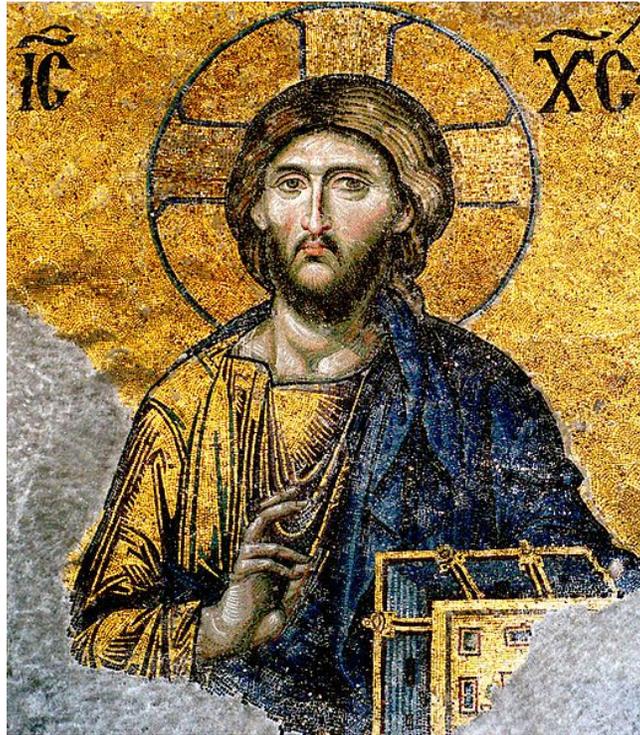




***THE HOLY WRITINGS OF CHRISTIANITY:  
STORIES FOR HUMAN SPIRITUALITY***



***THE STORY OF JESUS ACCORDING TO JOHN***

***A SEEKER'S COMPANION***

***by Rev. David J. Fekete, Ph.D.***

*THE STORY OF JESUS ACCORDING TO JOHN: A SEEKER'S COMPANION*

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## **PREFACE**

### *WHAT THIS READER'S COMPANION IS FOR—WHY I WROTE IT*

*The holy writings of Christianity deserve a place among the great spiritual scriptures of the world. Spiritually minded individuals who read writings of world wisdom traditions will find the Christian scriptures as enlightening as they find other writings. This reader's companion is intended for spiritually-minded individuals who may wish to approach these scriptures with their own mind.*

*This reader's companion is a fresh look at the holy writings of Christianity. I have been at pains to let the documents speak for themselves, and not to speak from a faith perspective. That was my goal and my effort in writing this companion to the holy writings of Christianity. But every person has their own value structure, and believers have a belief system. I have studied world religions from a cultural/historical perspective, and literary texts in graduate schools for a period of thirteen years, and have acquired tools for textual analysis that are largely objective, and sensitive to storytelling methods. However, I do have a belief system of my own, and it has, no doubt, colored my interpretation of these writings. I am a Swedenborgian minister who is a student of world religions. No commentator can keep their own faith completely out of their textual analysis. But I have tried to be clear when my own belief system enters the commentary, as I do when other denominational beliefs enter the commentary. As is the case with the great wisdom traditions of the world, there is a power in the Gospels. These works have endured for millennia. And they have done so because humans resonate with the words they find there. We humans are complex beings, and we develop at different rates and to different degrees and in different ways. The complexity of the Gospels*

*meets the complexity of the human soul. I believe, and I have found, that the Gospel of John has something of benefit for my soul at every stage of my development, and each time I come to it. And I fully expect for this to be the case throughout my life, and even into the next one, where Jesus has gone to prepare a place for me.*

*There are two sections at the end of this Reader's Companion. One is for important terms that appear in either John's Gospel or my commentary. These words are highlighted in red and underlined. To learn more about these words, one would turn to the back of the Reader's Companion and find the given word in the section called IMPORTANT WORDS AND TERMS. Following that section is another one called FROM SCRIPTURE TO RELIGION: HOW CHURCHES HAVE USED BIBLE VERSES. In this section we look at certain Bible verses that have become important in the history of Christianity. Christianity has taken certain verses from the Bible and made doctrinal statements out of them. These doctrinal statements, in turn, have become beliefs that the various Christian denominations hold. I highlight the Bible verses that I comment on in bold type. In the section of this work on Bible verses, I compare how different Christian denominations have generated beliefs from the given Bible verse. I compare Catholic, Lutheran, Swedenborgian, and at times Evangelical denominations. For instance, early in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist sees Jesus and exclaims, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" My note on this verse treats Catholic, Lutheran, Swedenborgian, and Evangelical doctrines of the atonement—an important doctrine derived from that Bible verse.*

*Writing this companion to John's Gospel has had a marked influence on me. I have grown in the writing of it. I believe that anyone who encounters this Gospel will be transformed, as I have been. This commentary is my encounter with John's Gospel and the ideas and*

*interpretations that came to my mind. But my reading is not the only way to read John. I invite everyone with an inclination to, to encounter John for themselves, and see what ideas and direction this great work of spirituality gives them. John's last sentence is also about the fathomless wisdom to be found in the Jesus tradition,*

*But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written (21:25).*

## WEEK I

### GOSPEL CLAIMS ABOUT JESUS' IDENTITY, PART 1

#### John 1:1-18: The Battle between Darkness and Light

The Gospel of John begins up in the heavens with a cosmic battle between light and darkness. The first 18 verses of chapter one begin with a sort of hymn that sounds **Gnostic**. In this section, salvation is described in terms of the spiritual battle between forces of light and forces of darkness. Jesus is the light. As the light, Jesus gives life and enlightens (vss. 4, 9). This idea parallels Buddhism which speaks of **enlightenment** in order to be delivered from this world of suffering.

In John, we are told that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it. The battle between forces of light and forces of darkness is timeless and universal. But given Jesus' locale and time, perhaps the battle between light and darkness is best understood according to the **Dead Sea Scrolls**. They speak of a coming battle between angels of light and angels of darkness. While the Dead Sea Scrolls speak of this battle as something that will happen in the future, in John's Gospel the language is in the present tense, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5). Is John saying that the battle between light and darkness is a present, ongoing battle? Is this a statement to Jesus' life on earth only, when forces of darkness tried to stop His ministry by assassination? Are we each involved in a battle between forces of darkness and forces of light? Is the light a present resource that continually shines in our lives?

The battle between forces of darkness and forces of light is a battle we all experience as we make our way into the light. There are dark forces that would drag us down into the vanities and illusions of the material world. And there is the power of light that elevates us out of illusion and material concerns into the Spirit. We can say that John's Gospel speaks about us coming to Jesus, who has a heavenly kingdom. This is at the end of the hymn that opens John's Gospel.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

So we can become children of God. John contrasts different ways of being born—being born biologically versus being born of God. Being born of God is possible for those who believe in Jesus' name. But what's in a name? We will look at being born in Jesus' name later in this seekers' companion. Here, it seems clear that we will need to receive the light and overcome the powers of darkness in order to be born of God. It may well be that Jesus' actions and teachings, which come later in the Gospel, are the directions for receiving the light and becoming children of God.

#### FOR REFLECTION:

- 1) John says that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (1:5). Is this a reference to Jesus' life and struggles, or is this a statement of our ongoing struggles against powers of darkness?"

- 2) Can you identify forces of darkness in your own life? Do you feel you need a “higher power” to overcome them?
- 3) John 1:12-13 says that we can be born of God. How are we born of God? Is believing in the name “Jesus” enough? What is meant by receiving Jesus?
- 4) What does John mean when he calls Jesus “The Light?”

### **In the Beginning**

John’s Gospel begins with deep mystical language. It opens at creation, and, in fact, before creation. “In the beginning was the word.” This is a vast statement. Its depth emerges when we reflect on the Greek word for *word*—*logos*. Calling Jesus the Word is an example of Plato's influence on the **Hellenistic** world. It also shows the influence of a school of philosophy called Stoic Philosophy. In Greek, *Logos* means “Word” but much, much more. *Logos* also means “Reason,” “Truth,” “Wisdom,” “Knowledge,” and in Platonism it can mean the very pattern of the created world. In its meaning as reason, we derive our English word “logic.” We use *logos* today to label systems of knowledge. Whenever you see -ology, you are seeing *logos*: **theology** (logos about God—Theos), **anthropology** (logos about humans—anthropos), **biology** (logos about life—bios), **ecology** (logos about the harmony—ecos—of nature).

So what is reasonable is included in “The Word.” But in a more philosophical sense, the Stoic philosophers held that the universe was created by Supreme Reason, and everything in creation follows Reason. The very pattern from which the universe was created is the Logos, the Supreme Reason. So Logos is the pattern, the form, from which the universe was created. Logos is the first “emanation” from God. So John says, “the Logos was with God and the Logos was God” (1:1). As the pattern for the universe, the Logos made all things, “all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (1:3). Logos is also the subject, or content of a saying or sentence. Logos is the truth in a sentence, in a paragraph, or in a book. Logos is what is divine in the Bible. So when John says that the Logos became flesh, he is saying that the subject of the whole Bible became a Human.

Let's try to sum up what the opening hymn in John means. In the beginning was Reason, what is reasonable, the pattern of the created universe, the first emanation of God, the subject of the Scriptures, God. This is what took on human flesh and was born as Jesus.

Before launching into Jesus’ ministry, we need to consider the opening words of John’s Gospel.

In the very first verse of John, The Word, the *Logos*, is in the beginning—“In the beginning was the Word.” We are told that The Word was with God, and was God. Repeating God twice (with God and was God) has led to a doctrine that somewhat separates Jesus from God the Father. So the “with God” phrase is said to mean that there is God the Father and the “was God” phrase means Jesus, who was God, and was also with God the Father in the beginning. But another equally plausible way to read this is that *Logos* is God’s Wisdom, which is God. Just following this line John says that, “all things came into being through him.” To me, this suggests Genesis 1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” God created everything through God’s Divine Wisdom, “The *Logos*.”

John says next that in The Word is life. In Divine Wisdom a person has life. When a person is embodying Divine Wisdom, then the person has life—“in him was life.” More

broadly, all life is from The Word, The *Logos*. The whole created order, everything living, everyone embodying Divine Wisdom, is created by the Word.

We are told that life in The Word is light. The Word is light and life. Calling The Word light follows the meaning of *Logos* as Wisdom. We use language of light to talk about wisdom. We call smart people “brilliant” which is bright light. When we don’t understand something, we ask for someone to shed some light on the subject. Spiritually advanced seekers are called “enlightened.” When we understand, we say, “I see.” John tells us that the true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world.

All this took on human flesh—“And the word became flesh and lived among us.” Becoming flesh is what the word “incarnation” means, which we hear often, especially around Christmas. *Caro* (**car**nation) is Latin for “flesh” and *in* means “in.” Putting them together gives us *incar-*. Then grammarians add the case ending “-nation” to give us “incarnation”—in the flesh. So the cosmic *Logos*—God, God’s Wisdom, Reason, the creative Power of everything, took on flesh, a human body. And as if to emphasize just how real incarnation was, John adds, “and we have seen his glory.”

The world was in a dark place when The Word was made flesh. So John says that the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness did not overcome it. The word translated as “overcome” is a Greek word that has multiple meanings. *Katalambano* means “to seize,” “grasp,” “take by force.” And it also means mental understanding. To grasp also means grasp mentally, or understand and comprehend. The King James Version says that the darkness has not *comprehended* it. This suggests that people didn’t understand Jesus. And the RSV translation suggests that the forces of darkness hadn’t overpowered and conquered Jesus—“the darkness did not overcome it.” By using the word *katalambano*, John says that the forces of darkness both did not understand the light, nor did the forces of darkness overpower and conquer the light. This is a very short narrative of Jesus’ life. Jesus came into the dark world of the first century C.E. He brought light to the world. But many did not understand Jesus’ teachings and service to humanity. They tried to destroy Him and silence His teachings, but they could not, did not.

## **John1:1-18, Luke 1-2:40**

### **Part 1: Logos, Holy One, Father and Son**

John's Gospel opens with two titles for Jesus: The Word Made Flesh (1:1-3, 14); and Son of God (1:18). Luke's Gospel reinforces this idea using a term from the Hebrew Scriptures, but also some unique imagery. From Luke that we have the story of the manger and the angels appearing to the shepherds. From Luke we have the stories of the angel Gabriel's annunciation to Zechariah and Mary about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. “The Annunciation” is when the angel Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus is to be born from her. There is a history of paintings called “The Annunciation” that depict this story from Luke.

Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary tells us something about who Jesus is. Gabriel tells Mary that the “the power of the Most High shall overshadow you.” Clearly "Most High" is God. This means that God is impregnating Mary.

Gabriel says further, “the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God” (1:35). To the Jews reading this line, the meaning would be very clear. “Holy One” is a recognized term

in the Hebrew Scriptures for Yahweh (Jehovah), or God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Holy One is also called “your Redeemer,” and “your Savior”. So what is born from Mary is The Holy One from the Hebrew Scriptures, or God<sup>1</sup>. So in Luke’s account, Jesus, as “the Holy One,” is none other than Yahweh God in human form. John also uses this term for Jesus. Peter confesses that Jesus is The Holy One,

You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (6:69).

It is of utmost importance that Mary consents to be the mother of Jesus. Greco-Roman mythology has stories of gods raping mortal women, to whom demi-gods are born. Hercules was one of these half-gods. But the incarnation of Jesus—“incarnation” means “taking on flesh”—happens with Mary’s consent. Mary says, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

The Greco-Roman world had several divine-humans. In Homer’s *Iliad*, Diomedes is called “divine.” The philosopher Pythagoras was a god. A story has come down through the ages of another human god, Apollonius of Tyana. Some see Jesus in this Greco-Roman mind-set that was amenable to wonder-working human gods.

There is one significant difference in Jesus’ divinity and the divinity of the Greco-Roman god-men. The Greco-Roman world-view was polytheistic. That is, there were several gods and goddesses in their celestial realms. No one god was supreme. Even Zeus was a king with a court, not a universal power. Jesus, however, came from a mono-theistic world-view. Yahweh was the One Universal God over all creation. Aside from Him there is no other. If Jesus is Yahweh incarnate, or Yahweh’s Son, He would possess a universality that Hercules, or Pythagoras, or Diomedes, or Apollonius of Tyana could never possess. If Jesus was Yahweh incarnate, He would be the One God incarnate. If Jesus was Yahweh’s Son, He would be the One Son, only Begotten, of the Father.

Jesus as the incarnation of the One God is like the system we find in Hinduism. In Hinduism, there are Gods and Goddesses. Most prominent are the Gods Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu, and the Goddesses Shakti, Lakshmi and Kali. The Hindu Gods and Goddesses, though, are considered incarnations of the One Universal, Infinite, Holy Power, Brahman. Brahman is the creative force inside and behind everything. Gods and Goddesses are personalized forms of this Power.

As to Jesus’ relation to God, all through the Gospels Jesus is called “Son of God.” This expression has been mistranslated, or shall I say misunderstood in modern language translations. Jesus and the people of his time and place spoke a language called Aramaic. In Aramaic, the use of the word “son” has different meanings than in English. “Son of God” in Aramaic would mean “God.” “Son of man” would mean “man.” “Son of Jews” would mean “a Jew.” In the Hebrew Scriptures there is a book attributed to the prophet Daniel. In Daniel, there is a reference to a visionary being called “a son of man.” “And behold, with the clouds of heaven came one like a son of man” (Daniel 7:13). Scholars now read that passage as if it says, “And behold, with the

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<sup>1</sup> That term can be found in Daniel 4:10, 13; Habakkuk 3:3; Isaiah 1:4; 5:19; 10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19; 30: 11, 12; 41:16; 43:3, 11, 14, 15; (here the Holy One is also called "your Savior," vs. 3, 11; and "your Redeemer," vs. 14 ); 47:4 (where Holy One is called "your Redeemer"); 48:41; 49:7; 54:5 ("your Redeemer") Psalm 78:41; Jeremiah 51:5; and in other places.

clouds of heaven came one like a man.” Jesus is called Son of God and Son of man. These names would best be translated “God” and “man.” So Jesus is both God and Man.

But equally true is the fact that Jesus was born as a baby. So clearly, He is some kind of Son and has some kind of Father. But Jesus’ relationship to the Father is complex. Jesus says that He does the will of the Father, “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (6:38). We all can strive to do the Father’s will. But in the case of Jesus, it is different. Jesus says that he came to do the will of “him who sent me.” Would we claim to be sent here by the Father? Perhaps. In near death experiences, some report to be sent back to earth in order to complete something they have not yet finished on earth. Perhaps there is a way in which we are all sent here to accomplish some good. But Jesus is different from ordinary humanity because He claims special knowledge. He claims that the Father shows Jesus “all that he himself is doing.”

“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing” (5:19-20).

While this language makes Jesus look like a separate being from the Father, Jesus still is acting parallel to the Father, doing the Father’s will and doing everything that He sees the Father doing.

Language about Jesus’ divinity gets stronger. Jesus possesses some of the Father’s powers. Jesus declares that God has given Him God's power to judge. “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgement to the Son” (5:22). As God gives life, so does Jesus, “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will” (5:21). The way that works, apparently, is that the Father gives Jesus life, and Jesus gives us life, “Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me” (6:57). We are to revere Jesus as we would the Father, “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him” (5:23). Finally, Jesus has life in Himself, as does God. “As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself” (5:26). So far, one could read these verses and conclude that Jesus and the Father are two very closely related beings, but distinguishably distinct.

But there are a couple of verses that state plainly that Jesus is God. For instance, Verse 5:46, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (5:46). Moses wrote only about God's relationship with humanity. There is no mention of the Messiah in Moses—only God. So how can Jesus say that Moses wrote about Him? That can only be true if Jesus is God. Jesus makes this explicit in John 6:45, “It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God’” (6:45). This means that Jesus, who is doing the teaching, is God.

Further, John tells us how Jews in Jesus’ day would understand the relationship of Father and Son. To us, Father and Son are two different persons, with two different identities, and two different finite souls. But all this changes when God is one’s Father and a mortal is the mother. For Jews in Jesus’ day, calling God Jesus’ Father made Jesus equal to God, or God Himself. Jesus is called Immanuel—literally, “God with us.” Jesus’ equality to God comes out early in John’s Gospel. Jesus heals on the Sabbath, which inflames strict Jews (see below). But what inflames them all the more is Jesus’ claim that God is His Father. For Jews in Jesus’ day, this makes Jesus equal to God,

This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God (5:18).

## WEEK II

## GOSPEL CLAIMS ABOUT JESUS' IDENTITY, PART 2

## Unity, Trinity, Miracle Worker, Messiah

In some places in John, we find “Unitarian” language. By “Unitarian” I mean language that speaks of one God, not **the trinity**. Unitarian language makes Jesus and God one Being, one Person. So in John 3:35 we find, “the Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand.” In other places in John, Jesus is the Father—“I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). The union of Jesus with the Father is stated even more emphatically in John 14. There, Jesus says that seeing Him is seeing the Father:

If you really knew me you would know my Father as well. From now on, ***you do know him and have seen him***. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? ***Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father***, how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:7-9).

John's Gospel gives us a little detail on how the Father and Jesus can be one. He states that God the Father is in Jesus as soul is in the body. Jesus says, "The words I say to are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, ***living in me***, who is doing his work" (14:10).

