one in union with Christ. The details of the allegory are not difficult to apply. From this union a number of consequences flow: in Christ, the believer serves Christ (bears fruit, John 15:2, 4, 16), finds his prayer answered (verses 7, 16; compare 14:13-14), knows the meaning of obedient love (verses 9-13, 17), and has his very life (verse 6) and true joy (11). All this is not an achievement of the believer, it is the gift of Christ himself (16).

Verse 6 is unlike John's usual idea of judgment, and reminds us of the older emphasis in Matthew 5:13.

## 2. The Christian and the hostile world, 15:18-16:15

15:18-25 relates the world's hatred of the Christians, as shown in the persecutions of John's own day, to the hatred of Christ that led to the crucifixion. The love of the disciples is in sharpest contrast to the hatred of the world. Hatred from the world is to be expected; when it is a hatred and a rejection that proceeds from a knowledge of Christ it is morally culpable and sinful (verse 22). Indeed, the world's knowing rejection of Christ and his disciples is hatred of God himself.

Verses 26-27 introduce another saying about the Counselor, who will bear witness with the disciples in the midst of their struggle with the hostile world.

In 16:1-4 the hostility of the Jews is made even more definite: it will involve excommunication from the synagogue and even death for the disciples. But even so

(verses 5-11 continue in another saying about the Counselor), joy and not sorrow should be the response of the disciples. The Counselor is the new form of the presence of Christ in the Church; so it is essential that Christ himself depart to the Father. The work of the Counselor must involve a stern judgment of the world.

The final Counselor saying in verses 13-15 really sums up the content of the preaching of the church; it is to be a proclamation utterly dependent on God, and it will declare the true meaning of the new age, ushered in completely by the death and resurrection. (This is the meaning of "the things that are to come" in verse 13; it does not refer to the ability to foretell the future.) The Counselor, here called the Spirit of truth, is the very presence of Christ in the midst of his people, bringing to them the riches of God himself and empowering them to claim it and to declare it to all.

3. The disciples and the death and resurrection of Christ, 16:16-33

The "going" is probably the death of Christ and the "coming," the resurrection, with "the little while" the interval between, though this may be deliberately ambiguous, so that the interval between the ascension and the second coming may also be suggested. Verse 20 describes the joy of the world over Christ's death that will turn into the sorrow of judgment, and compares this with the disciples' sorrow that will turn to joy. Verse 22 again refers to the resurrection; after this climax there will be no more anxious questions to Jesus, but only faithful prayer to God.

In verses 29-33 the disciples think they see it all. They suspect that Jesus' going to the Father can be consummated without his death, and they decide that he did indeed come from God because of his Omniscience. Jesus rudely shatters their self-confidence and predicts their flight after the crucifixion. But, in the final verse which can be taken as a summary of the whole second discourse, even their despair is seen as a temporary tribulation that will be put aside because of Jesus' victory over the world. Note that "tribulations" are not Overcome; these still come to every disciple. But Jesus' victory makes it possible for the disciple to meet every tribulation with faith in Christ as God's Son.

d. The prayer of Christ, 17:1-26

In this final prayer, the meaning of "the hour" of glorification is revealed. The teaching is completed; the truth has been given the disciples, and they will receive it fully through the power of the Spirit after the resurrection. One thing remains to be done: Christ consecrates himself in the presence of the disciples (17:19). He prays first for himself (verses 1-5), then for the disciples and their future in the church (6-18), and finally for the whole church in time and in eternity (20-26). Nearly all the themes of the Johannine theology are contained here: obedience unto death as the meaning of God's glory in Christ; the disciples' being in, but not of, the world; the revelation to the disciples of the true character ("name," verse 6) of God in Christ; their mission, their unity in love, and their present and future relation to God and to Christ.

In 17:1-5 we discover that the chief result of the Father's glorification of the Son, and the Son's of the Father, is the gift of eternal life to the disciples here and now. This life is defined clearly as the knowledge of God who sent Jesus into the world.