The Christian Scriptures say that God is Jesus' Father. But the human Mary is His mother. Some of the ancient creeds (Athanasian Creed) emphasize that Jesus is fully God and fully Man. The Christian scriptures use several names to talk about God. In general, Christianity finds three basic terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are all titles for God. These three names give rise to the Christian doctrine called “**the trinity**.”

The trinity may be the most difficult idea to understand in all of Christianity. The idea of the trinity says that God is three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This appears as if there are three gods. But to avoid the idea of three gods, Christians assert that the three Persons share one essence. This is a difficult idea to comprehend. Christians want to assert that there is one God while maintaining language of three Persons. I'm not sure you can have it both ways. But that is the claim.

There is another title for Jesus that emphasizes His humanity. In many places He is called, “Son of man.” We are to understand this as “man.” This title emphasizes the part of Jesus that came from Mary. It is the human aspect of Jesus. In the Gospel stories, we see a human being endowed with special powers who has an unselfish love for everybody He encounters. Jesus even cries, when moved by strong emotions (John 11:35). I think that the ancient creeds capture Jesus' nature well when they say that He is fully God and fully man.

Jesus' relation to God, or to the Father is a difficult issue for many people. Many see Jesus as a great teacher. Many see Jesus as a great prophet. But some find it hard to see Jesus as the Word made flesh, God in human form. The Jews of Jesus' day refused to see Jesus as divine. They knew Mary and Joseph, and thought that Joseph was Jesus' father,

Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I came down from heaven? (John 6:42).

There are some interesting passages in the Christian Scriptures when Jesus testifies about Himself. At times He doesn't claim any of the titles we have been looking at. When John the

Baptist sends out some of his followers to ask Jesus if He is the one we are to expect according to the prophets, Jesus does not reply with a clear Yes,” or “No.” Instead, Jesus points to His deeds:

Now when John heard in the prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matthew 11:2-5).

Are these mighty deeds testimony that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Word made flesh? Or is Jesus deflecting attention from these titles and emphasizing the deeds themselves? My questions concern the role of Jesus in salvation. If the great deeds of Jesus are what matter, and not his name or title, perhaps this puts believing in His name in a different light. Some scholars of the Christian Scriptures even assert that titles like Messiah, Son of God, and Savior were laid on Jesus by the early church, and Jesus never claimed these titles for Himself. In their understanding, Jesus’ deeds such as healing and Jesus’ teachings about love are what matter. Jesus’ words and the example He demonstrates of selfless giving are what His mission is all about. Doing likewise, and following the wisdom He preaches makes a person a disciple and gives eternal life.

But if Jesus is God Incarnate, then it would matter very much if we believe in Him. If we are to enter His kingdom, I would think believing that He is King would be an entrance requirement. There appear to be scriptures on both sides of this question. We will call attention to them as they arise in the texts.

A final title given to Jesus needs consideration. It is a cornerstone of Christianity and this title divides Jews and Christians. That title is “Messiah.” The important Messiah tradition begins with King David in the Hebrew Scriptures. “Messiah” literally means “anointed.” When a person was made king, he was anointed with oil. Thus “the anointed one,” “the messiah,” means the king. The tradition of the Messiah is associated with King David because of a promise God makes to David. Through the prophet Nathan, God promises that a descendant of David will be on the throne in Jerusalem forever, “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). But this does not prove true in history. In 587 BCE (“BCE”—“Before the Common Era,” this is how we now refer to the time period that used to be called “BC,”—“Before Christ”) Babylon conquered **Judah** and the king was removed from his throne never to return again. Then, prophesies about the messiah, or the king from David’s lineage, put the messiah into the future. In Jesus’ time, everyone expected that the Messiah would come soon. In John 1:41, Andrew excitedly tells his brother Peter that he has found the Messiah. (The Greek word for “Messiah” is “Christos”—Christ. So when we call Jesus “the Christ,” we are calling Him the “Messiah.”) The Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah expected Him to overthrow the Romans and to establish a Jewish king in Jerusalem. John the Baptist’s father sings a song about his hopes for Jesus,

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
 Because He has come and redeemed his people.  
 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
 In the house of his servant David  
 (as was said through his holy prophets of long ago)

***Salvation from our enemies******And from the hand of all who hate us—***

To show mercy to our fathers

And to remember his holy covenant

The oath he swore to our father Abraham;

***To rescue us from the hand of our enemies***, (Luke 1:68-74, emphasis mine).

In the **synoptic Gospels**, Jesus enters Jerusalem in grandeur. The people welcome Him as a conquering king. They say, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (21:9). Matthew and Luke contain genealogies of Jesus’ ancestry. They are both careful to trace Jesus’ ancestry through King David. Being a descendant of David, Jesus is qualified to be the Messiah. Both the promise to King David and the prophesies say that when the Messiah comes, he will be a descendant of David (cf. Isaiah 7:13,14; 9; 11). Matthew’s Gospel tells us that Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem fulfills a prophesy from the Hebrew Scriptures about the coming Messiah. That prophesy is from Zechariah 9:9

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, He tried to tell people that he was not an earthly king. During Jesus’ trial, Pilate asked Him if he were a king. Jesus replied that he was not a king of this world; if so, His angels would fight for Him. But the people didn’t seem to get it. In Mark 8:29-33 there is an interchange between Jesus and Peter. Jesus asks Peter whom he thinks Jesus is. Peter says that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah). Then Jesus prophesies that He will be handed over to the religious authorities and suffer at their hands. This is not supposed to happen to the royal Messiah. So Peter protests. Jesus reacts strongly to Peter, saying that he has only worldly things in mind. Even Jesus’ closest disciples, apparently, didn’t understand that Jesus is a spiritual king, not a worldly one. In John’s Gospel, the people even try to force Jesus to be a worldly king,

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king,

Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself (John 6:15).

Jesus certainly didn’t act the way people understood the Messiah should act. He didn’t drive out the Romans. He didn’t assume the throne in Jerusalem. He didn’t change the material world and its structures of government. This is the primary historical issue that separates Jews from Christians. Jews do not view Jesus as the Messiah. Christians do view Jesus as the Messiah—although they understand the Messiah in vastly different terms than the Hebrew Scriptures describe him. I recall a Rabbi’s comment on this matter. Both Jews and Traditional Christians are waiting for the Messiah to come in the future. For Christians, this would be the second coming. For Jews it would be the first coming of the Messiah. The Rabbi said we can all be friends while we wait. And when the Messiah comes, we can ask Him, “So, have you been here before?”

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) Can the several titles for Jesus be harmonized: i.e., can Jesus be the Logos, the Son of God, the Son of Man, and the Messiah all together?
- 2) Is there a title that resonates with you more than another?
- 3) Why would Jesus not answer John the Baptist's question about His identity directly?
- 4) Do you think that salvation depends on the way a person views who Jesus is?
- 5) Was Jesus the Messiah?
- 6) Can you understand Jesus' claims about His relationship to the Father? Does the doctrine of the trinity solve the complexity of this relationship? Is it agreeable to you?
- 7) How do you view the unitarian passages in John's Gospel. Is a unitarian view of God agreeable to you?
- 8) Can God, or the pattern of the universe, take on a human form? Can God be human and divine at the same time? Is the claim that Jesus is both human and divine a reflection of his age only—an age with Hercules and other demi-gods? Was Jesus "The Divine Human" or "a divine human?"

### **John 1:19-34: What John the Baptist Says about Jesus**

John the Baptist lived like typical Old Testament prophets. He lived in the wilds. He ate food that didn't come from cultivation, but from nature, "and ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6). John the Baptist lived in the wilderness, away from cities, and lived off nature.

Jews, probably frantically, sent out **priests and Levites** to question John the Baptist. They ask him several questions--all united by one idea: apocalypticism. Apocalypticism was very much in the air at the time of Jesus. Apocalypticism means prophecies of a great day of judgement when God would come to earth and set things right. It would be a cosmic event--in some cases the earth would be transformed, or reel like a drunkard, mountains would be levelled and valleys lifted up. In some cases there would be a cosmic battle between forces of light and forces of darkness. The apocalyptic age was foretold by several of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, including Isaiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, and Malachi. It is also prophesied in the New Testament book of Revelation and in smaller sections of the **synoptic** Gospels. Not only are these prophecies in the Bible, but we find similar apocalyptic prophecies in the Dead Sea Scrolls. These prophecies were circulating in the air at the time of Christ.

All through the Gospels, Jesus talks about the apocalyptic age or kingdom being either near or as having come already (Mark 1:15). At times it appears as if Jesus Himself is the fulfillment of the apocalyptic prophecies (Luke 4:16-21). At other times, it appears as if the kingdom of God is at hand (the apocalyptic age), and Jesus is its herald or bringing it about (Luke 9:60; Luke 12:49-53).

One implication of Jesus' coming is that some kind of new age was ushered in during His life. How it came is not clear. Some scriptures suggest that Jesus' coming was the fulfillment of the apocalyptic prophecies that God would come to earth. In this reading, Jesus' power transformed the world into the new age. Other passages suggest that the new age was happening in the universe and that Jesus' mission was to point it out. Still other passages say that Jesus' own person was the new age. So the **Gospel of Thomas** (82) reads, "Jesus said: 'He who is near to me is near the fire, and he who is far from me is far from the kingdom.'"

Somehow, Jesus is related to the new age. How we are related to the new age would seem to depend on how Jesus is related to it. If Jesus Himself is the new age, then our

relationship to Jesus matters. If Jesus announced the new age, or if Jesus instituted it, then we are already in it because it has been established.

The questions that the priests and Levites ask John the Baptist are all directed to specific prophecies about the new age. Their first question is, "Are you Elijah?" This is a reference to the dreadful Day of the Lord. A prophecy from Malachi reads, "Surely a day is coming; it will burn like a furnace . . . See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes" (4:1, 5). John replies that he is not Elijah and the priests then breathe a sigh of relief. Next they ask him, "Are you the prophet?" This is a reference to a vague prophecy from Deuteronomy. God tells Moses, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers" (18:18). When or who this prophet is isn't said. John denies being this prophet also. They then ask him just who he is. John answers with a verse from a gentle and pastoral prophecy from Isaiah: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness make straight the way of the Lord . . . ." The prophecy goes on to say,

The uneven ground shall become level,  
And the rough places a plain.  
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
And all people shall see it together . . .  
You who bring good tidings to Zion,  
Go up to a high mountain.  
You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,  
Lift up your voice with a shout,  
Lift it up, do not be afraid;  
Say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" . . .  
He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
He gathers the lambs in his arms  
And carries them close to his heart;  
He gently leads those that have young (Isaiah 40:9, 11).

John the Baptist is the first one to testify as to who Jesus is. John exclaims, "Behold **the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**" This is a reference to Jewish sacrifices. In the Jewish religion of Jesus' time, a person could offer a sacrifice at the temple in order to take his or her sin away. A priest would slaughter an animal and in the animal's death, the person's sin is removed, or atoned for. The animal could be a bull, or a goat, or a lamb (more on this in the section *From Scripture to Religion*). John the Baptist is calling Jesus such a sacrificial lamb. At this point in the story, we don't know how Jesus will take away the sin of the world. Will Jesus teach the people righteousness and thereby take away the world's sin? Will Jesus lead a celestial army in the fight of the angels of darkness against the angels of light? Will Jesus give us power in our internal battle against the forces of darkness? Will Jesus purify the cosmos with His divine power and presence? Will Jesus heal the world? Traditional Christianity takes this line to mean that Jesus' death on the cross is like a lamb being sacrificed in **the temple**. They say that when Jesus was crucified, his death took away the world's sin.

Very early in John's Gospel, the issue of the Spirit comes up. John the Baptist says that he saw the **Holy Spirit** descend and remain on Jesus. He also says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Spirit is a huge word that means many things. It means breath, and hence the life force. It means divine power. In the sense of life force and divine influence ("influence,"—literally

“flowing in”) we have the English word *inspiration*. *Spirit* is the root of “inspiration.” In many Asian systems, inner breath, or life force is used for spiritual purification. In China it is called Ch’i; in India, it is called *prana*; in Japan it is called Ki. In all these systems, a person’s relationship with this inner life force, this spiritual breath, is important for well-being, and in some cases for immortality. So, too, in John’s Gospel, a relationship with the Spirit appears to be necessary for salvation. But perhaps most interestingly, the Greek word for Spirit also means a person’s inner character: who the real person is. This points to who Jesus is and also to Jesus’ mission. If the Holy Spirit descended and remained on Jesus, is John saying that God’s divine power entered Jesus and purified His inner character? And if Jesus is baptizing with the Holy Spirit, isn’t he cleansing a person’s inner character and making it holy? Perhaps this is how Jesus takes away the sin of the World.

In John’s Gospel, when John the Baptist meets Jesus, there is a significant omission. John bears witness that the Spirit descended on Jesus and remained there. But John’s Gospel does not say that Jesus was baptized. All the three other Gospels (Matthew, Mark Luke) mention that Jesus was baptized; John doesn’t. It would seem that John is more interested in the Spirit being embodied in Jesus, than with rituals such as baptism. This, again, points to John’s mystical emphasis: he is more interested in Jesus embodying the Spirit and baptizing with the Spirit than he is with the ritual of baptism in water.

#### **FOR CONSIDERATION:**

- 1) How is Jesus related to the new age foretold by the prophets? Did He bring in the new age? If so, how did He do it? Did He only testify to and announce the new age? Do you think that a new age is at all related to Jesus?
- 2) What does John mean when he says that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world?” Can a sacrifice take away a person’s sins?
- 3) What does the Holy Spirit mean to you? What would being baptized by the Holy Spirit mean. Consider the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. Do you think that their discussion of Spirit influenced the Christian Scriptures? Was Spirit as understood in the *Dead Sea Scrolls* appropriated by Christianity?
- 4) Why doesn’t John’s Gospel record Jesus’ baptism?

## WEEK III

## JESUS AND SALVATION

## John 1:12-14: Salvation, Grace, and Belief

The hymn opening John's Gospel brings up the issue of salvation. The actual wording in the passage (1:12-13) is two-fold: "To all who **received him**, who **believed in his name** he gave the power to become children of God." This and other lines like it have generated much debate in religious circles. Some religions say that believing in Jesus by name is sufficient for salvation. In the part of this book called *From Scripture to Religion*, we have a discussion of belief in Jesus' name from religions' perspective.

What does it mean to believe in the name of Jesus? Is it simply the word "Jesus?" I think not. In the ancient world a name meant the qualities of and the power in a person. After Jacob wrestles with God, he receives a new name, Israel (Genesis 32:22-32). This name means that he has striven with God and man. His name captures his life and who he is. The power of a person's name exists in other stories of folklore. The story of Rumpelstiltskin turns on the name of the gnome. He releases the lady when she discovers his name. The gnome's power was associated with his name. The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. Joshua means "savior." Believing in Jesus' name means more than simply reciting Jesus' name. It means accepting the power and all the qualities that Jesus stands for. These are revealed in the Gospel stories as they unfold, and they are embodied in Jesus Himself, the Word made flesh.

Christianity has co-opted verse 1:14 almost to the point where it is unrecoverable in its original meaning. Yet this is a very important verse for who Jesus is and what Jesus' mission was. In the RSV, the verse reads, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of truth and grace." We need to consider the words "truth and grace."

John tells us that Jesus is filled with truth and **grace**. Jesus was one of the great teachers of spiritual wisdom. In His capacity as teacher, Jesus is filled with truth. But Jesus is not only a teacher of truth. John says that He is also filled with *xaritos* (*charitos*), in the Greek. I use the Greek word to avoid the way Christianity has co-opted the English word. One can see that *charitos* is the Greek root of our word "charity." When we hear the word *charity* we think of building hospitals, founding soup kitchens, giving alms to the poor, and the like. These deeds are included in the word charity, but charity in its original Greek sense is much broader. It is related to joy, to "attractiveness"--as in charisma--to good will and to tangible forms of goodwill--such as healing.

So when John says that Jesus is filled with truth and *xaritos* (*charitos*), he is saying that Jesus is filled with truth, joy, attractiveness, good will, caring, and charity. The Greek word *charitos* would be the emotional aspect to Jesus' character, while truth is the intellectual aspect to Jesus' character. Jesus is a union of truth and love. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of truth and caring."

This concludes the opening hymn section of John's Gospel. What follows is the immediate beginning of Jesus' ministry. Mark and John begin their narrative with Jesus' baptism. Jesus' baptism is the official beginning of His ministry. And Jesus' ministry begins with John the Baptist (not John, the author of the Gospel).

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) What does the name “Jesus” mean. What qualities of Jesus can be included in his name? What aspects of His life are meant by His name?
- 2) What would it mean for Jesus to be filled with truth and grace (*charitos*)? Have you heard the word grace before? What does it mean to you? How would Jesus be filled with truth?
- 3) What does it mean to believe in Jesus?

**Jesus’ Role in Salvation****John 3:16-21; 5:19-47; 6:25-63:**

In the middle of John’s discussion about Spirit, he inserts a sermon about salvation. Although rather short, the sermon is dizzying in complexity and bewildering in contradictions. Because of these difficulties, some churches emphasize only one verse of this sermon—indeed found whole theological systems on one verse from it—and ignore or suppress the differing voices within it.

Consider the following verses from John3:

- 1) For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (3:17).
- 2) He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him (3:36).
- 3) For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (3:16).
- 4) He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God (3:18).
- 5) And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God (3:19-21).

Consider the first two verses, numbers 1) and 2). The first verse says that Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to save it. This verse is reinforced by one later in John’s Gospel, “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37); and “I did not come to judge the world but to save it” (12:47). The second verse says that if a person doesn’t believe in Jesus, the wrath of God will rest upon her or him. To me, these two verses seem contradictory. Having the wrath of God rest upon a person looks like condemnation to me. But Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to save it. The idea of condemnation also appears in verse 4: “He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God (3:18).” How do these verses about condemnation stand in the light of John 3:17, “For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (3:17)?

Many Evangelical Christians put a lot of weight on John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." To them, if a person believes that Jesus is their Savior, and that He died on the cross as a sacrifice of atonement, then she or he is saved. Evangelicals teach that we can be saved in an instant if we believe this. They support this belief system with citation 4), "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the *name* of the only Son of God" (3:18). Verse 4) puts an emphasis on the name of the only Son of God. Evangelicals understand name to mean the name "Jesus," and Jesus only. Belief in only Jesus saves. All other religions are condemned because they do not believe in Jesus. In Evangelical Christianity, belief and faith in Jesus is the only way for salvation.

It must be said that there are many verses that speak of salvation by belief. Jesus says, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him may have eternal life" (6:40). And again, "He who believes has eternal life" (6:47). When asked what works a person needs to do in order to do God's will, Jesus answers with language of belief,

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (6:28-29).

But citation 5) speaks only about deeds, not belief in Jesus. As in the opening chapter, citation 5) returns to language of light and darkness, not Jesus' name. This passage states that people love darkness "because their deeds were evil" (3:19). Those whose deeds are wrought in God turn to the light, that their good works may be clearly seen. In passage 5) it would appear that belief is not the issue, but whether a person's deeds are good or evil. And those whose deeds are good turn to the light, while those whose deeds are evil love the darkness. No mention of belief in Jesus' name is in this section. This reading agrees with verse number 2), "he who does not obey the Son shall not see life" (3:36). In this verse, *obeying* the Son is the issue, not *believing*. Verse 3:36 points to Jesus' teachings. To obey the Son would mean to follow Jesus' teachings. The verse unites belief and obeying the Son: "He who *believes* in the Son has eternal life; he who does not *obey* the Son shall not see life." For this verse to make sense, it seems to me that believing in Jesus means following His teachings (obeying). Belief isn't agreeing to a doctrinal formula. It is following the teachings of the Son. This verse seems to say that believing in Jesus is *doing* the things that Jesus teaches. And it agrees with passage 5)—a person's deeds make them turn to the light or turn toward darkness. The question of deeds appears two chapters later,

A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned (John 5:28-29).

I am not sure that all these verses can be reconciled. Jesus comes not to condemn the world, but to save it; those who do not *believe* in Jesus are condemned; people's *deeds* determine whether they turn toward the light or toward darkness. I think, however, that injustice is done to the complexity of these passages when one verse only is selected and the others suppressed. I think that belief and deeds need both to be considered to honor what John is saying.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- 1) Do the five passages I present at the beginning of this lesson seem contradictory?
- 2) Consider each of the five passages one by one. What does each one say to you?

- 3) How would believing in the name of Jesus save?
- 4) How do good versus evil deeds relate to belief?
- 5) Can salvation be thought of in terms of turning toward the light or turning toward darkness without including Jesus' name? In other words, would this process be an independent tradition than the tradition that emphasizes belief in Jesus?
- 6) Is there a way to harmonize all five passages?

## WEEK IV

### JESUS' MISSION

#### **John1:35-3:15, 4:1-30: The Beginning of Jesus' Mission**

Jesus is now anointed with the Spirit, and He begins His mission. Like other revealers and wisdom teachers, such as Confucius or Buddha, Jesus had a small group of intimate disciples. In the last verses of John 1 we learn about five. Two disciples hear John the Baptist call Jesus the Lamb of God, and from John's testimony they follow Jesus. One of them, Andrew, finds his brother Peter and brings him to Jesus. The next day Jesus Himself calls Philip, who, in turn, goes to his brother Nathanael. When Nathanael hears that Jesus is from Nazareth, he scoffs, looking down at the insignificant town and on Jesus because He came from such a backwater. But Nathanael becomes convinced that there is something extraordinary about Jesus when Jesus tells him that He knew him before they met. This is evidence of a kind of second sight, or all-knowing quality that Jesus will manifest later more fully.

Immediately following the baptism scene, The Gospel of John jumps to Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine. This miracle occurs at a wedding. It raises two issues: the significance of turning water into wine, and the symbolism of the marriage feast.

Can we consider turning water into wine a kind of purification metaphor? Is the miracle only to demonstrate Jesus' power? Or is it a kind of alchemical emblem of Jesus purifying human psyches? Does the process whereby an ordinary element such as water becomes a noble element such as wine suggest purification and sublimation?

And the story takes us to a wedding. One cannot overlook the symbolic nature of the wedding. Scattered throughout all the Gospels are references to weddings as somehow indicating a person's relationship with God, or weddings as symbols for Jesus' relationship to us. In the Hebrew Scriptures the relationship between God and the Israelites is compared to a marriage. One such passage is in Jeremiah 31:32, "I was their husband," says the LORD." John the Baptist makes a mystical reference to Jesus in terms of marriage,

He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full (John 3:29).

In this cryptic verse, John the Baptist is the friend of the bridegroom and Jesus is the bridegroom who has the bride. In other books of the Christian Scriptures, the union of Jesus and the church is compared to a marriage, for instance in the Book of Revelation,

For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. . . . Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6-7, 9)

Mystical traditions from Asia to alchemy in Europe speak of a level of spiritual attainment symbolized by marriage. In India, Shakta Yoga speaks of a union between the God Shiva and His wife Shakti. The practitioner is as Shakti, and he unites his consciousness with Shiva, even as Shakti is united to her spouse Shiva. Chinese and European alchemy teach an alchemical marriage of elements, and personality characteristics are identified with gender. In the light of these traditions, Jesus' presence at a marriage and references to Jesus as bridegroom seem to open up concepts related to spiritual, or mystical marriage between Jesus and humanity. On the

human level, churches interpret Jesus' presence at the marriage feast as a sanctification of human marriage.

Pointing away from ritual and toward a more spiritualized way of worship, the next story in John's Gospel has Jesus causing great commotion at the temple in Jerusalem. Performing sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem was central to Jewish worship in Jesus' day. When He arrives in Jerusalem, Jesus finds the temple courts filled with businessmen profiting from this ritual. They sold animals to sacrifice, and they exchanged currency in this cosmopolitan Roman city. Jesus drives out these profiteers and exclaims that His Father's house shall not be made a place of trade. Here Jesus is changing people's ideas about worship. He points to a higher form of worship, instead of the kind of ritual that can be reduced to selling animals and exchanging currency. A person's relationship to God is to be based on more spiritual and inner qualities than the rituals of animal sacrifice.

At this point in the narrative we add another title to Jesus. He compares His body to the temple itself. This would indicate that Jesus is a living embodiment of the temple. All that the temple stands for as a center of worship is in the living Word, Jesus. The actual meaning of the temple is Jesus Himself, or that Jesus is somehow the embodiment of the temple's holiness.

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body (2:19-21).

John 2 concludes with another statement of Jesus all-seeing eye. John says that Jesus knew all men and women.

Following the chaos in the Jerusalem temple, John's Gospel begins to talk explicitly about Spirit. Jesus talks with a **Pharisee** named Nicodemus and tells him that a person must be **born again**. In typical rabbinic dialogue, Nicodemus feigns ignorance, asking simple questions in order to draw out Jesus' teaching. Jesus says that being born again means being born of "water and the Spirit." Just what it means to be born of the Spirit is not clear. But what is clear is something in us needs to change. We cannot remain in a state of nature. We must become inspired with Spirit.

Perhaps the story in the following chapter sheds light on being born of water and the Spirit. Jesus speaks with a **Samaritan** woman at a well. As if to answer Nicodemus' questions (or the reader's), Jesus explains to the Samaritan woman the meaning of being born of both water and the Spirit. Jesus talks first about water, since they are at a well. Jesus says that He gives living water which wells up to eternal life. Is receiving living water from Jesus being "born of water?" What could receiving living water from Jesus mean? Perhaps Jesus' explanation of the Spirit answers these questions. According to Jesus' explanation, the Spirit is truth. Jesus says that true worshippers will worship in Spirit and truth. This means that true worship is not bound to a place, like Jerusalem, or to physical rituals like sacrifices.

We learn this in the dialogue Jesus has with the Samaritan woman. She brings up the issue of where Jews and Samaritans perform their sacrifices. Samaria is north of Israel and the Samaritans had a temple there on Mount Gerizim. The temple for the Jews was in Jerusalem. The Samaritan woman asks about the correct place to sacrifice,

"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" (John 4:20).

Jesus replies that in time, people won't worship on Mount Gerizim nor in Jerusalem, but will worship, "in Spirit and truth" (4:23). As if to add a concluding line to the entire discussion of

Spirit, Jesus then says, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:24).

One can hardly overestimate the importance that this new truth is revealed to a woman. Women held essentially no power or status in Jesus’ time. Yet this pivotal doctrine is given to a woman. It is a doctrine that even the educated Pharisee Nicodemus doesn’t grasp. By teaching such a profound doctrine to a woman, Jesus significantly elevates the status of women. In fact, it is remarkable that Jesus is spending so much time talking with a woman at all. His disciples marvel when they find Jesus talking with a woman:

Just then his disciples came. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” (4:27)

In the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary*, Mary knows more than the male disciples and is said to be a favorite of Jesus. Perhaps this Gospel is closer to the truth about Jesus’ relationship with women than the canonical Gospels. *The Gospel of Mary* places women in the center of Jesus’ life, whereas the canonical Gospels say little about women.

Perhaps even more remarkable is that Jesus is not only talking with a woman, but He is talking with a Samaritan. Samaritans were despised by Jews. And even the woman herself is surprised to find Jesus talking with her, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” And John explains, “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9).

Throughout His ministry, Jesus broke down artificial barriers of propriety, social standing, financial status, power, prejudice, and racism. Whatever churches have done later, Jesus Himself was a great liberator. He breaks conventions of propriety by talking with despised **tax collectors**, prostitutes, publicans, and other “sinners.” He uses stories about Samaritans in juxtaposition with “upright” Orthodox Jews, praising the faith of the former against the self-righteousness of the latter. So Jesus says in Matthew, “Blessed are those who are not scandalized by me” (Matthew 11:6). In many ways, Jesus reaches out to society’s disenfranchised and dignifies them. But we can’t say that they are the only ones Jesus is interested in. Luke tells a story of Jesus dining with a Pharisee on friendly terms (Luke 7:36-49).

At this point in John’s Gospel, Spirit is identified with God, and Jesus is a giver of eternal life (living water). It teaches that true worshippers worship in Spirit—in our inner selves, by being purified with divine power, by battling forces of darkness, by allowing our character to be transformed by truth, and to breathe in holiness.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- 1) Compare Jesus’ origins from an insignificant “backwater” town with other great revealers. What does it say about Jesus that he came from Nazareth, and not, say, Jerusalem, or Rome, or Alexandria?
- 2) Is turning water into wine a mystical symbol? Is it simply a demonstration of Jesus’ power?
- 3) Is there significance to the fact that Jesus’ first miracle happens at a wedding? Does the wedding carry mystical connotations. Does Jesus’ miracle at the wedding dignify the ceremony?
- 4) What does Jesus driving out the profiteers from the temple say about worship for Jesus? What does it mean that Jesus compares His body to the temple itself?

- 5) If you were a religious authority in Jesus' time, how would you react to Jesus driving out the profiteers from the temple?
- 6) What does it mean to be born again? What would being born of water and the Spirit mean?
- 7) Why would John use a Samaritan to reveal the nature of true worship, of Spirit and of truth?
- 8) What does it mean that "God is Spirit?"
- 9) Why would Jesus reveal the nature of true worship to a woman? Did the history of Christianity follow the way Jesus treated women? How do you view the *Gospel of Mary*? Is it a Gnostic distortion of Jesus' relationship to women? Or is it a true indication of the way Jesus honored women?
- 10) Why would Jesus say, "Blessed are those who are not scandalized by me?"

### **The Drama of People's Reactions to Jesus**

#### **John 6:66-7:1-52**

With a keen dramatic sense, John now turns to the peoples' reactions to Jesus. In the end of chapter 6 and through chapter 7, John leaves off sermonizing and turns to drama. As with good dramatists, John does not so much narrate the events, but rather makes them come alive by means of dialogue. The dramatic tensions in John 6-7 are 1) the conflict and dissention that arose about Jesus; 2) a contrast between established, organised power structures versus the power of the spoken word itself and teachers outside organised power structures; and 3) the contrast between new ideas versus traditional religious texts. And these themes all bear on the question of who Jesus is.

The drama unfolds around the Jewish **Festival of Tabernacles**. During the Festival, Jews live in small huts, called by some translators "tabernacles," or "booths," for a period of one week. This festival is held in commemoration of the time when the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, living in makeshift huts before settling in the Holy Land.

In a transitional segment, John records a touching and intimate interchange between Jesus and the twelve disciples. After hearing the sermon about Jesus' body and blood, many of Jesus' followers desert Him. We then see Jesus' moving question to the Twelve Apostles, "Do you also wish to go away?" (6:67). Peter answers with equally moving words,

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (6:68-69).

The drama then turns to public acceptance and rejection of Jesus at the Feast of the Tabernacles. As Jerusalem was the center of Jewish life in Jesus' day, people would go to Jerusalem to celebrate this great Festival. Jesus' brothers appear to taunt Jesus, telling Him to go to the Festival in Jerusalem and publicly reveal His power. They don't believe Him to be the divine being others think Him to be,

"Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." For even his brothers did not believe in him (John 7:3-5).

Jesus' response is sharp, "Go to the feast yourselves; I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come."

In addition to being a wisdom teacher, Jesus is also a social critic. Jesus says that His brothers are not hated, since they conform to the established social order. But He, Himself, is hated because He criticizes society,

"My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil (7:6-7).

So many of the world's great social critics are seen as threats. And often, society feels it must do away with them. The great philosopher Socrates, who essentially created Western Philosophy, was executed as a threat to religion, to the youth, and to the Athenian State. Analogously, Confucius, whose philosophy formed the basis of China's political and social order, never himself held a political office. In more modern times, we think of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His revolutionary marches changed forever the way race is viewed in the US. An assassin's bullet took his life. Jesus is like these reformers. His teachings ended up transforming the world, yet His own society and the authorities of His own religion succeeded in having Him executed. The fate of reformers like these, perhaps, led Hemingway to write these sad words,

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry (*A Farewell to Arms*).

From conflict with His brothers, the drama shifts to conflict with the established Jewish religion. Jesus does go to the Festival of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, but He does so secretly. Perhaps He hears some of the people talking about Him,

And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, "He is a good man," others said, "No, he is leading the people astray" (7:12).

The doubts about who Jesus is may be hard for contemporary readers to understand. We have 2,000 years of Christian history behind us, and Christianity was the dominant power in the West for that time. But these lines in John show just how tentative Jesus' acceptance was during His life and in the centuries immediately following. On the other hand, I think that similar doubts about Jesus are growing stronger in contemporary society. I see the world today becoming increasingly distant from organized religion and its interpretations of Jesus. Perhaps society today is in a unique position to recover the original dissensions and doubts about who Jesus is.

Jesus makes Himself known publicly mid-way through the Festival and teaches in the Temple itself. The power of His personality causes dissent and conflict. People marvel at His wisdom, since Jesus never went to rabbinic schools as did the Pharisees and Teachers of the law, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" (7:15). People are impressed with Jesus' learning and with the wonders He has performed. Some come to believe due to Jesus' miracles and wisdom,

Many of the people believed in him; they said, "When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?" (7:31)

But others, the religious authorities, perhaps because of His popularity, seek to murder Jesus.

The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him (7:32).

As is typical of small-minded people, in public they deny their desire to kill Jesus,

“Why do you seek to kill me?” The people answered, “You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?” (7:19-20).

Others are more open and admit that there are plots to murder Jesus. But Jesus’ enemies will not admit their intentions in public,

“Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him!” (7:25-26).

The plan to arrest Jesus backfires this time, and the very officers who were sent to arrest Him become enthralled with His teachings.

Now the issue of religious authority versus the power of language itself emerges openly. Within this struggle is also the issue of class stratification—elite religious authorities versus common people. The power of Jesus’ words captivates even those sent by the religious elite to arrest Him, “No man ever spoke like this man!” (7:46). Jesus’ teachings are what convince, not the wonders He performs. This suggests that it was the words of Jesus that called the masses to follow Him, and that people today who follow Jesus do so in part for the same reason.

The religious authorities bring up the issue of classism. They ask if any of the religious elite are convinced by Jesus words. By contrast, it is the common people who follow Him. The learned, who were educated in the Law of Moses are not convinced that Jesus holds any special power. But the common people, who are not well versed in the Law are profoundly attracted to Jesus.

Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed” (7:48-49).

The issue of who Jesus is in relation to the prophesies of the Hebrew Scriptures arises. Even those who support Jesus find it hard to reconcile the scriptures with Jesus’ biography.

“We know where this man comes from; and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from” (7:25)

The issue is Jesus’ birth. In some leading prophesies, The Messiah had to come from Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David. But people think that Jesus came from Galilee, way north of Bethlehem. This causes division among Jesus’ followers. Some say that He is the Messiah, the Christ, but others disagree due to Jesus’ apparent birthplace,

Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the scripture said that the Christ is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” (7:41-42).

Luke is careful to give us the story of Jesus’ parents going to Bethlehem for a census that Caesar Augustus instituted. In Luke’s story Jesus was actually born during that trip to Bethlehem, though He grew up in Galilee. The debate about Jesus’ birth concludes this section of John. Nicodemus (who was a Pharisee, himself, and who spoke with Jesus earlier about being born again) is in the presence of the conspiring Pharisees. He reminds the ruling elite that before convicting any one, the law requires a trial. In fact, it requires three witnesses against an individual for capital offenses.

“Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee” (7:51-52).

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) Why do you suppose Jesus' brothers did not accept Him as the Messiah, or as a special, enlightened being? What do you make of their taunting Jesus and telling Him to make Himself public at the Festival of Tabernacles?
- 2) Can you think of instances when charismatic reformers encountered conflict with religious authorities?
- 3) How do we react to people who don't have proper credentials? Will we listen to wise people who don't have a Ph. D.?
- 4) Why wouldn't the religious authorities of Jesus' day publicly admit their plans to do away with Jesus? Why did they seek to execute Him?

### **John 10:1-18: The Metaphor of the Good Shepherd**

John 10 begins with one of the most famous metaphors for Jesus: that of the good shepherd. As we find it in John, the extended metaphor of the good shepherd is a sermon. In this sermon, we learn about Jesus' intimate relationship to His followers, and we also find further development about Jesus' claims about Himself.

This sermon has caught on in almost every Christian church. For some, it is the primary image of Jesus. In Christian art, in coloring books, and in images taped on church walls—everywhere, we find depictions of Jesus as the good shepherd. I think that this metaphor is so appealing because the imagery of sheep invokes innocence, and a shepherd tending innocent sheep is a gentle, comforting idea of God. One reason for the metaphor of the shepherd is because it is nearly impossible to define innocence. We know innocence intuitively when we see it. But often intuitive matters do not lend themselves to argument or rational explanation. So writers employ metaphor to treat emotive and spiritually interior subjects. Jesus says we must become like children to inherit the kingdom of God. Being “like” a child, but not being an actual child, is another metaphor evoking innocence. And now we have the image of Jesus' relationship with humanity as one of shepherd and sheep.

In the metaphor of the good shepherd, we humans recognize the voice of truth when we hear it.

The sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers (John 10:5). Jesus claims that humanity won't listen to false leaders, “All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them” (10:8). That part of the metaphor is about how we relate to truth. I know a sheep rancher, and he told me that when it's time for the sheep to come into the corral, they will come when he calls them. But they won't come when his wife calls them. They know only the shepherd's voice, and won't listen to another.

But the metaphor is also about God's relationship to us. The good shepherd knows all the sheep by name, “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (10:3). Here, Jesus tells of His intimate relationship with the whole human race. He knows each sheep by name; Jesus knows each human by name, Jesus knows each person intimately. A friend of mine once questioned this. He asked me to imagine a square mile of a beach. He asked me to consider how many grains of sand were in it. He then said that there were as many galaxies in the universe—GALAXIES—not stars. With so many galaxies with their billions of stars, he said it

were impossible for God to care for an individual person. I replied, “That’s the wonder of it, God does.”

As Jesus knows humanity by name, so He cares deeply for humanity. He leads humanity to peace and fulfillment,

He goes before them, and the sheep follow him . . . and will go in and will find pasture. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (10:9, 10).

And as loving parents will sacrifice themselves for their children, Jesus claims that He loves humanity so much that He will lay down His life for us, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11).

Other leaders may not care as much for their flock, and flee when danger approaches. They are compared to a hired hand, who doesn’t own the sheep and so doesn’t care for the sheep like the shepherd does,

He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; . . . because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep” (10:12, 13).

Jesus claims that He is the good shepherd. This is a controversial, perhaps derisive claim. It could be considered inflammatory to the Jewish leaders. “All who came before me are thieves and robbers” (10:8). “I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved” (10:9).