In 17:6-18 Jesus describes what he has done for the disciples. Note that his chief work is not teaching or healing but the calling of a distinctive community to bear witness to God by making known His "name." He asks God that the disciples be kept faithful, in but not of the world, bearing witness to what they know, united to each other as Son is united to the Father. The reference in verse 12 is, of course, to Judas; and in verse 14 John is apparently thinking of the world's hatred in terms of the persecutions in the midst of which he is living. In verse 17 Jesus prays for the sanctification of the disciples: that they be dedicated and empowered to bear witness to the truth. This dedication is not based on anything they have of themselves; it is based on Jesus' own consecration. "Consecrate" in verse 19, the climax of the prayer, is a sacrificial term; it refers directly to his death, and it means "I dedicate myself as a sacrificial offering."

Finally, in John 17:20-26, Jesus prays for the church present and to come. This is a prayer for the church's unity, based on the unity of Son with Father, that the church may be so bound to God and to Christ that the world will believe its witness. In verse 24 we pass from present to future, and we catch a glimpse of the eschatological hope of the church. The three stages of Christian existence are thus

sketched out: first is the time of the manifestation of God's glory through Christ to the disciples; second is the new form of presence of Christ in the church after his death and resurrection (this is where John was, and where we are now); finally, there is the consummation of the church in the perfect love of the presence of God.

## 2. The narrative of the Passion and resurrection, 18:1-21:25

### a. The Passion, 18:1-19:42

#### 1. The arrest, 18:1-11

The scene suggests Gethsemane; note "garden" in John 18:1 and the reference to the cup of suffering in verse 11. There are some new features that we do not find in the synoptic accounts; no kiss from Judas; the identification of Peter as the one who cuts off the slave's ear; the emphasis on Jesus' moral authority and courage in verse 6; and Jesus' concern for the safety of the other disciples in verse 8. The main impression we receive from this account is that Jesus, and not Judas or the soldiers, is in control. The arrest, the suffering, the death must come, for it is all God's will and the means He uses to glorify Himself through the Son. But it would be wrong to conclude from this that all death and suffering can be fully described as being simply God's will. This particular suffering and death is just that, for it is the center of God's gift of salvation to sinful men. But human suffering and death are often due to human evil, to disease, to accident; and suffering is an enemy that must be fought and, whenever possible, removed. God's will is present to us in every suffering, but it is too easy to explain suffering away by saying only that it is God's will.

## 2. The trial before the high priest and Peter's denial, 18:12-27

There is some difficulty about Annas and Caiaphas here. It is the latter who is high priest (see Matthew 26:57 and John 11:49), yet Jesus is taken to Annas, and there is only a hint of a trial before Caiaphas in verse 24. The other disciple in verse 15 is probably the beloved disciple.

The strange thing about the trial before Annas is its brevity, compared to Pilate's extended examination. Jesus is questioned only about his disciples and his teaching. There are no messianic questions, no mention of this threat to destroy the temple. No accusations are made and no charge is established or even defined. Jesus refuses to testify against himself (18:21) which is in fact illegal in any case: evidence must come from witnesses, not from the accused. So the examination is inadequate, illegal, and, in verse 22, brutal.

## 3. The trial before Pilate, 18:28-19:16

Jesus is taken into Pilate's residence, the praetorium; the Jews remain outside for fear of ritual defilement. The discussion that follows between Jesus and Pilate takes place inside, and Pilate goes outside to consult with the Jews when necessary. If the Jews here represent those who reject Christ, Pilate stands for the world that needs a Christ, half-convinced, half-skeptical.

Pilate returns to Jesus (18:33) and asks him if he is the Messiah. We may well wonder where Pilate picked up this accusation, and indeed we perhaps ought to be somewhat

skeptical of the historical accuracy of these private conversations between Pilate and Jesus. It is hard to see how they could have come to be known. Jesus penetrates to the heart of the theological issue and discusses the nature of kingship, affirming his true kingship, denying that he is a king in Pilate's sense. Verses 33-38 are really a study of the relation of the church and the empire, and their relevance to John's own day can easily be seen.

After the half-ironic, half-sincere question "What is truth?", Pilate again tries to avoid action by citing to the Jews the custom of releasing a prisoner on the Passover. The Jews refuse to accept Jesus' release.

Verses 1-6 are difficult to understand. Perhaps Pilate is trying to appeal to the pity of the Jews. He whips Jesus, making him appear so powerless that they would conclude he could not be dangerous. Pilate's scornful "Here is the man!" in verse 5 is an indirect witness to the truth; here is the man indeed, the very word made flesh, the Son of man himself.

But Jewish sympathy cannot be aroused, and they make their second accusation: he has made himself the Son of God. Here the Jews blurt out their real charge against Jesus, though up to now they had doubtless been afraid to admit to Pilate that their objections were religious and not political. This accusation upsets Pilate, and he questions Jesus again, in verses 9-11. Jesus answers with a discussion of the nature of authority.

Again Pilate tries to free Jesus, and the Jews openly threaten Pilate with being friendly with an enemy of the

imperial authority. The final charge they bring is rebellion, and to make their accusation convincing they utter a word of blasphemy and final apostasy: "We have no king but Caesar" (19:15). Pilate finally gives in, and consents to have him crucified. Verse 16 does not mean that the Jews crucified him. Verses 17, 18, and 23 remind us that the soldiers of Rome were the actual agents of the execution. Pilate's actual responsibility remains: for John the Son of man must be "lifted up," crucified, so the Roman means of punishment is essential. But the author certainly minimizes Pilate's actual involvement.

#### 4. Crucifixion and burial, 19:17-42

The details of the crucifixion are more carefully related to fulfillment of scripture here than in the synoptics, and the symbolic meaning of these details is brought to the fore. The story of the seamless robe, verses 23-24, becomes a parable of the unity of the church.

Mark 15:40 and Matthew 27:56 mention these women near the cross, but there the third is Salome and not Mary the wife of Clopas. This is the first mention of Mary Magdalene in the gospel, and she comes in later as a witness of the resurrection. She is also a witness of the resurrection in the other gospels, and Luke 8:2 briefly mentions her. This is all the real information we have of her. There is no good evidence to identify her with Mary of Bethany in Mark 14:3-9 or with the sinner in Luke 7:37.

John reports three sayings from the cross; in the first, Jesus gives the care of his mother to the beloved disciple. It is hard to see any important symbolic or theological meaning for this; perhaps it is merely a touch describing the church

as a new kind of family. "I thirst" is a fulfillment of Psalm 69:21. Hyssop is an herb. A twig of hyssop may be meant here, and this would relate the death again to the Passover, for hyssop is used in some of the Passover ceremonies. But it is hard to see how a sponge could be placed on a small branch and offered to Jesus. The Greek word for soldier's spear or javelin is very similar to the Greek word for hyssop, and there may be a scribe's error here. Putting the sponge on a javelin would be more intelligible in this context.

The breaking of the other criminal's legs is a detail peculiar to John, as is the reference to the Old Testament to explain why Jesus' legs were not broken. The point of John 19:31-37 is mainly to insist on the reality of Jesus' death (verse 33) on the day before Passover, to emphasize that his death coincided with the killing of the Passover lambs. He really died, in accord with God's will and the scripture. Verses 34-35 state that this death gives life and cleansing for all (the witness is again the beloved disciple).