Jesus is both the good shepherd and the door to the sheepfold. There are different ways of viewing this metaphor. Is it the person of Jesus that the sheep follow? Or are the words and teachings of Jesus that matter. When we respond to the shepherd’s voice, is it the shepherd himself, or is it the content of the shepherd’s voice? Is it Jesus Himself, or is it the truth value in Jesus’ words that people respond to? I incline to the second interpretation. Jesus says several times that the sheep hear the voice of the shepherd. This suggests that it is the voice, the teachings, that the people follow. The sheep, “will heed my voice” (10:16).

There is also a statement that suggests Jesus’ call to all humanity is universal. “I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice” (10:16). Jesus doesn’t say that they will worship Him. He says that they will “heed his voice.” They will follow His teachings.

The sermon of the good shepherd concludes with a statement about Jesus’ death and resurrection. He lays down His life by His own power and He raises Himself up from the grave by His own power.

I lay down my own life, that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. . . . I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I received from my Father (10:17, 18).

Jesus is talking about His impending trial, death, and resurrection. Though it appears that earthly powers sentenced Jesus to death—Pilate and the Romans—Jesus claims that it was He Himself who allowed this to happen. This same statement suggests Jesus divinity—who but God can both lay down His life and raise it up by His own power?

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) What is it about sheep and shepherds that makes a person think of innocence?

- 2) Almost all of Jesus' stories and parables are set in rural contexts instead of urban ones. Do you think that there is a reason for this?
- 3) Is there something about land and nature that is closer to God than human structures such as buildings and cities?
- 4) Do Jesus' pastoral metaphors distance you or draw you in. This may reflect whether you yourself are a city person or a country person. Jesus' immediate audience were primarily rural.

## WEEK V

## MIRACLES AND SERVICE

## The Significance of Jesus' Early Miracles

4:46-54; 5:1-18; 6:1-14

John does not seem to be very interested in Jesus' miracles. Rather, he uses them as springboards for theology. In John's treatment of Jesus, we find surprising statements by Jesus that sometimes seem curt or that show disappointment with humanity. These verses show us that Jesus is a human, and has human feelings.

The second miracle Jesus performs (after turning water into wine) is a healing. A Roman official's son is dying and he asks Jesus to heal his son. Jesus' response sounds as if He is disappointed with humanity, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe" (4:48). The official appears to believe already, and he appeals to Jesus out of fear for his child's life, "Sir, come down before my child dies." At that moment, in that place—not going to the official's home—Jesus heals his son. Though the official believed before the miracle, we are told that the miracle led him and his whole household to believe (4:53).

The next miracle again contrasts spirituality with ritual—this time with Jewish **Sabbath** rituals. Jesus heals a lame man on the sabbath, telling him to pick up his bed and walk. The wonder of this miracle is not emphasized. Rather, it becomes a springboard for three theological issues: 1) carrying his bed (doing work) on the Jewish day of rest (the Sabbath); 2) sin as a cause for illness; and 3) Jesus as God's Son.

The first issue is that the man is carrying his bed on the Sabbath, and the fact that Jesus performed His healing on the Sabbath—both were understood as "work." No one is supposed to do any work on the Sabbath—it is a day of rest. So pious Jews ask the man why he is carrying his bed. He replies that the man who healed him told him to. In this story, John again elevates religion out of ritual and into spirituality. Healing a man, letting him walk and carry his bed, does not violate the sanctity of the Sabbath from this perspective. Humanity is what matters, affirming life and wellness, not obedience to man-made rules for their own sake.

Jesus supports his work of healing by using rabbinic reasoning based on the Law of Moses. He says that circumcision can be practiced on the Sabbath. Circumcision is a ritual that joins a person with God, according to ancient Jewish law. In that sense it is a ritual of purity. Jesus says that if priests render a man ritually pure by circumcision on the Sabbath, how much better that a man's whole body be healed on the Sabbath?

Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man upon the sabbath. If on the sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the sabbath I made a man's whole body well? (John 7:22-23).

Mark's Gospel records a saying of Jesus that relates to this very issue. Religion is for the betterment of humanity. Religion is not a set of man-made rules or rituals to be followed for their own sake. "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (2:27). I understand this to mean that the Sabbath was created to give humans rest, for their own wellbeing. Wellbeing is the issue, not man-made Sabbath laws.

Jesus finds the man in the Temple later. There, Jesus makes a statement that is difficult to understand, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you” (5:14). Jesus appears to attribute the man’s sickness to sin. Sickness is symbolic of spiritual illness. In that sense, we see sickness as a metaphor for spiritual shortcomings. Even today, we call depraved behavior “sick.” It would appear, though, that in this case, the belief is that physical illness represents a spiritual disorder. Today, we see physical causes for illness such as bacteria, viruses, defective genes, etc. Nevertheless, we also recognize that there can be “spiritual” causes for illness, too. Stress can cause even bodily illnesses. The pressures of society, anxieties, worry, overwork, and burnout can generate sicknesses from colds, to ulcers, to migraines, high blood pressure and heart attack, perhaps even muscle aches and paralysis? Are these modern “sins”? Sins that Sabbath rest and the peace of God could cure? Perhaps a close contemporary parallel to the first century understanding of disease as sin might be attitudes to mental illnesses. Mental illnesses carry stigma, shame and fear with them, although we know that they are medical conditions. And we want to segregate persons with mental illnesses from polite society, locking them away in wards. Further, don’t we look down on people who miss work because of illness, when we show up at work faithfully? As if taking off work for illness shows moral weakness?

The third theological point in this miracle concerns Jesus’ identity. The Jews find out that it was Jesus who told the man he could carry his bed on the Sabbath, so they confront Jesus. Jesus replies, “My Father is working still, and I am working” (5:17). Theologically, this means that God is always working on behalf of humans. God never rests from saving humanity—the whole human race. And salvation means inspiring humans with as much love, peace, and joy as we can bear. The parallelism of Jesus’ sentence says that Jesus is acting just like the Father, “My Father is working still, and I am working.” In fact, the Jews understand this relationship to mean that Jesus is equal with the Father,

This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God (5:18).

Immediately following this miracle are 28 verses—quite a long section—all about Jesus’ identity. The miracle of healing is dwarfed by John’s discussion of who Jesus is. Unlike the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of John does not emphasize the wonder of Jesus’ miracles. In Mark, after almost every miracle the people are amazed. But in John, the miracles are occasions to explore who Jesus is and to teach spiritual lessons.

Following this miracle, Jesus feeds 5,000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread. This miracle convinces many that Jesus is “the prophet” foreseen in the Bible. (In Deuteronomy, God tells Moses, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers”—18:18.) There appears to be more to this miracle than simply feeding the masses. John tells us that the leftover scraps filled 12 baskets. Twelve is an important Biblical number. In the Bible, numbers have a significance beyond quantity. They symbolize qualities. The number 12 occurs in many places. There were 12 tribes of Israel; when the Israelites camp at a place called Elim, there are 12 springs of water; in the Temple, 12 loaves of bread are to be brought to God as a perpetual offering; there are several sets of 12 utensils in the Temple; there are 12 Apostles, there will be 144,000 saved in the last days (according to the book of Revelation), which is 12 x 12; at His trial, Jesus speaks of 12 legions of angels who could fight for him; Jesus was 12 years old when He was found in a synagogue teaching the elders. Is it a coincidence that there are 12 hours in a day and 12 months in a year? Some interpreters say that the number twelve signifies

completeness, or fullness. All this is behind the 12 baskets of scraps picked up after Jesus feeds 5,000.

Jesus' miracles are not only wonders. They also show Jesus' compassion and love for humanity. All His miracles are done on behalf of humanity. Turning water into wine was for the sake of a wedding feast; feeding the 5,000 was out of compassion because his followers were hungry, healing the official's son was from care for the official's family, and healing the lame man was from compassion for his suffering. Jesus teaches a Gospel of love and Jesus demonstrates this Gospel by the love He shows in His miracles. Jesus then performs the miracle of walking on water, which takes only 5 verses in John.

### **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) Do we stigmatize people who are sick?
- 2) What about those short remarks of Jesus? Is He showing exasperation or disappointment with humanity? Is the Word made flesh allowed to make remarks like these? Do they make Jesus more human?
- 3) Is ritual valuable for spirituality? Is there a proper place for ritual? Would you like to do away with rituals?
- 4) How do you understand Jesus' miracles? What do they do for your understanding of who Jesus is? Do you need the miracles to value Jesus? Where would Jesus be; who would Jesus be without the miracles?

### **John 11: Raising Lazarus from the Dead; the Afterlife**

John begins the Lazarus story itself with a reference to another story about a woman, Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill (John 11:1-2).

We don't know anything about Lazarus. But apparently everybody in the early church knew about Mary. It was Mary who anointed Jesus with expensive oil and wiped his feet with her hair. John does not give us this story until later, and it can be found in all the other Gospels, as well (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 7). A story that we find in all four Gospels has a high degree of historical probability (academicians do not consider everything in the Christian Scriptures to be historically accurate). The story of Mary was "in the air" of the Christian world, and, indeed, Jesus rightly comments, "wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mark 14:9). Since Mary is so well known, John identifies the unknown Lazarus by the well-known Mary.

The Lazarus story is both Jesus' most spectacular miracle as God incarnate, and also the occasion where we see Jesus as a human most profoundly. We see Jesus' humanity right at the very outset of the story, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (11:5). Jesus calls Lazarus his "friend" in verse 11. Further in the story we have another of the well-known passages about Jesus. Jesus feels such solidarity with humanity that He is overwhelmed by the grieving friends and family of Lazarus. Caught up in their mourning over the death of their beloved Lazarus, Jesus weeps,

Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him, fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept (11:32-35).

Even in this most spectacular miracle, John again talks theology. As with the other miracles, the resurrection of Lazarus becomes an opportunity to talk about the afterlife and the **Last Judgment**.

We don’t know exactly where Jesus is when He hears the news about Lazarus. We are told only that Jesus plans to enter Judea again to come to Lazarus. When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. Martha goes out to meet Jesus. In their conversation, one of the most important ideas in John’s Gospel arises. Jesus plainly tells Martha, “Your brother will rise again” (John 11:23). Martha responds with the accepted idea concerning the afterlife. She replies, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (11:24). The prevailing belief was that people sleep in their graves until the Last Judgment (last day). Then the dead all rise from their graves and live again on the earth. Jesus immediately dispels this belief with the bold words, “I am the resurrection and the life” (25). Having declared that He, Himself, raises souls from the dead and gives life, Jesus briefly elaborates, “He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:25-26).

What do these words mean? What does it mean that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? I take this to mean that Jesus is the Source of all life, and that Jesus gives eternal life. So Jesus says, “He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (25). Belief in Jesus gives life to humans, even after they die. For John, we live in Jesus’ kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, after we die. Further passages in John’s Gospel reinforce the idea of eternal life in Jesus, and eternal life in heaven, “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (14:2). So John’s Gospel denies that a final apocalyptic Day of the Lord day will come (last day, Last Judgement), when the dead will be raised from their graves to walk the earth. John teaches that Jesus raises us from the dead immediately and prepares a place for us *in His Father’s house*—not on earth after being wakened from sleeping in our graves.

In the synoptic Gospels, there are descriptions of the second coming of Jesus when all the souls of the dead will be raised from their graves and stand in judgment before Jesus. In John, Jesus’ final words on the cross are, “It is finished.” This would mean that with the crucifixion and resurrection, all is finished. There will be no final judgment in the future. “It is finished.”

As He is raising Lazarus from the grave, Jesus prays to the Father. However, the reason for this prayer is not because Jesus needed to ask the Father for help—the Father always hears Jesus. Rather, Jesus prays so that the Jews witnessing this miracle will believe that He is sent from the Father. In a loud voice, Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb. We feel as though we are there, “The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth.” Jesus’ greatest and final miracle in John is to bring a dead person back to life. This miracle is symbolic of Jesus raising us up into life in His Father’s kingdom upon the death of our material body.

“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”

How would we react to such a miracle? Wouldn't we be astonished, maybe be awestruck, overjoyed? Some are. John tells us that some of the Jews who had come to comfort Mary and Martha believe in Jesus. But others see Jesus as a threat to political stability. The chief Priests and Pharisees gather together and speculate that if Jesus continues to grow in popularity the Romans will take notice. Jesus will destabilize relations between Jews and Romans, and then, "the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation" (11:48). That, in fact, did happen in the years 66-70 CE. Due to a Jewish rebellion, Rome destroyed the Temple. John mentioning this event as a prophesy leads scholars to speculate that his was written late, perhaps about 90 CE, after the Roman destruction of the Temple. Couched as a prophesy, this may have been, in fact, recollection. In the story thus far, we have seen several attempts to kill through mob violence. But in John 11:53 we find a calculated, formal plan hatched by the religious authorities to assassinate Jesus.

### **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) What does raising Lazarus do to answer the question as to who Jesus is?
- 2) Does Jesus' authority depend on this miracle?
- 3) How can raising Lazarus from the dead be seen as relevant to us all? Is there a parallel between raising Lazarus to life and raising us to eternal life?
- 4) Do you find Jesus' words about being the resurrection and the life comforting? How do the words about Jesus preparing a place for us in His Father's kingdom rest with you?

### **John 13: Washing the Disciples' Feet and Service**

John's Gospel contains another unusual story that is not in the other Gospels: Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. This story symbolizes Jesus cleansing the soul by means of His words. Using the metaphor of washing, Jesus tells His disciples that they are clean, meaning purified, by His words. "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over; and you are clean" (John 13:10). The disciples don't understand why Jesus is washing their feet. Peter is even indignant that his teacher should wash his feet, "Lord, do you wash my feet? . . . You shall never wash my feet." (13:6, 8).

Jesus' response carries two messages: 1) that Jesus came to serve humanity, whom he loves, and we are to follow His example by serving one another, and 2) that Jesus cleanses us from sin, and when He does so, we are then in His kingdom.

Jesus washes the feet of His disciples to show them the power of service. It is central to Jesus' teachings that we are here to do good deeds to one another, and to serve each other. It is the Christian message for us to make life as lovely for each other as we can. This message was remembered by generations of Christians, as we find it in all the other Gospels in addition to what we read here in John.

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him (John 13:13-16).

We can compare this passage in John to the earliest version in Mark, and we will see that this message of service and helping each other has spread throughout the early Christian communities,

“You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

For reasons not too hard to grasp, Peter can't imagine his lord and master washing his feet. But the foot-washing is symbolic of Jesus' words cleansing the souls of His followers. Accordingly, Jesus' response to Peter is, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me” (13:8). The feet are the lowest part of the human body. So by washing the feet, Jesus shows that His Holy Spirit needs to flow through all the levels of our soul, down to the lowest **parts of our soul** and to cleanse them, too. It is not enough to know religious truths; it is not enough to read religious texts. What this passage shows is that we need to accept truths in our minds and hearts, and open our souls to God's Holy Spirit and put into practice our understanding of spirituality. As the Holy Spirit enters our souls, it purifies our desires, feelings, and thinking. Our emotional life will change as we begin to feel holy affections. Our thinking will change as we cherish truth and banish self-deception and inaccurate world-views—the *maya* of illusion. And we will show love in all aspects of our life. God's Holy Spirit purifies and cleanses all the parts of our souls—our reasoning, our feelings, our behaviors, and even our senses. Washing the feet symbolizes the Holy Spirit reaching and cleansing the lowest part of our soul. This would be the part of the soul called sensual, or the part associated with the senses. So that seeing a sunrise, or smelling a flower, or hearing bird songs, or eating a healthy meal, or intimacy with our spouse are spiritual experiences.

In John's Gospel especially, we find teachings about love. Indeed, all the Gospels have the two great commands—to love God and to love the neighbor—and also, teachings about loving enemies. But in John, Jesus' love for humanity and teachings about love abound. John 15 is a long sermon all about love and Jesus' mystical love relationship with humanity. But we also find a few poignant words about love in John 13:1. Jesus knows that the time for His crucifixion is coming, and He is preparing to depart from this world. While He was on the earth, Jesus, “loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (13:1). And Jesus teaches us to follow Him, loving each other,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

The Apostle John is singled out as the one whom Jesus loved. Notice the intimacy in this short statement of the relationship between John and Jesus, “One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus” (13:23). This is a God who loves, who humans can touch and show their own love even by lying close to the breast of their God.

The narrative shifts to difficult theology when Jesus tells His disciples that they cannot follow where He is going,

Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going you cannot come” (13:33).

The Apostles cannot go where Jesus is going because of Jesus' full union with the Father. Jesus, as the Word, came to earth from God, as God: The Word made flesh. Having fulfilled His mission, Jesus is now returning to fullness with God in heaven, coming from God and going back to God. John tells us that the Father gave all things to Jesus. How can all things be given to Jesus? It would seem that only unity with God makes Jesus possessed of all the Father has. There can be only One All Power. The Father is in Jesus and Jesus is elevated into the Father, where He came from,

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God (John 13:3).

The full union of the Father with Jesus and of Jesus with the Father is stated briefly in somewhat difficult language toward the end of John 13:

Jesus said, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once (John 13:31-32).

The Son of man is Jesus, the Word made flesh, God in human form. This Man is glorified—meaning that Jesus' humanity is divinized when God enters Him fully. "Now is the Son of man glorified." John then adds that God is glorified in Him. God is glorified in the humanity of Jesus, meaning that God shines through the human Jesus. So God is glorified even in the human form of Jesus. Jesus is a glorified human through whom God shines. The glory of God is in Jesus and Jesus has the glory of God. "God will also glorify him in himself." So Jesus is taken into God and glorified in God, and God shows God's self in the human Jesus.

In the middle of the touching statements and examples of love, and the difficult theology about glorification, John returns to the storyline. John tells us briefly that Judas leaves Jesus in order to betray Him. Yet, John does not continue on with the Passion Narrative, that is, the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Instead, John is about to launch into the longest sermon section yet, with the most poignant, heartwarming, and mystical theology in any of the Gospels or in the history of Christian literature.

When John introduces Judas' betrayal, we see another example of just how human Jesus is, "When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit" (13:21). Why was Jesus troubled? In the context of John's Gospel, I do not think that it is because of the impending crucifixion. (Surprisingly, John does not show us any real suffering on Jesus' part in the crucifixion.) I think rather that Jesus is troubled because He knows that Judas will betray Him and that Peter will deny Him. His intimate circle of friends, His most faithful followers, are going to fall away. Jesus sees that even one of the intimate Twelve Apostles is going to turn Him in to the authorities who seek His demise and that another of the Twelve will deny ever knowing Him. Judas' intimate betrayal is captured in the scripture quote Jesus cites, "He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me" (13:18). In many places, Jesus quotes scripture in his teachings and to interpret what He is doing in His life. This time He quotes Psalm 41:9,

Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,  
who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me.

John is clear that God isn't the agent of Judas' betrayal. Twice, John says that the devil enters Judas and impels him to turn against his teacher.

Then there is Peter. The most solid of Jesus' disciples, the disciple whom Jesus called a rock—the rock on which He would build the church—Peter denies being a follower of Jesus. Though in the presence of Jesus, Peter says, "I will lay down my life for you" (13:37). When

Jesus is arrested by the Jewish and Roman authorities, Peter denies that he knows Jesus three times to three different people. Of this, Jesus has foreknowledge, “Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the cock will not crow, till you have denied me three times’” (13:38).

Peter shows how weak humans can be when self-preservation is at stake. When our own survival is threatened, our lofty ideals and loyalties to a cause can cower and collapse under fear. And Jesus shows how forgiving and understanding divine love can be. Even knowing Peter’s frailty and weakness, Jesus remains in a love relationship with the him and the other Apostles. Jesus treasures the love relationship between Him and His disciples, and, indeed, among the multitudes that followed Him. Just before Jesus tells Peter that he will deny Him, Jesus says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you” (13:34). In the face of treason and self-interested denial, Jesus remains the God-Man, teaching, as always, about love. Now, Jesus invokes Leviticus, one of the books of Moses from the Hebrew Scriptures,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

Though Jesus says that this is a new commandment, and Christians often think it is new with Jesus, in fact loving the neighbor is in Leviticus 19:18. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus refers to Leviticus 19:18 as the central teaching in the Law, the five books of Moses—the books on which the whole of Jewish Law (called The Torah, in Hebrew) is based. In Mark, A teacher of the Law asks Jesus what the greatest teaching is in the Torah. According to Jewish tradition, there are 613 laws in the Torah; Jesus is asked which is the greatest. He replies that loving God and loving the neighbor are the two greatest commandments (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18). Jesus is not making up a new commandment—rather, Jesus is drawing on the Law of Moses and extracting its essence in two commandments. John is anticipating the beautiful, comforting talk about love that will occupy chapters 14 and 15.

### **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) How would you feel about a teacher, pastor, or some other person in an authority position washing your feet? Would you react like Peter? How would you feel about this reversal of power roles.
- 2) The message of service to our fellows is central to the Jesus tradition. Does this sound like a good teaching for humanity?
- 3) Do you agree with Plato’s idea that there are parts and levels to the soul? Can you identify aspects of your personality that you would call higher, or more noble than others?
- 4) Central to the Jesus tradition is the injunction to love. How hard is it to love? Would you agree that loving is a good way to approach life?
- 5) What is the connection between love and service to one’s fellows?
- 6) Have you ever experienced betrayal? Betrayal from an intimate friend?
- 7) Have you experienced being disowned by an intimate friend, such as Peter was to Jesus? How does the way Jesus handles Peter and Peter’s potential denial speak to Jesus’ message and Jesus’ character?

- 8) Can God be glorified in a human? Can a human so embody God that God would shine through the human? How divine is Jesus? Do you accept the idea that God and human can become one?

## WEEK VI

## BELOVED SERMONS

**John 14: The Sermon about Afterlife and Prayer**

“Let not your hearts be troubled.” So John 14 opens with a statement of comfort to His disciples and to the whole world. This passage is one of the surprisingly few passages in the Bible that describe the afterlife. Rather than the gloomy afterlife we see in Greek mythology, or the still gloomier afterlife of Mesopotamian mythology, Jesus’ view of the afterlife is comforting. Because John 14 talks about life after death, and because of its comforting tone, it is often read at Christian funerals.

Jesus tells His followers that after death, they have a place prepared for them by Jesus. And they will be with their beloved teacher Jesus, in the place He prepares for them.

In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (John 14:2-3).

This passage suggests the idea of heaven as it is commonly believed. That is, after death we live in some kind of spiritual paradise. But Christianity has a conflicted understanding of heaven. Some say that heaven is a temporary holding place in which a person lives until the **resurrection of the dead**. Then our bodies will rise from their graves and we will live on the earth in our material bodies forever. Others say that we live in heaven forever after death. Whether on earth or in heaven, Jesus gives us the comforting words that we will live with Him for eternity. In the story of Lazarus, Jesus tells us that we will live forever. “He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:25-26). And here, Jesus adds that our life itself is from Him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6); “because I live, you will live also” (14:19). Given the gentle, loving figure that Jesus is in the Gospel of John, the ideas that we will live with Him forever, and live because of Him are comforting ideas for Christians.

Included in Jesus’ words about the afterlife are also teachings about Jesus’ identity. The opening words in John 14 are ambiguous—“believe in God, believe also in me (14:1). The parallel construction of this phrase can be read to mean that Jesus and God are the same. It looks like believing in God means to believe also in Jesus. Believing in Jesus is right up there with believing in God. However, there is that word, “also.” “Also” could be read to mean that Jesus and God are two.

The language in John 14, though, seems to state God and Jesus are one and the same. Knowing Jesus is knowing the Father, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.” Those who hold strong beliefs about the trinity could argue that knowing Jesus means knowing His words, which Jesus says that He hears from the Father. In this sense, knowing Jesus is knowing the words of the Father, or “knowing” the Father. While it may be possible to hold to a Trinitarian belief when it comes to knowing, seeing is different. Seeing Jesus is seeing the Father, “henceforth you know him and have seen him” (14:7). How can we understand Jesus saying that we have seen the Father? If seeing Jesus is having seeing the Father, isn’t this because Jesus and the Father are one? Jesus wants to press this point upon Philip, who asks Jesus to show him the Father. “Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be

satisfied” (14:8). In emphasizing His unity with the Father, Jesus seems to speak in rather pointed language. “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (14:9). Jesus explains how that can be. He says that the Father is in Him. “The Father who dwells in me does his works” (14:10). This is how Swedenborg understands the relationship between the Father and Jesus. God the Father is in Jesus as the soul is in the body. The infinite, unseen God of the Hebrew Scriptures took on a human body in the form of Jesus. “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?” (14:10). So God is Jesus’ soul—“The Father who dwells in me does his works.”

Jesus is the incarnation of the Father. The Father is in him, and Jesus is in the Father. For that reason, Jesus instructs his followers to pray in His name. Jesus will answer prayers that are given in His name. The Father will be glorified in the Son, because the good things Jesus does are really done by the Father who lives inside Him. So Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13).

Some Christians believe that saying the name “Jesus” alone is what this passage means. So they pray to the Father and end their prayers with the words, “In Jesus’ name we pray.”

But I believe that more than the name “Jesus” is meant here. We looked at the significance of names above. There, we saw that a person’s name means everything that the person stands for. To me, asking for something in Jesus’ name means invoking what Jesus stands for. So asking for peace is asking for something in Jesus’ name, because Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (14:27). And Jesus is called “Prince of peace.” Asking for truth is asking for something in Jesus’ name because Jesus said, “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things” (14:26). Asking for something to satisfy human vanity and adding Jesus name to such a prayer is not really asking in Jesus name. It is asking in the name of vanity, and then adding Jesus’ name to it. But when we understand prayer as asking for Jesus’ Spirit and His holy qualities to manifest, then we are asking in Jesus’ name. That, I think, is how Jesus’ words are to be understood, “If you ask anything in my name, I will do it” (14:14). This idea is reiterated in chapter 15, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you” (15:7). Praying in the name of Jesus is praying in the spirit of all that Jesus stands for. It means asking for good things while Jesus’ Spirit is in us, while His words abide in us. Our words in prayer, then, will be Jesus’ words, Jesus’ Word, the Word we have embodied

Jesus then introduces the idea of good works. Loving Jesus is not only believing in Jesus: it is **doing** the things Jesus teaches. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (14:15). And Jesus’ commandment is, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (15:12). In other places, Jesus has summed up the whole Bible in two great commandments, 1) Love God; and 2) Love the neighbor. It can well be said that Jesus’ core message is to love. Doing something in the name of love is certainly doing something in Jesus’ name.

Loving Jesus is not only loving the person who lived in Israel in the first century CE. Loving Jesus means keeping His commandments and keeping all His words.

“If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me” (John 14:23-24).

Recall that in the very beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus is called The Word. Jesus' word, and Jesus as The Word, are all the teachings about love, about peace, about the eternal world, about worshipping God, and everything else that we read in the Gospels. Jesus embodies all these things in His deeds, taught all these things, lived out all these teachings in His relationships with humanity. His healings showed his love for humanity; raising Lazarus from the dead showed his love for Lazarus and his sisters; teaching humanity the way to live in order to be saved showed Jesus profound love for the eternal welfare of humanity; finally, accepting the ultimate sacrifice of death—rather than causing a riot and holy war—showed Jesus' love for peace in the human world and divine forgiveness. Jesus taught love, and Jesus lived love. Jesus comes to us, makes His home with us, when we keep His words—when we do things like Jesus did.

I would briefly note that the language in this passage looks Trinitarian. First, Jesus says that if we keep Jesus' word the Father will love us. Then Jesus uses a plural word, "we" when He says that the Father and Jesus will come to us, "we will come to him and make **our** home with him." Then Jesus talks about sending a third spiritual Counselor, who is identified as the Spirit of truth and the Holy Spirit. If we want to preserve the unity of God, perhaps this passage can be read in the light of the line just above, "In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (14:20). Keeping Jesus' commandments will cause a person to be loved by Jesus and the Father, but only Jesus, as God in the flesh, will manifest to us, "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (14:21).

John describes the nature of God's Holy Spirit. It is in each one of us. This is the enlightenment power from Jesus. It gives us truth, is Truth. This power is eternal, with us eternally, and we are given eternal life by it.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, . . . you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you (14:15-17).

God is in us. And it can also be said that God is outside us, too. The sun's warmth is felt in us when we get hot under the summer sun. Our bodies get hot from within, and our skin feels the sun's heat from outside. God's intense spiritual heat enters our souls, but God is infinite, and too great for us to embody totally. For we are finite. God's infinite love, God's spiritual heat, is too great for us to bear totally. But God can and does enter us as much as we can bear. Some people pray by contemplating the God within; others pray to a God without. God can be said to be both. The whole question of whether there actually is an inside and outside when it comes to spiritual matters is a huge question. Buddhists speak of the bodhi-garba, the seed or womb of enlightenment that is in us. In fact, some Buddhists say we are all enlightened beings, we need only to realize it. And the Hinduism of the Upanishads teaches that the One Universal Brahman is in us, or is us. In the depths of the self is the One Power called Brahman. The lessons in the Upanishads usually end with the words "That is Brahman! That is Atman! (self) That thou art!" The Holy Spirit is that aspect of God that enters our souls, enlightens us, that gives us understanding of truth, and fills our hearts with Jesus' love. The Holy Spirit emanates from God like heat does from the sun. The sun is too hot for us to be in it, but here on earth the sun gives us enough heat and light to live—in fact, for the whole planet to live: plants and animals.

According to some church doctrines, the Spirit comes after the crucifixion, when Jesus ascends to God, from whom He came. "I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father" (16:28). When the glorified Human Jesus

is fully one with His Origin, God, then Jesus' Spirit flows out from the God-Man. If Jesus does not unite with God after His ascension, then Jesus cannot send His Spirit to us, "if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (16:7). The Spirit comes from the God-Man Jesus, who now has received everything from God,

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (16:13-15).

The full union of God and Jesus is a good thing because it permits the Spirit to be sent from the now all-powerful God-Man. "I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (16:7). Jesus criticizes His disciples because they do not ask what this means, "But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?'" (16:5). Instead, they are only sad because Jesus has said He is leaving them, "But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts" (16:6). But Jesus assures His disciples that they will see Him again in "a little while." "A little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me" (16:16).

Seeing Jesus a second time may look like the "second coming." But the idea of the second coming is foreign to the general thrust of John's Gospel. In order to read this line as a reference to the second coming, one needs to turn to the synoptic Gospels. In John, when Jesus breathes His last on the cross, He says, "It is finished." There will be no second coming, when Jesus returns in the clouds of heaven. It is more in keeping with John to understand seeing Jesus again as seeing Jesus in heaven. It is in the Father's house where we will find many rooms—not on the earth in a resurrected material body. "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (14:2). When we see Jesus again, it will be because He takes us to where He is. "And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (14:3). And we have just seen that where Jesus is, is with the Father, "Now I am going to him who sent me" (16:5). We will see Jesus again in heaven, forever, which appears to be the meaning of Jesus' words, "So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (16:22). Joy in heaven is eternal, so "no one will take your joy from you."

Jesus' portrayal of heaven is decidedly different from the Classical world's portrayal of the afterlife. Different in a way that brings hope. Heaven for Jesus is a good "place." It may be a state of mind, rather than a geographical locale ("Behold, the kingdom of God is within" Luke 17:21.) However it is conceived, in heaven one is *with* Jesus. And "in" it, one has joy that is eternal. In Christianity, death is no longer tragic. This view of the afterlife is one reason why Christianity spread so rapidly and widely in the Roman Empire.

The Roman afterlife, like the Greek, was a gloomy place. You were literally living under the ground, deprived of the sun's light. Death for the Romans was tragic. And one would in no way live with the gods. The gods lived high on Mount Olympus, far from the world of mortals. After death, we would not be in rooms prepared for us by a loving God-Man who joins us in eternal joy. In Classical mythology, we would be in a dim kingdom under the ground, while the

gods lived on a mountain top drinking ambrosia. Only the gods are happy for eternity in Classical mythology.

And in Classical mythology, humans had no choice about their destiny. At birth, the Three Fates spun a thread that dictated your entire life. Your destiny was foreordained. Also, belief in astrology was widely held in Roman times. The stars also determined your fate. With Jesus, free will enters western religion. One is free to accept Jesus or to reject Him. We have free will to choose the direction our lives will take. And when a person turns to Jesus, one lives with one's God forever in joy that no one can take away.

Another startling idea in John is how humans relate to God. In John, Jesus calls us friends. Not only do we live with our God in eternal joy forever, but we are *friends* with God.

You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you (15:13-15).

This would never be the case in Roman mythology. It's one thing to say that God loves us. A superior can love an inferior. A king can love his subjects; a parent can love their children; God can love humanity. But you would never say that a king is a friend with his subjects; and only in special cases are parents friends with their children. Friends are on equal footing. That makes Jesus almost on a relationship of equality, in fact does make Jesus equal with humans.

Aristotle wrote an enduring work on friendship, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. And in it, he says that friends are on equal footing. "Friendship is said to be equality" (*Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.5). And writing in the Classical age, friendship with the gods was unthinkable, "when one party is removed to a great distance, as God is, the possibility of friendship ceases" (VIII.7). In fact, the idea that God can be a friend is unimaginable in almost every world religion. The idea that Jesus is our friend is in John alone. And it affirms one church doctrine that isn't emphasized sufficiently, I think. Jesus is fully human. And as a full human, Jesus can be our friend. A friend whose breast we can rest next to.

Though friendship with God is unique to John's Gospel, a human God is not unique to Christianity. In Hinduism, Krishna is a human God. And Krishna is so human that there are stories of him actually engaging in sexual relations with female cow-herds. This story is a metaphor for the ecstasy the human race experiences when we are in a mystical love relationship with the God Krishna. Other Hindu Gods—Shiva, Vishnu, Kali, Shakti and others—are in human form, but are not as earthy as Krishna. And the Buddha was born a full human. (Technically, the Buddha is not a god. He is a fully enlightened human being. We can all become Buddhas, should become Buddhas.)

Just before the beautiful sermon about love in John 15, Jesus says a few words about the relationship between spirituality and the world. First, Jesus says that He gives us something that the world does not give us: true peace. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you" (14:27). What does the world give us? I would think that the world gives us satisfaction and a comfortable existence, at best. But much in the world is harmful to the soul. Popularity, prestige, and wealth, while sometimes considered the greatest things on earth, can also give us pride and contempt for others, and anxiety. Popularity and prestige can make us think we are superior beings, better than others, even gods. Wealth can cause anxiety for fear of losing it or not having enough. Spiritual peace is very different than anything the world can give. Feelings of love and serenity cannot be bought in a store or given

to us by popular acclaim. They come from an entirely different Source. Serenity is felt by those who have spirituality. Christians would say that Jesus gives it to us.

Jesus sets up an actual opposition between the world and His kingdom of spirituality. The world hates Jesus and His followers. Since Jesus' followers treasure spiritual things, not worldly things, they are not of the world.

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (15:18-19).

This may show the influence of Plato, who is the earliest western philosopher to teach a duality between the eternal realm and the worldly realm.

The opposition between the world and Jesus reflects the difficulties early Christianity had in a Roman and Jewish society. John has Jesus talking about these difficulties as a prophesy. But scholars say that this section of John was written nearly a century after Jesus and reflects the conditions of early Christianity. Jesus speaks of the initial reaction of His arrest and crucifixion, "The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his home, and will leave me alone; . . ." (16:32). Then we see early Christian history, when Christians were expelled from synagogues, and even martyred by the Romans.

They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father, nor me (16:1-3).

This prophesy is included in John in order to encourage the early Christians. "I have said all this to you to keep you from falling away (16:1). As Jesus prepares His disciples for His crucifixion and the aftermath of it, he warns them that "The ruler of this world is coming," while at the same time encouraging them that, "He has no power over me" (14:30). Perhaps intended to encourage the early Christians, Jesus' words encourage us even today, "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (16:33).

### **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name? Will we get whatever we ask for, if we add the name of Jesus to our prayers?
- 2) Do you find Jesus' words about the afterlife comforting? Are they believable?
- 3) Does it make sense to ask if God is in us or outside us? How do you understand the idea of God's presence?
- 4) Can we be friends with God?
- 5) How do you understand the Platonic/Christian opposition between the world and spirituality?

### **John 15: "I Am the Vine; You Are the Branches"**

I think that the sermon in John 15 is the high point of John's Gospel, maybe even the center of it. In that sermon, we find the most extended treatment of the subject of love—a subject central to the Jesus tradition. And in it we find the most profound teaching about **mysticism** in any of Gospels.

Almost as a prelude to his discussion about love, Jesus begins this sermon with a metaphor illustrating the mystical union of Jesus and humanity. It is a fitting prelude because we find true love through mystical union with Jesus. When Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus, then spiritual love fills us, as we are united with the Source of love.

Jesus explains that He lives in each of us. We are in Jesus and Jesus is in us. And since God-Jesus is all Good, and the Source of all Good, when Jesus is in us, we have good in us. Having good in us, good flows from us in good deeds. When Jesus is in us, we will do good works, or, in John's metaphoric language, we bear fruit,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit (John 15:1-2).

Jesus explains the mystical relationship between Him and us by means of metaphor—vine and branches, “I am the vine, you are the branches” (15:5). Jesus is the source of our life, of all life, so He is the vine. We have life from Jesus, so we are the branches off the central vine that is Jesus. “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me (15:4). We can't be spiritual without Spirit. So we are spiritual when we have Jesus' Spirit in us. If we abide in Jesus, and He in us, we will bear much fruit, “He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (15:5).

And Jesus tells us that if we bear no fruit, we will be cut off. While if we do bear fruit, the Father will prune us so that we bear even more fruit. This idea is behind the cryptic saying of Jesus in the synoptics,

For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Mark 4:25).

For those who are doing good works, spiritual love increases and along with it comes the desire to do even more good. So those who have spiritual love receive more and more as they practice their love in works. Those who do not love (if such exist), and who do not do good works are cut off by their own will from the loving vine that is Jesus. This idea is also in John the Baptist's preaching, “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). And another passage from Jesus, “Thus you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:19-20). Bearing fruit shows one's love, bearing no fruit indicates a spiritually undeveloped soul. Bearing fruit in this way is mystical, because everything good that we do is God-in-us doing the good. “Abide in me, and I in you.”

These ideas are scattered through all the Gospels. But what makes John unique and so profound, is mysticism. The metaphor of the Vine and branches becomes a vehicle to teach that everything we do is done by Jesus in us. “Apart from me you can do nothing” (15:5).