John does add symbolic and interpretative touches to some of the incidents of the crucifixion. But at the same time he insists on the real historic character of the central event. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, really died and was really buried.

b. The resurrection, 20:1--21:25

1. The empty tomb, 20:1-29

There are two parts to this account, verses 1-18 concerned with Mary, 19-29 with Thomas. The vivid details are not

difficult to grasp. The beloved disciple, hearing the report of the women, reaches the tomb first, but Peter goes in first. The description of the linen cloths that he sees (verses 6-7) suggests that the body was not disturbed or stolen, but that it dematerialized in some miraculous way. However, it is not Peter but the beloved disciple who is the first to believe. The faith of the beloved disciple who believed without seeing the risen Lord is the center of this part of the story. Mary sees the empty tomb but continues to weep. She does not believe until the one she takes for the gardener speaks to her and she responds to the risen Lord. This account is an interesting study of the relation of sight (facts) to faith. Mary, the beloved disciple, and, in the next section, Thomas -- each has the problem of facts and faith solved in a slightly different way.

Later that evening, John 20:19-25, Jesus appears to a group of disciples, shows them the marks of his victory over the world, and gives them their final commission to serve. John records the gift of the Spirit, the power to undertake the commission, as occurring on Easter Sunday rather than on Pentecost, six weeks later, as in Acts 2. Verse 23 defines the chief purpose of the church as forgiveness of sins and the withholding of forgiveness or judgment.

Thomas, whom we have met before as something of a pessimist and skeptic (11:16 and 14:5), hears the report of Jesus' appearance, and remains unconvinced. The next week Jesus comes to Thomas, who responds, not merely identifying the figure with Jesus, but affirming him as Lord and as God. In verse 29, Jesus mildly rebukes Thomas, or at least praises those who believe without seeing.

This chapter is very carefully written. Mary's tears and Thomas' doubts are parallel; in both parts, the problem of touching Jesus is raised; in the first part, Mary's tears are less important than the faith of the beloved disciple; in the second, Thomas' doubt is less important than the commission of the disciples.

Verses 30-31 conclude with a comment on the gospel John has written, and with a final word on its function. Many have felt that this marked the true ending of the gospel at one time, and that Chapter 21 represents a later addition, perhaps by the same hand as Chapters 1-20. To some, Chapter 21 seems anticlimactic; to others, the further explanation of the mission of the disciples and the comments on the faith of Peter and the beloved disciple are quite appropriate.

## 2. Epilogue, 21:1-25

### a. The appearance by the lake, 21:1-14

This story reminds us a little of Luke 5:1-11, but it would be a mistake to read it simply as a story of a wonderful catch of fish. There are a number of touches that suggest a deeper meaning playing throughout the story, even if it is difficult to know just how far

we should take the symbolism. The language reminiscent of the Lord's Supper in John 21:13 is clear; the untorn net of verse 11 may suggest the capacity of the church to hold all sorts of men. The number 153 has been a happy hunting ground for symbolic interpreters. Two points should be noted, which may or may not be relevant: 153 is the sum of

the first 17 whole numbers, and 17 is the sum of 7 and 10- both supposed to be numbers symbolizing wholeness or perfection. It used to be thought that ancient Greek zoologists had estimated the number of types of fish to be 153, 50 that the number was said to symbolize a perfect and a complete catch.

b. Peter and the beloved disciple, 21:15-23

If the catch of fish represents the mission to the unconverted, the words to Peter perhaps represent the mission to the converted. to the sheep. Peter's threefold response of love is intended to suggest his threefold denial, and to indicate that it is overcome. Peter's death is hinted at in John 21:18-19; though verse 18 seems more like a prediction and 19 more like the statement of a fact already accomplished. Notice that Jesus' last word to Peter (verse 19) is the same as his first, in Mark 1:17 -- "Follow me."

Verses 20-23 are a slight rebuke to Peter for being concerned about the fact that the beloved disciple is to have a longer period of service than Peter himself. The chapter ends with a statement on the trustworthiness of the witness of the beloved disciple, and a remark, like that in 20:30-31, about the many things which the gospel has excluded. The "I" of "I suppose" in verse 25 is the author; but whether this is the beloved disciple or not we have no means of knowing. The author deliberately kept himself out of his gospel except for this brief allusion; his function was to witness to something far more significant than himself.