The idea that we are infused with God's power is difficult for many westerners to accept. We pride ourselves on our own accomplishments. We pride ourselves that we are self-made-men. We want to stand on our own two feet. We are taught to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. So the idea that we can do nothing without God's power in us is hard for many westerners to accept. We don't want to lean on anyone or depend on anyone. Furthermore, the idea is contrary to appearances. It appears as if we do things by our own power. It feels like we act all on our own. But this is only an appearance.

In reality, we can't act at all without God in us. A student of biology can see that there are billions of chemical reactions that take place in us, which we have no power over. Without

any effort by our own consciousness, food is taken apart in our bodies molecule by molecule and recombined into complex carbohydrates in a process called the Krebs cycle. Can we stop our heart by thinking about it? (Maybe yogis can.) When we are injured, the life force in us heals us without any effort on our part. (Think of the healings Jesus performed on earth.) So we are not life-in-itself. We are the life of God-in-us. Once one accepts the idea that God is giving us the power to act—to live, in fact—then John’s sermon makes sense.

Having talked about the mystical union of Jesus with humanity, Jesus then talks about love. It is because of Jesus’ mystical love relationship with us that we love.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love (15:9-10).

The way I read this passage is that God fills Jesus with love, and Jesus sends his Spirit into us and so fills us with Jesus’ love.

In this passage, works are central. We are Jesus’ followers if we keep His commandments. Only when we keep Jesus’ commandments do we abide in His love. We are not asked to believe here, we are asked to do. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.” Love is an action verb.

And a loving person is a joyous person. A person consumed with selfishness is continually frustrated. She or he wants to be the director of the drama and others may not cooperate with her or his directions—likely will not cooperate. Then frustration and rage set in leading to anger and violence. But when one abandons self in the mystic union with Jesus, and when one opens to the whole world of sentient beings, then the drive to have one’s own way becomes a love of service and giving. This is what renders a person truly happy and what fills the soul with joy. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (15:11). The lovely sermon about the vine and the branches concludes with a statement that I think is the essence of Christianity: “This I command you, to love one another” (15:17).

#### **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) How do you feel about the idea that God is working through you to bring about good purposes? Do you accept the idea that there is a life force in you healing your body and keeping you alive? How do you react to the idea that God gives us life, and that we do not live by our own power?
- 2) What is the relationship between love and joy?
- 3) Do we need God in order to love? Is there a difference between spiritual love and other loves?

## WEEK VII

## THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST, OR LACK THEREOF

**John 18:28-19:22**  
**Jesus and Pilate**

In the early encounter between Jesus and Pilate, one gets the impression that Pilate would rather avoid the whole Jesus matter. Pilate isn't against Jesus; Pilate isn't for Jesus—he just doesn't want to deal. The Jews try to convince Pilate that Jesus is a criminal according to Roman law, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you” (18:30). But Pilate puts it back on them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law” (18:31). The Jews persist and say that their law does not allow the death penalty, while Roman law does. Under some compulsion, Pilate does question Jesus, asking Him if He is a king—which would indeed be treason. Jesus replies with a question—does Pilate himself think Jesus is a king, or has he heard it from others? Pilate recognizes something must be up since the Jewish leaders have handed Jesus over to him, and asks Jesus what He did,

“I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” (18:35)

When Jesus explains that His kingdom is not in the earthly realm, Pilate presses the issue of kingship—“So you are a King?” Jesus explains that His mission is to bring truth to the world. Pilate dismissively quips, “What is truth?”

Pilate returns to the crowd and says that there is no case against Jesus. But to satisfy the people, Pilate has Jesus flogged. The Roman soldiers, caught up in grotesque glee, put a crown on Jesus's head—the crown of thorns—and taunt Him and hit Him in the face. Still trying to be done with the whole Jesus thing, Pilate again says, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him” (19:4). The mob continues to demand crucifixion, hollering out at Pilate. Refusing to be manipulated into charging Jesus with a crime, Pilate leaves the blame with the mob, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him” (19:6).

When the mob persists in calling for Jesus' death, Pilate becomes fearful, most likely afraid lest a riot break out. Fear motivates Pilate's further involvement in a case he is loath to hear. He appears exasperated with the furor caused by this backwoods peasant, “Where do you come from?” Since Jesus refuses to explain Himself, Pilate exclaims, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” John appears really to want to absolve Pilate from blame, and to shift blame onto the Jews. Jesus replies that Pilate has power only from God, and that the people who handed Him over to Pilate are really to blame,

“You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” (17:11).

Again, shifting blame away from Pilate and onto the Jews, John's Gospel now tells us that Pilate actually tries to release Jesus. But the mob gives Pilate more to fear. They claim that supporting Jesus is treason against the Emperor—they claim that Jesus called Himself a king,

“If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor” (19:12).

In the closing lines of the trial, Pilate seems to have developed a perverse sense of humor. He mocks both Jesus and the Jews by presenting the scourged, beaten, and humiliated Jesus to the Jews, telling them, “Here is your king!” As the clamour for Jesus’ crucifixion persists, Pilate sarcastically asks, “Shall I crucify your king?” The mob insists that they have no king but the Emperor. John’s final words in this episode are important. Pilate doesn’t sentence Jesus to death. Instead, Pilate hands Jesus over to the mob to have them crucify Jesus. “Then he handed him over to them to be crucified” (17:16). Pilate is finally done with the whole Jesus thing.

#### **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) Is Pilate at all interested in Jesus? Does Pilate consider Jesus a threat to the Empire?
- 2) Is Pilate guilty for handing Jesus over to be crucified? Who is more responsible for Jesus’ arrest and conviction, Pilate, the Jews, or the mob?

#### **The Crucifixion John 19:16-30**

What is striking about John’s treatment of the crucifixion is that there is no passion of Christ in it. The crucifixion itself takes up only five verses. The side narratives of Pilate’s inscription, the story of casting lots for Jesus’ clothing, and the names of the witnesses to Jesus’ crucifixion add ten more verses. In John, Jesus does not cry out, “Father, why have you forsaken me?!” Jesus does not cry out in a loud voice when He gives up the Spirit. There is no darkness over the land. The dead do not rise. There is no earthquake. The veil of the temple is not torn in sunder. (These are all in the synoptic Gospels.) While He is on the cross, Jesus tells Mary that John is her son, and tells John that Mary is his mother. Jesus drinks wine from a sponge on a hyssop branch and says, “It is finished.” Jesus’ work and ministry is completed.

The legendary elements that the synoptics include are absent in John. That is, the sun being darkened, the earthquake, the temple curtain being ripped in two, and the dead rising from their graves. In this sense, John may be more historically accurate than the synoptics. Indeed, John also has the crucifixion taking place on the day before Passover, which is also more likely historically. Due to Jewish purity laws, having a dead body in Jerusalem during the High Holy Days would be such a sacrilege that violent riots would have certainly broken out.

The crucifixion itself includes the sub-plots of Pilate and the soldiers. I can’t help thinking that Pilate is again exercising his perverse sense of humor when he writes, as a taunt, “Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.” When the chief priests try to correct Pilate, once again, he dismisses the whole Jesus business, “What I have written I have written.”

John cites the Psalms as prophecies about the events of Jesus’ crucifixion, such as casting lots for His clothing, that His bones would not be broken, and His side being pierced. Perhaps Psalm 22:16 anticipates the crucifixion most powerfully,

For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.

At the crucifixion, women play an important role. John tells us that there were four—three of whom have names. In an age dominated by men, in a book written by men, the fact that women’s names are recorded is highly significant. It can be inferred that these women played an important role in early Christianity, and even in Jesus’ ministry. That women played an important role in early Christianity is attested to by Paul. He names several prominent

women in early Christianity who were fellow laborers or missionaries, or who hosted congregations in their homes. Jesus' mother is at the crucifixion, as a mother would be even in her son's defeat, persecution, and death. Mary's unnamed sister is with her, consoling her. There is a certain Mary the wife of Clopas, who hadn't been mentioned before nor is she afterward. A whole mythology has grown up surrounding Mary Magdalene, who is at the cross. The only thing that the Gospels say about her is that Jesus cast seven demons out of her. But common belief says that Mary Magdalene was especially loved by Jesus. Some mix up Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman who anointed Jesus with perfume (Mark 14:3-8; Luke 7:38-46). There is a Gospel of Mary Magdalene among the Gnostic Gospels, which says that Mary was especially loved by Jesus, that Jesus taught her secret teachings, and that Mary herself instructed the Apostles after Jesus' resurrection. What the Gospels do actually say about Mary Magdalene is that she was the first person to witness the resurrected Jesus. She is the first person to bring the message of Jesus' resurrection to the Apostles, who scoff at her in disbelief.

At this point, John inserts himself into the narrative—in fact, he does it twice. He mentions the disciple whom Jesus loved, meaning himself. This is the disciple who adopts Mary, Jesus' mother, as his own mother. And John also testifies that he saw the crucifixion with his own eyes, (“He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth” (19:35).)

John reminds us again that the crucifixion took place on the day of preparation for Passover, and that the Jews did not want the bodies on the cross during their High Holy Days. They ask the soldiers to break the legs of the bodies on the crosses so that they would die sooner. Jesus was already dead and a soldier pierces His side with a spear, from which blood and water flow.

Jesus really did die. The Creeds tell us that Jesus is fully God and fully Man. As a full human, living a complete human life, Jesus experienced the complete human condition—including death. The mystery of the resurrection should not diminish the reality of Jesus' death. Jesus was born a baby, grew into adulthood, lived an adult life, and died—as all humans do.

After Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea bargains with Pilate to obtain Jesus' body. Much legendary literature has grown up around Joseph of Arimathea, especially in the middle ages. For instance, he is the first bearer of the Holy Grail in medieval romance literature. Having been taken from the cross, Jesus's body is embalmed with spices, wrapped in burial linens, and lain in a grave which has never been used before, in a garden.

But this is not the end of the story. John records Jesus' resurrection from death. The resurrection initiates Christianity as a religion. Many scholars, including Christian scholars, do not accept the story of the resurrection. Since there is no scientifically documented resurrection of a dead body, historians are not able to assert that the resurrection is fact. We do have documented instances of people who have died in hospitals and returned to life. I don't imagine, though, that we have cases of bodies deceased for three days who get up again and walk. But to be true to their own criteria, historians can say nothing about the resurrection—neither that it happened nor that it didn't happen. So the narratives of “the historical Jesus” will end with Jesus' burial. This does not mean that we ourselves need to end our reading with the burial. Just because historical methods do not allow historians to speak for or against the resurrections, we do not need to remain silent about it. Jesus may indeed have risen from the grave. Jesus can be alive, still. But this is a leap of faith.

Personally, I believe that Jesus rose from the grave. I believe that Jesus lives. It is part of my Christian belief system. But I can't prove this to other people. For these beliefs are just that—beliefs, not historical facts. John is an eye witness to the resurrection, and he records the testimony of other eye witnesses. So historians can say that there are recorded testimonials from eye witnesses that the resurrection did happen. Thus, conscientious historians can and do pick up the story of the resurrection as something that early Christians believed. Their methods do allow them to talk about how Christians saw and see the resurrection, as a historical fact about the Christian religion.

John wants us to believe that Jesus is God, and that He rose from the dead. But equally so, John wants us to understand the teachings of Jesus. John's Gospel itself contains long sermons, and many wisdom teachings—primarily about love. And in many places, John points us to Jesus' teachings as a central aspect of Jesus' ministry. John 17:7 captures the dual nature of John's Gospel well. Jesus says,

Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you . . .

Jesus' words are mentioned first, and the assertion that Jesus came from God is mentioned second. These seem to be the two overarching themes that run through John's Gospel. John himself tells us that he has written his Gospel for two purposes: 1) that we would believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and 2) that we may have life in His name:

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (20:31).

Throughout this commentary, I have wrestled with the meaning of Jesus' name. I have been showing that Jesus' name is not the mere word "Jesus." Instead, I have been pointing to the qualities that Jesus' name invokes. For me, Jesus' name means His teachings, His love, His care for the sick and disenfranchised, and His care for the whole human race. Having life in His name means having life by embodying the things He taught and the example He gave us. Living out the things that Jesus taught to do and believing the things He said will give eternal life. John wrote his Gospel so that we can do both and live.

## **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) Why would John give the crucifixion such little emphasis?
- 2) Why are there no wonders associated with the crucifixion in John?
- 3) What is the significance of the women being named who are at the crucifixion?
- 4) How do you feel about Jesus telling John that His mother is now John's mother? Does this suggest something about Jesus' relationship with Mary?
- 5) Where does the Jesus story end for you? With Jesus' death? How do you feel about the resurrection? How you you feel about the way historians treat the Jesus story?

### **John 12:23-50: Implications Surrounding the Crucifixion and Glorification**

John brings up some ideas surrounding the crucifixion that are not in the other Gospels. In John alone there is talk about the **Glorification**. The glorification is somehow related to the crucifixion. Something transformative happens to Jesus after the crucifixion. He receives the power of the Father, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself"

(John 12:32). And Jesus is completely united with the Father, “And he who sees me sees him who sent me” (John 12:45).

This power from Jesus’ union with the Father is called “glorification.” Jesus becomes glorified by full union with the Father. This union occurs after Jesus’ death on the cross. Then, fully united with God, Jesus bears much fruit,

And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.”

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:23-24).

The idea here is not what the crucifixion does for us; it is not an atonement idea—that is, the crucifixion does not take away our sins. Rather, the idea is what happens to Jesus. With the crucifixion, resurrection, and glorification, Jesus is completely united with the Father. Jesus’ full union with God gives Him the power to reach us and bring all humanity into relationship with Himself forever. He has all power in heaven and on earth through His union with God; and He has the power to enter into relationship with humanity through His own Human nature.

The process of glorification does not follow a strict chronology in the storyline. Jesus appears to foreshadow His crucifixion when He says,

Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? “Father, save me from this hour”? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name. . . . He said this to show by what death he was to die. (12:27-28, 33).

Notice that it is the Father’s *name* that is being glorified. We don’t have a name for the Father, other than Father. As in other places in John, the *name* of the Father or the name of Jesus means the qualities or spiritual essence of the deity. After Jesus invokes the Father’s name, the Father’s voice thunders from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” This voice suggests that the glorification has happened at this point in the story—before the crucifixion—and not necessarily after the resurrection, but also that it will happen again—“I will glorify it again.” However it occurs in the storyline, glorification appears to mean union with the Father and the power that such union grants.

What Jesus says about His death and resurrection suggests a kind of Platonic disparagement of the material world. And we, likewise, are told to despise this world and embrace the other world, where Jesus is.

He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; (12:25-26).

This saying appears in all the Gospels. But in John, the saying is a little longer and contains a bit of interpretation that helps to clarify the saying. The oldest version is in Mark,

For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it (Mark 8:35).

John takes this verse and has it say that we will inherit eternal life if we despise the material world and look to eternal life, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25).

Plato disparaged the material world, calling it a poor copy of the Eternal world of Ideas, or Eikons. The Gnostics adopted this concept and intensified it, even saying in some documents that a false god created the material world to deceive mortals. Some have suggested a Gnostic influence in John’s Gospel, due to the light/darkness imagery and the sayings that disparage materiality. Only in John do we find the striking light/dark imagery, which is also found in some

Gnostic texts. Then there are the sayings that suggest Jesus' words are what give life. For Gnostics, knowledge is what saves, very much like hearing saving words. Furthermore, Jesus does not appear to suffer before and on the cross, indicating a kind of liberation from materiality.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) We return again to the question of belief. Do we need to worship Jesus in order to be saved? Or does Jesus say that His words are what save?
- 2) How do you feel about the idea of glorification? Can you accept the idea that a human merged completely with God?
- 3) Would you say that we, too, like Jesus, can merge with God? Or is Jesus a special case?

## WEEK VIII

### HE IS RISEN!

#### John 20: Early Easter Experiences

What makes Jesus an extraordinary revealer is His resurrection from the dead. None of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures did; nor did Mohammed; nor Lau Tzu, Confucius, or the Hindu Rishis (who wrote the Vedas). There are some accounts of the Buddha appearing to his disciples after his death, but Buddha is not considered a god by Buddhists. What testifies to Jesus' divinity is His resurrection from the dead, flesh and bone.

The resurrection narratives begin with Mary Magdalene. She goes to the tomb and finds it empty. Running back to the Apostles, she tells them that the tomb is empty. John (the one whom Jesus loved) and Peter race to the tomb along with Mary Magdalene. They find the linens that Jesus' body was wrapped in folded up, but Jesus' body is not there. The burial linens are held by some to be the Shroud of Turin. At this point, all that the three see is the empty tomb and the burial linens. The first supernatural visions appear to Mary Magdalene alone, after the Apostles return home. When Peter and John depart, Mary Magdalene remains, crying.

In John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene first sees a vision of two angels sitting in the tomb. But in John, the angels do not look extraordinary. In Luke, the angels are in dazzling clothes and so impress the women at the tomb that they bow down and worship. John can describe spiritual realities in lofty heights, such as the cosmic Jesus in the beginning as the Word. And John can make spiritual realities very human, such as the Jesus who cries at the funeral of His friend Lazarus, and now in the resurrection story. Mary talks with the angels as she would to any ordinary human. They ask Mary why she is crying. Mary explains to the angels that Jesus has been taken away. She takes them for ordinary human beings. As she does Jesus, Himself.

Immediately after Mary Magdalene explains her grief to the angels, Jesus appears to her. What happens next I have pondered for decades. Mary thinks that Jesus is the gardener. Jesus does not appear in heavenly glory; His clothes do not shine with dazzling light; no special power attends His appearance to Mary—Jesus appears like an ordinary man. This is also the case in Luke. In Luke, Jesus appears to two disciples and walks next to them for about seven miles, to a city called Emmaus. They do not recognize Jesus either. Mary asks Jesus if He has removed the body, and then, if so, where He has taken it. Jesus says her name, "Mary." That is when Mary recognizes Jesus and calls Him, "Rabbouni" (Rabbi, teacher).

It is intriguing to me that Jesus looks like an ordinary human being in His resurrected body. But doesn't he look like He did when He was on earth? Why don't the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognize Jesus? Why does Mary think that Jesus is the gardener? It is one thing to say that Jesus was so human that he didn't shine with unearthly splendor upon His resurrection. But if He is totally human, why didn't He look the same when He was resurrected as He did while on earth? No one seems to recognize the resurrected Jesus.

In another intriguing statement, when Mary does recognize Jesus, He tells her not to touch Him as He has not yet fully ascended to the Father. He commissions Mary to tell the Apostles that He is going to His Father and their Father, His God and their God. In one sense, this makes Jesus very human. His God is the same God that we have. That would make Jesus and humans all children of God. There would be one difference, though, in Jesus' relationship to

His God and our God—where Jesus is going, we cannot go, “Where I am going you cannot come” (13:33). We cannot go where Jesus is going because Jesus is going back to God, where He originated. And what kind of spiritual physics are operating when Jesus says not to touch Him because He is not ascended to the Father? I have not encountered any theologies that explain these matters, nor that even raise the questions.

Next, Jesus appears to the disciples when they are gathered (probably for supper) in evening, and greets them with the typical Jewish greeting, *Shalom*. “Peace be with you” (20:19). This manifestation brings up another question pertaining to the resurrection body. The disciples meet behind locked doors because they are afraid of the Jews. Yet Jesus can materialize in the midst of them anyway.

Jesus commissions the disciples to carry His teachings out to the world. This is called “The Great Commission.” In sending the disciples out to the world, Jesus uses language that recalls previous sayings about the relationship between Jesus and the disciples. In John 15, Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (15:9). Now, as Jesus hands His ministry over to the disciples, He says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (20:21). Then, Jesus breathes on them and gives them the Holy Spirit. This is when the Holy Spirit is said to originate.

Christianity is beginning to become a distinct religion when John writes his Gospel and early church organization is beginning, with it. Jesus is said to give the disciples power to forgive sins. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (20:23). In Matthew, this injunction is given to Peter alone—“Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). Peter is considered by Catholics to be the first pope. Since Peter is given the power to bind or loose on earth, Catholics to this day claim that the pope, and by derivation priests of the church, have the power to forgive sins. However, in John all the Apostles are given this power, after they receive the Holy Spirit. By extension, can we say that we all are sent out when we receive the Holy Spirit as ambassadors of Jesus’ Word? I believe that everyone can be sent out as witnesses of Jesus and as examples of Jesus by the extent that we have received the Holy Spirit, and show it in our lives, by our lives. “They will know we are Christians by our love.” Though I do not believe that I have any say over someone else’s sins. The Protestant understanding of this issue is that only God can forgive sins, and that is between the individual and God alone.

Thomas doesn’t believe the story told him by the Apostles, that Jesus is risen from the dead. He is in a position like us all. We have the Bible story that Jesus rose from the dead. But Thomas gets a privilege that we don’t. Jesus appears to Thomas and invites Thomas to put his fingers in the nail holes of Jesus’ hands and feet, and in His side where it had been pierced by the spear. Thomas believes and bows down. Then Jesus says the statement that captures the spiritual space we all inhabit, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29). Most of us have not had visions of Jesus, I imagine. Blessed are those who have. For most of us, it is the power of the Bible stories, accompanied by the peace of mind that comes over us when we read, and the warming of our heart—a feeling of Presence—that we experience which convinces. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

**Important FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) Was Jesus' resurrection real? Or was it wishful thinking or some other form of illusion?
- 2) Why didn't Mary recognize Jesus at the tomb, at first. Why didn't the Apostles in Luke recognize Jesus when He walked next to them for seven miles?
- 3) Why did Jesus tell Mary Magdalene not to touch Him?
- 4) How could Jesus go through walls and also be physical enough for Thomas to touch Him?
- 5) Can we believe without touching Jesus as Thomas did?

**John 21: Jesus' Final Easter Appearance**

Jesus' final appearance is to disciples who are fishing. Two plot elements speak to me in this resurrection appearance. First, the general context of Jesus' final appearance seems to be about ministry and carrying the message out to the world. Second, this appearance is not only to the twelve Apostles. The fact that these were followers of Jesus, but not the twelve Apostles, is significant. Since the context of this story is ministry, these ordinary people are also called into ministry. Jesus' call is to anyone who has heard His Word, who is following His Way.

In the final appearance, Jesus appears as the disciples (not the Apostles) are fishing. While the fishermen have caught nothing on their own, with Jesus' counsel they catch so much that they are not able to haul in their nets. Probably, this is not just an example of Jesus knowing where fish can be caught. It is likely a metaphor. I think that in this story, we need to remember Jesus' words when He first called His Apostles. "Come with me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). Though this statement is not in John, the tradition of fishermen fishing for men was likely an oral tradition and it is in all the synoptics. The net being filled so full that it couldn't be hauled in symbolizes the vast number of people who heard Jesus' message and were attracted to this new Way.

The context of ministry is made explicit in Jesus' conversation with Peter after the disciples have come ashore and eaten. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him. After each question, Jesus tells Peter to feed His sheep or tend His sheep. Jesus is the good shepherd, as we saw in chapter 10. Now, Jesus is passing on the role of shepherd to Peter. This passage is often read when Christian ministers are ordained, because it is like an ordination for Peter. And Christian ministers are called to tend their flock, or congregations.

But there is a problematic aspect in Jesus' conversation with Peter that comes out when one reads the story in the original Greek. The first two times when Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him, Jesus uses the Greek word, "agapao." Agapao is the Greek word for spiritual, all giving love. But when Peter answers, he doesn't also use the word "agapao." Instead, Peter uses the Greek word "phileo." Phileo means friendship. So Jesus asks Peter about all giving spiritual love and Peter responds with language of friendship. In English, the dialogue would go like this: Jesus asks, "Do you have love me spiritually?" Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know that I am your friend." Why would Peter answer Jesus with friendship when Jesus asks him if he loves Him? Did Peter simply miss the word Jesus used? Or is there something in Peter that makes him incapable of the all-giving spirituality Jesus asks him for? Is Jesus asking Peter about spirituality while Peter only understands friendship? Is Jesus pushing Peter beyond human friendship to spiritual love, which Peter is incapable of? Is Jesus probing the new evangelist to

see if he, too, has Jesus' all-giving spiritual love? Is Peter afraid of the word love? Is Peter trying to keep things light, seeking to avoid this talk of spiritual love? Can we ask if this is an early example of homophobia? I have not found satisfying answers for this question in the literature I have studied.

In any event, it is entirely consistent with John's Gospel to end with a discussion of love. In the long sermon on love in John 15, Jesus uses the word *agapao* throughout. When Jesus says "This I command you, to love one another" (15:17), he uses *agapao*. It is Jesus primary teaching that we love one another with that all-giving, spiritual love. As He is leaving this earth, He asks Peter if Peter has learned to do this. Although Peter misses this point, Jesus still tells him to tend His sheep. The third time that Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him, Jesus uses *phileo*—"Are you my friend?" This hurts Peter's feelings, because three times in a row Jesus asks him if he loves Him. Why does Jesus leave off love the third time, and ask about friendship instead? Does He realize that Peter is not capable of the spirituality Jesus asks for, and comes to Peter in language Peter can understand?

Meeting Peter on Peter's own terms is consistent with the whole reason for Jesus' coming to earth. Jesus comes to humanity in a human form so that we can see and understand God's ways. Coming to earth as Jesus, God gives us a form we can relate to. Acting out God's infinitely loving ways, Jesus shows us two things. He shows us what God is really like. And He shows us what we need to do to follow in God's ways.

John's Gospel concludes with a strange paragraph. John is following Jesus while He talks to Peter. Peter sees John and asks Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus replies, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" We are not given any clues as to why Peter asks about John. I wonder if this is professional jealousy. Peter is having an intimate moment with Jesus and notices John following. Peter was a prominent Apostle, perhaps the most prominent Apostle. He was called "a Rock," and the Rock on which Jesus would build the church (Matthew 16:18). Then there is John, who is identified as the one Jesus loved. The drama of the Gospels contains the whole range of human emotion: love, friendship, death, grief, betrayal, self-sacrifice, childbirth, family, vocation and calling. Here are we seeing the all too human quality of anxiety about whom the master—the friend—loves more?

Then there is Jesus' strange answer. I see two aspects to Jesus' response. First, Jesus says, "What is that to you? Follow me!" Jesus tells Peter not to be concerned about John. Peter's task is to follow Jesus in his own way. While we are called to nurture spirituality in others, we are not called to concern ourselves with the other's personal relationship with God. We are neither able nor called to judge the spiritual condition of other people. The injunction not to judge others comes out more forcefully in the synoptics,

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye (Matthew 7:1-5).

"What is that to you?"—i.e., don't worry about other people—is followed by Jesus' words, "Follow me!" It is enough for us to follow Jesus according to our best understanding of what that means.

Jesus also says that John will stay alive until Jesus returns. This is a reference to the **Second Coming** of Jesus. According to several passages in the Gospels, and in Paul, some thought that the Second Coming would happen in their lifetimes (Matthew 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27; 1 Corinthians 7:29, 31). And here in John, we find the words, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

So John’s masterwork closes. Not with Jesus’ death. Not with Jesus’ resurrection. But with the suggestion that Jesus will come again within the lifetime of his disciples. The Second Coming does not find a place in most of John’s Gospel, and in certain places John seems to argue against a final judgement. But we will not find consistency in this or any of the four Gospels. They were composed from memory of Jesus’ sayings, from schools of thought that arose after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, and from some written records, none written by Jesus. This does not detract from the power of the Gospels. These works have endured for millennia. And they have done so because humans resonate with the words we find there. We humans are complex beings, and we develop at different rates and to different degrees and in different ways. The complexity of the Gospels speaks to the complexity of the human soul. I believe, and I have found, that the Gospel of John has something of benefit for my soul at every stage of my development, and each time I come to it. And I fully expect for this to be the case throughout my life, and even into the next one, where Jesus has gone to prepare a place for me.

Writing this companion to John’s Gospel has had a marked influence on me. I have grown in the writing of it. I believe that anyone who encounters this Gospel will be transformed, as I have been. This commentary is my encounter with John’s Gospel and the ideas and interpretations evoked by my encounter, and my theological education. But my reading is not the only way to read John. I invite everyone with an inclination, to encounter John for themselves, and see what ideas and direction this great work of spirituality gives them. John’s last sentence is also about the infinite wisdom to be found in the Jesus tradition,

But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written (21:25).

#### **FOR REFLECTION:**

- 1) Can the story of Jesus appearing to fishermen be understood metaphorically?
- 2) Why did Peter respond to Jesus’ questions with friendship instead of love? Why does Jesus conclude His talk with Peter by asking about friendship, instead of love?
- 3) Why does Peter ask, “What about him?” Do you find John’s concluding episode a strange way to end his Gospel?

## IMPORTANT WORDS AND TERMS

**Gnostic:** Gnostic Christians were a religious group that developed along with what became orthodox Christianity. The origin of their name, Gnostic, is based on the Greek word for knowledge: Gnosis. There is a considerable collection of their texts. A library of Gnostic works was discovered in upper Egypt in a city called Nag Hammadi.

Gnostics held a wide range of beliefs. But one leading teaching is about the creation of the universe. It was believed that the universe was created by a lesser divinity called a demiurge. This demiurge thought that he was the only god, although he wasn't the ultimate true God. The demiurge created the universe as a kingdom for him to rule over. But the universe so created was a false reality and distracted ignorant humans from the true reality of God. Being born on the world is a form of imprisonment brought about by ignorance. Everything humans see in this false universe is a deception. Knowledge of the true God would release humans from imprisonment in false reality. Jesus came to bring this knowledge to humanity. He is Savior as the bringer of saving knowledge. Salvation to Gnostics is through knowledge of the reality of the universe and the true God who stands above the created order.

The Gnostics were harshly suppressed by what became orthodox Christianity. Orthodox Christianity affirms the words in the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis 1:31, "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." There was fundamental disagreement about the nature of the created universe. Orthodox Christians held that it was created by the true God and everything in it was good. Gnostics held that the universe was created by a false demiurge and everything in it was deceiving. Orthodox Christianity won the battle of truth, and Gnosticism was successfully suppressed, for centuries known only through the polemics of its Orthodox Christian opponents.

**Dead Sea Scrolls:** Another collection of texts was discovered near an ancient settlement named Qumran, close to the Dead Sea. This fascinating collection is an "inter-testamental" collection—it is made up of texts from the time period between the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the Christian Scriptures.

Scholars believe that these texts were compiled by a religious order called the Essenes. The Essenes lived in a kind of monastic community and observed certain rules of conduct such as diet and celibacy. They saw themselves as the true elect people. One reason for their rule of celibacy was that they were in constant readiness for holy war, and the Old Testament requires celibacy in preparation for war. They were awaiting a cosmic war between the "angels of light" and the "angels of darkness" or the angels of Belial. Their writings contain many striking ideas such as the "Spirit of Truth" and other terms that sound much like New Testament teachings. Some suggest that Jesus was an Essene, but there is no conclusive evidence to support this suggestion. By means of rituals, the Essenes taught that one could obtain holiness without performing sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem.

**Sadducees, Priests, and Levites:** Today we think of priests and ministers as similar to one another--leaders of worship. But in ancient Israel, priests fulfilled a special role different from our priests and ministers. The temple was not a place where people gathered to hear preachings and to sing hymns--this would have been done in the synagogues. The temple was where sacrifices were performed and it constituted the very center of Jewish life. Ever since the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity, the temple was the center of political power. The temple priests performed sacrifices and governed the Jews as agents of Roman Rule. The Sadducees were the temple priests and rulers of the Jewish state. They interpreted **The Law of Moses** (Also called The Pentateuch: first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These five books were believed to be received by Moses from God, when Moses was on Mount Sinai. They are the heart of the Jewish religion.) as pertaining strictly to rituals of purity and proper sacrifices. The Sadducees all claimed descent from Zadok, the chief priest under Solomon, and their name derives from their line called Zadokites.. The role of priesthood was passed down from father to son, staying in the family. Hence, the Sadducees held their power as aristocratic families. The Sadducees were wealthy and powerful. In ancient Israel, one of the 12 tribes was called the tribe of Levi. They were a special, holy tribe and were the original priests in Israel. In later times, however, they were displaced from their position by the Zadokites and reduced to temple servants.

**Synoptic Gospels:** The synoptic Gospels are Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The order of events is roughly similar in these Gospels. There are many verses that are identical in these three Gospels. The writers of Luke and Matthew knew the Gospel of Mark and followed it. They also had a source of Jesus' sayings that they added to what they had from Mark. Because of the similarities among these Gospels, they are grouped together.

**Gospel of Thomas:** One of the Gnostic Gospels. It is a collection of sayings of Jesus. There is no storyline connecting them. Some of these sayings have parallels in the canonical Gospels. Although parallel with sayings in the Gospels, the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* are redacted toward ascetic practices. Recall that the Gnostics do not favor the things of this world. So they practice asceticism and do not affirm worldly marriages or reproduction.

**The Temple:** The temple was the center of Jewish religious practice at the time of Jesus. There was only one temple and it was located in Jerusalem. Jews would bring animals or grain to be offered to God, depending on the kind of offering. There was a freewill offering of grain, which a person would offer freely out of gratitude to God. Then there were animal sacrifices that a person would offer to take away their sin. It was believed that when an animal was slaughtered and burned on the altar flames, the sin of the person would be taken away. The priests, Sadducees, and Levites did the actual slaughtering of the animals and burning the flesh in fires inside the temple. The animal flesh was actually cooked over the flames and the temple priests retained the edible portions of the food, while other parts of the animal were burnt completely. The smoke of the burnt offering went up to God as a "sweet savor" like incense. Jews from all over Israel had to go to Jerusalem at least once a year to bring their sacrifices.

**Pharisees:** Pharisees were teachers of the law. They were considered by some to be philosophers. Like rabbis, they maintained a bond between teacher and student. The Pharisees

were interpreters of the law (Pentateuch) and passed down their interpretations through various schools and traditions. They applied the teachings of the Law in such a way that an individual could maintain ritual purity without sacrificing in the temple.

**Samaritans:** The Samaritans occupied the land north of Judah. They were composed of relocated Assyrians, from the conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel. They were held in contempt by the Jews because of the impurity of their bloodline. Furthermore, they had their own scriptures which were not recognised as orthodox by the Jews. They had constructed a temple on Mount Gerizim which rivalled the time-honored temple in Jerusalem. The temple on Mount Gerizim, however, was destroyed in 130 BC. The Samaritans continued to exist as a distinct people from the Jews, and, indeed, at times at war with the Jews.

**Gospel of Mary:** Highly controversial Gnostic Gospel. Although named after Mary, precisely which Mary is not clear. Some think that it is Jesus' mother. Others think that it is Mary Magdalene. The Gospel is controversial because some hold that it indicates a marital relationship between Jesus and the Mary of the Gospel. The Gospel does say that Jesus loved Mary more than any of the other disciples. It also shows a conflict between Mary and the other disciples. The conflict is due to a special teaching that Jesus entrusts only to Mary. The other (male) disciples question whether Jesus would entrust a special teaching to a woman, and why he wouldn't enlighten the other disciples with it as well.

**Tax Collectors:** The tax collectors were particularly hated by the Jews in Jesus' time. They were Jews who lived among their people and knew the residents of their neighbourhoods. Their proximity to their fellow Jews gave them the knowledge of the economic conditions of their neighbours. They were responsible for collecting the taxes for the Roman government. Since they knew the economic conditions of their neighbours, they knew how much each one could afford to give. They were despised for being in league with the Romans as traitors to their fellow Jews.

**Manna:** Manna was literally bread from heaven. The Israelite people escaped from Egypt, by God's help, where they had been slaves. Their escape from Egyptian civilization took them into the desert wilderness outside Egypt. The people became hungry and complained to Moses, their prophet and leader. "Why have you delivered us from Egypt in order for us to die of hunger in the wilderness," they complained. So God fed them miraculously. In the early morning, along with the dew, a thick, flakey bread covered the ground. They didn't know what this bread was, so they called it, "manna." "Manna" is Hebrew for the phrase, "What is it?"

**Hellenistic:** Hellenism is a term given by German scholars to a certain time period: the period from Alexander the Great's conquest of the Mediterranean until Roman conquest. This period was from 323-31 BCE. The name "Hellenism" derives from the word Greeks used for their country, *Hellas*. Alexander the Great conquered the entire Mediterranean countries and even into India. This made Greek culture the dominant culture in those regions. This included Israel. So the literary language of Israel was Greek and Greek ideas and philosophy became popular and well-established in Israel. So the Christian Scriptures were written in Greek, even though Jesus and his followers spoke Aramaic and the scriptures they read were in Hebrew.

**Judah:** Judah is the southern kingdom of what used to be the Israelite kingdom. King Solomon was the last king to rule over a united Israel. After King Solomon, the northern tribes of Israel refused to submit to the rule of Solomon's son. They chose their own king, and Israel became a divided land. The northern half of Israel was called by the same name, Israel. The southern half was called Judah. Israel, the northern kingdom was utterly obliterated by Assyria in 721 BCE. Only the southern kingdom of Judah survived. But after its conquest by Babylon, Judah never had a Jewish king on its throne.

**Sabbath:** The Sabbath is the seventh day of the week in the Jewish calendar. It is a day of rest and no work of any kind is supposed to be done on the Sabbath. The Sabbath day is grounded in creation itself. According to the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis, God did the work of creation in six days. After creating everything, God rested on the seventh day. This seventh day of the week is very holy. It is holy because God made it holy after He finished creation,

And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done.<sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation (Genesis 2:2-3).

Since God rested from all His work on the Sabbath, so humans are supposed to rest from all their work on the Sabbath. In Jesus' day, long lists of rules about what kinds of work cannot be done on the Sabbath were written. There were even laws about how far a person could walk. Today, strict Jews do not drive on the Sabbath, among other things.

**Festival of Tabernacles, or Booths:** A description of The Festival of Tabernacles can be found in Leviticus 23:33-43 in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is one of three ancient festivals from the very origins of Israel: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, or Passover; The Festival of Weeks; and this one, the Festival of Tabernacles. When the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the desert for 40 years before they settled in Canaan. During this period, they lived in makeshift huts. The Festival of Tabernacles is a reminder of those days of wandering. The Festival lasts one week and takes place in the fall. As a reminder of those days, Jews construct a small hut on their property. Modern Jews still observe this Festival. Originally, the idea was to live in these huts for a week. But compassion and practicality modified this rule. Sometimes in places in the northern hemisphere it can get really cold in the fall. And with the hustle and bustle of modern living, it becomes impractical for a whole family to live in a small hut. Apartment dwellers are only able to make the smallest hut on their balcony. So modern rules say that eating one meal in the hut as a symbolic gesture of living in it is acceptable.

**Passover:** The Passover Feast is perhaps the most important religious celebration in Judaism. The Passover Feast commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, or the event that began Israelite consciousness as a people. Exodus was such a significant event in Israelite history, that they begin their calendar with a festival remembering this miracle. The word "Passover" refers to the final plague God visited upon the Egyptians in order to render Pharaoh willing to release the Israelites from slavery. The last plague God sent the Egyptians was the death of all the

firstborn children in Egypt—even the son of Pharaoh. But the angel of death who struck down the Egyptians “passed over” the houses of the Israelites, saving their children. Pharaoh then released the Israelites from slavery and they began a new life as a free people devoted to the LORD. All through later Jewish literature, the memory of the Exodus and God’s deliverance of His people remains a central theme.

The Passover is a feast. A lamb is roasted and eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. The bitter herbs symbolize the harsh slavery the Israelites endured in Egypt. The bread is without leaven because the Israelites grabbed their bread quickly in order to make their escape and didn’t have time to leaven it and wait for it to rise. Passover lasts one week. It is celebrated to this day by Jews around the same time as Christians celebrate Easter. The Jews in Jesus day made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to celebrate this holiest of festivals at The Temple and in their capital city.

**Parts of Our Soul:** Philosophers and psychologists speak of different levels or parts to the human soul. Plato divided the soul into three levels: the *Nous*, or rational mind, the *Thumos*, or noble emotions, and the *Epithumia*, or the passions for pleasure and bodily desires. Freud also had a three-level soul, the Id, the Ego, and the Superego. It is worth noting that the word “psychology” means study of the soul, psyche.

For our purposes, we can discern a few levels to our soul by means of introspection, or by looking within. There is the internal part of our soul, which would be thoughts and feelings. This would be considered a higher level. Then there is the behavioral level, by which our emotions and thoughts take form and are grounded in behavior. This is a lower level than the internal level of thoughts and feelings. Then there is the lowest level, the level of our five senses. If we allow our senses to control us, we can be led into gluttony, or to search for pleasure after pleasure and sensuality, sexual excesses, even into drugs—searching for pleasure without end.

By Jesus washing our feet, the cleansing of our sensual level is signified. This means that our eyes see by means of higher feelings and thoughts. Sounds stimulate joyous affections, sights stimulate beautiful thoughts, touch brings intimacy, smell leads us to discriminate between healthy and unhealthy foods, and taste is satisfied by healthy food.

**Resurrection of the Dead:** Christianity does not have a single consistent idea concerning what happens to a person after death. One belief is that a person’s soul goes to heaven or hell for eternity. That is what Swedenborg taught. Another belief, though, is that heaven is a temporary holding place where a person lives until the **last days**, or the final judgement. The last days are the end of time, when a cosmic battle takes place between forces of darkness and forces of light. At this time, Jesus comes to earth again to judge the good and evil. After Jesus and the forces of light defeat the forces of darkness, the dead come to earth and live in bodily form on a rejuvenated and paradisiacal planet. It is like a return to the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden was a paradise in which the first couple—Adam and Eve—lived. The whole earth will be like the Garden of Eden when the cosmic battle is over. Even in this idea, there are conflicted beliefs. Some say that after death we sleep in our tombs until the last days. Then we rise up out of the earth and live on the rejuvenated planet. Others say that we come down from heaven and live in bodily form on the earth.

**Second Coming:** The Synoptic Gospels say that Jesus will come to earth again on the clouds of heaven and power and glory. This is called the Second Coming. When Jesus comes again, He will judge the earth and separate the sheep from the goats—the good from the evil. The dead will rise from their tombs. Cosmic phenomena will accompany this Second Coming. The sun and moon will turn dark; the stars will fall from the sky; and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Some of the Apostles thought that they would see this happen in their own lives. For Swedenborg, the Second Coming is a spiritual reality that happens to each individual when we face Jesus in our own souls. The cosmic phenomena are symbolic of our old way of living undergoing upheaval as we let Christ's way into our former worldly, natural self.

**Mysticism:** Mysticism means a direct human experience of God. It also means a union between God and Humans. Mystics are bonded with God in some way, usually internally. Classic Christian mysticism derives from monasteries. St. John of the Cross, a famous Christian mystic, describes the stages the soul goes through as it joins with God. Likewise, Bernard of Clairvaux describes a four-stage ladder we ascend through love in which we find a mystical love union with God. Organized religion sometimes looked with suspicion on mystics. For if mystics could unite with God individually, without priests, the mass, and the sacraments, they challenged the authority of the church.

**Atonement:** Atonement is a theological term about Jesus' crucifixion. The doctrine of atonement states that God was angry with the human race for their evils. Also, the atonement doctrine states that Adam committed the original sin, which was eating of the tree of knowledge (Genesis 2). Adam's sin is passed on to humans at conception. The ancient Israelites could sacrifice an animal at the temple and the sacrifice would remove any sin that they committed. The atonement doctrine states that Jesus' crucifixion was such a sacrifice, and that Jesus' crucifixion took away all the sins of the humans who believe in Jesus.

## FROM SCRIPTURE TO RELIGION: HOW CHURCHES HAVE USED BIBLE VERSES

**Believed in His Name:** Christianity has made much of the several lines in the Christian Scriptures that suggest believing in Jesus' name brings salvation. More on this subject will be presented under the heading, **Behold the Lamb of God.**

### **Catholic:**

As with all Christian denominations, Catholics say that believing that Jesus is God and Savior is necessary for salvation. However, they assert that this belief must be mediated by the Church. By attending mass, confessing sin and receiving absolution, and other good works a person receives grace and finds salvation.

Catholicism does state, however, that the grace of the Catholic Church extends out to "cover" other Christian denominations and grant salvation to practicing Christians of other denominations.

### **Lutheran:**

The Lutheran doctrine on belief in Jesus is more complex than that of Catholicism. Lutherans hold that Jesus' death on the cross was like an animal sacrifice in ancient Judaism. Jesus bore the sins of the world on the cross. We are saved if we believe this. This is called having faith in Jesus. It is faith that saves us, not any good work. Only faith in Jesus saves because only Jesus bore our sins on the cross.

Although faith saves, the sign that one has been saved shows in good works. That is, one will do good deeds if one is saved. These good deeds do not contribute to salvation. And it is even hurtful for us to take credit for our good works and think that they "guarantee" our salvation.

### **Swedenborgian:**

Swedenborgians believe that Jesus is God. Since Jesus is God, believing in Jesus unites a person with God. As a mystic, Swedenborg teaches a personal union with God. When God's love is in our hearts and God's wisdom is in our minds, we are one with God. This union is what brings about salvation.

The Swedenborgian denomination, although essentially Christian, affirms that persons of all other religions can be saved.

**Evangelical:** Evangelical Christians make much of belief in Jesus' name. They claim that if a person accepts Jesus as their Savior the individual is instantly saved. The salvation is forever, and all sins: past, present, and future are forgiven.

**Grace:** Grace is considered essential for salvation. Grace comes from Jesus to humans. The way grace comes to us differs dramatically among different denominations.

**Catholic:**

In Catholicism grace is mediated by the Church. Grace flows forth from God, but it comes to humanity through the Church. Grace comes to humans through the sacraments. There are seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist or Holy Communion, Penance, Last Rites, Holy Orders, and Marriage. These sacraments give a person grace. This grace saves a person.

**Lutheran:**

In Lutheranism, grace is first earned by Jesus through His acts of redemption. That is principally His suffering and His crucifixion. This grace is transferred to humans and saves them. Grace is transferred to humans when we believe that Jesus died on the cross for humans.

**Swedenborgian:**

For Swedenborgians there is essentially no doctrine of grace. Swedenborg asks how Jesus' grace can be transferred to humans. If Jesus earned grace through His efforts, how can that grace become ours—not having done the work of salvation. One person's works cannot be transferred to another person.

If there were a doctrine of grace, the Swedenborgian idea would be analogous to Catholicism. Salvation for Swedenborgians is by union with God. And union with God leads a person to love doing good. God is Good Itself, and loving God means loving good, and hence doing good, wherever and whenever we encounter it.

**The Lamb of God Who Takes away the Sin of the World:** This title for Jesus has generated an immense body of theological ink. By calling Jesus the Lamb of God, the Jewish sacrificial complex is suggested. In this sense, Jesus is a sacrificial lamb. In the ancient Jewish system, sacrificing a lamb at the temple in Jerusalem would take a person's sins away. Jesus' death on the cross is considered a sacrifice.

The sin of the world refers to "original sin." Original sin refers to the sin of Adam and Eve. In the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, *Genesis*, Adam and Eve—the first humans—begin life in the Garden of Eden. God tells them that they must not eat fruit from a tree called "The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil." They do eat fruit from this tree. This disobedience was the first sin. It results in their being expelled from the Garden of Eden. It brings death to humanity, pain in childbirth and hard labor to survive in the world. Traditional Christianity holds that this original sin of Adam and Eve is passed down to every human at conception. We are all born guilty by inheriting Adam and Eve's original sin. We sin in other ways in our lives every time we veer from God's ways.

Traditional Christianity holds that God the Father was angry with the human race for their sins. Jesus bore all the sins of the entire human race when He was sacrificed on the cross. Being innocent of any sin, when He died on the cross, He appeased the angry Father and reconciled God to humanity. This act of innocent sacrifice redeemed the human race.

But Jesus only redeemed those humans who believe this. This act of redemption only applies to those who believe that Jesus saved them. Since Jesus is the Being who reconciled God to humanity by His death on the cross, only Jesus saves. Hence only those who accept Jesus are saved.

Interfaith relations are difficult for traditional Christianity, since only Jesus bore the sins of the world. Faith in Jesus makes Jesus' sacrifice on the cross saving. Otherwise the cross doesn't save a person. So religions that worship other Gods don't save.

This belief is called "the atonement."

**Holy Spirit:** Traditional Christianity explains the Holy Spirit in terms of God's activity. That is, the Holy Spirit enlightens humans, the Holy Spirit gives humans grace, the Holy Spirit brings conviction of truth, in short, the Holy Spirit is what fills humanity with God's grace. Christians believe that humanity didn't receive the Holy Spirit until Jesus' resurrection. The verse for this belief is John 7:39, "As yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." The Holy Spirit is called the Third "Person" of the Trinity. Traditional Christians consider God to be a trinity of "Persons": God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This triune nature of God is highly complicated and difficult to understand. While asserting three distinct "Persons" of God, Christians still maintain that there is one God. More on this issue in the discussion of the trinity.

The Holy Spirit has an interesting history. The Dead Sea Scrolls speaks of a Holy Spirit before Jesus was born. In one of the scrolls we find language that sounds remarkably like Christianity,

For only through the spirit pervading God's true society can there be atonement for a man's ways; all of his iniquities; thus only can he gaze upon the light of life and so be joined to His truth by His holy spirit, purified from all iniquity. Through an upright

and humble attitude his sin may be covered, and by humbling himself before all God's laws his flesh can be made clean. Only thus can he receive the purifying waters and be purged by the cleansing flow. . . . By His truth God shall purify all human deeds, and refine some of humanity so as to extinguish every perverse spirit from the inward parts of the flesh, cleansing from every wicked deed by a holy spirit. Like purifying waters, He shall sprinkle each with a spirit of truth, effectual against all the abominations of lying and sullyng by an unclean spirit. . . . Through a gracious visitation all who walk in this spirit will know healing, bountiful peace, long life, and multiple progeny, followed by eternal blessings and perpetual joy through life everlasting (1QS, 4Q255-264a, 5Q11, "Charter of a Jewish Sectarian Association," pp.129, 130, 131).

In this passage we see how spirit means a person inner character. It says that God will "purify all human deeds" and "extinguish every perverse spirit from the inward parts of the flesh, cleansing from every wicked deed." So we see that the inner parts of a person are called spirit. And God will purify us by means of "a holy spirit."

I think that we can read John's use of the word "spirit" in the light of the Dead Sea Scrolls. God's holy spirit is compared to "purifying waters." This is precisely what Jesus offers the Samaritan woman at the well; He tells her that He can give "living water welling up to eternal life." And He tells Nicodemus that a person must be born again of "water and spirit." This is likely a reference to purifying a person's inner character, as we read it in the light of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Reading John in the light of the Dead Sea Scrolls makes sense as they were written in a time closer to Jesus than that of modern Catholicism, Lutheranism, or Swedenborgianism.

**Pentecostal Christianity:** Pentecostal Christianity makes much of the Holy Spirit. In their worship services, they aspire to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Their services are lively, sometimes braking out in song and dance. In many Pentecostal services people start talking in "tongues." This practice is from Acts 2:1-12. The twelve apostles are gathered together in a room. The Holy Spirit fills them and they all start talking in foreign languages. But because the King James Bible translates "foreign languages" as "tongues," Pentecostal Christians try to emulate the behavior of the Apostles and talk in "tongues." The Apostles spoke in foreign languages, while Pentecostal Christians speak in nonsensical babble. The Bible never sis say that the Apostles spoke in "tongues," but in foreign languages.

**Swedenborgian:** For Swedenborg, the Holy Spirit is God's activity. However, there is no discussion of a trinity of Persons in Swedenborg. God the Father is Jesus' soul; Jesus is God's body; and the Holy Spirit is God's outgoing influence on humanity and the created universe. So God's mercy for humanity and God's activity to reform and regenerate humanity, as well as to enlighten humans are ascribed to the Holy Spirit. Though in fact, it is God acting through His Humanity that does this. God is only one person, Jesus Christ, whose soul is the infinite God.



**Eucharist:** The Eucharist is celebrated in both Protestant and Catholic churches. It is also called Communion, or Holy Communion. It is a sacrament in both Protestant and Catholic denominations. The word *Eucharist* means “giving thanks.” It refers to the last supper that Jesus ate with His disciples. There bread and wine were served. So Christians eat small amounts of bread and drink a sip of wine. There are differences in the way Eucharist is understood among Catholics, Lutherans, and Swedenborgians.

**Catholic:**

In Catholicism, partaking of bread and wine is considered partaking of Christ’s body and blood. In Catholicism, there is a doctrine about this called “transubstantiation.” Transubstantiation means literally transforming the substance of the bread and wine. When the priest blessed the bread and wine, they are transformed into Jesus’ body and blood. So the communion participants are consuming Jesus’ real body and blood in the bread and wine.

**Lutheran:**

The Lutheran understanding of the Eucharist is similar to that of Catholicism. The language that they use is very slightly different. They believe that Jesus’ real presence is in the Eucharist. They do not have a doctrine of transubstantiation, but a doctrine that is very close to it. Lutherans say that the bread and wine are transformed when they are blessed. They call this “consubstantiation.” This means that the body and blood of Jesus are “in, with, and under” the bread and wine. I think that it is difficult to see the difference between transubstantiation and consubstantiation. The key difference, I believe, is that in consubstantiation the bread and wine stay bread and wine, and Jesus’ body and blood are “in” the bread and wine.

**Swedenborgian:**

For Swedenborgians, the Eucharist is a symbol through which Jesus’ presence occurs. Through a complex doctrine called “correspondence”, material things on earth communicate with spiritual things. The physical bread symbolizes God’s Divine Love and the wine symbolizes God’s Divine Wisdom. When a Swedenborgian partakes of the Eucharist, God’s love and wisdom enter the congregant’s heart and mind. So by partaking of the physical bread and wine, a spiritual connection is made to God’s love and wisdom. A person is said to feel a warming of the heart and a clarity of mind through the Eucharist.

**Trinity--Traditional Christianity:** The trinity is a term that refers to God's nature. In traditional Christianity, God is thought to be three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are distinct Persons, yet they share one essence. The earliest creed tried to figure out the way three persons could be one. They say that Father and Son are "one substance." Further, Jesus is "begotten, not made," which means that He wasn't created a brand new being at birth. This language was an attempt to hold the language of two entities who aren't two different gods. The Athanasian Creed tries even harder to explain how three entities can be one being. I like it for the way it describes the fully human nature of Jesus, while maintaining His divinity. In the Athanasian Creed we find the language that Jesus is "Perfect God and perfect Man."

**Nicene Creed:** I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

**Athanasian Creed:** Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternal; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinites, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighty; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity; to acknowledge every Person by himself to be

God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the catholic religion; to say, There are three **(Athanasian Creed, continued)** Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity.

Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation; that he also believe faithfully the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess; that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the Essence of the Father; begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Essence of his Mother, born in the world. Perfect God; and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who although he is God and Man; yet he is not two, but one Christ. One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh; but by assumption of the Manhood by God. One altogether; not by confusion of Essence; but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man; so God and Man is one Christ; Who suffered for our salvation; descended into hell; rose again the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the God the Father Almighty, from whence he will come to judge the living and the dead. At whose

coming all men will rise again with their bodies; And shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe truly and firmly, he cannot be saved.

### **The Trinity--Swedenborgian:**

For Swedenborgians, the trinity is all in the one person of Jesus Christ. The Father is as the soul, the Son is as the body, and the Holy Spirit is the outgoing influence of this divine human on creation. The Father is the infinite Yahweh God of the Hebrew Scriptures who took on human form in the person of Jesus Christ. So Jesus is the embodiment of the infinite Yahweh God. The Holy Spirit is not a separate person, but is the influence of God on the created universe.

**“Last Days” in Traditional Christianity:**

Traditional Christianity believes that there will be a final end to this world. When the world ends, the dead will all rise from their graves and live again on the earth.

According to this belief, when we die our souls go to sleep. We are “awakened in the Last Days and our material bodies live on the earth. This belief is the source of the great choral setting of J. S. Bach, “Sleepers Awake.”

This doctrine is related to the idea of apocalypticism. Apocalyptic thought holds that a great cosmic battle will take place in heaven and on the earth. God Himself will purge the world of all the evil and sin in it. Humans and angels will fight alongside God. After this cosmic battle, when sin has been removed from the world, the dead will rise up out of their graves and live on the now purified earth in their material bodies.

I see some confusion in this doctrine. First, there is disagreement about the bodies that will rise up in the Last Days. Some Christians believe that our material bodies will come back to life and we will live in them on the earth.

Others believe that some kind of “spiritual body” will come to life and house our souls on the earth. This idea comes from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians 15:35-44:

But some one will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” . . . There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. . . . It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.

According to this belief, some kind of immortal body is created for us, and our immortal soul animates it, gives it life on the earth.

But there is another element of confusion. That is the idea of heaven. There is a folk belief, perhaps based on certain Bible passages, that when we die we go to heaven or hell for eternity. In heaven or hell, we meet our loved ones who have gone before us. Husbands and wives are reunited, mothers and children, friends, and other people whom we love. There are images of us singing praises to God, playing harps, living on clouds.

But the idea of eternal life in heaven runs contrary to the doctrine of bodily resurrection. If we sleep until we are materially risen in the Last Days, how can we live forever in heaven? Is heaven only a “holding pattern” until the Last Days? Is heaven a final place, or a temporary place until our bodies—physical or spiritual—are raised and we live forever on the earth? I don’t believe that traditional Christianity has sorted out this question.

**Last Days—Swedenborgian:**

According to Emanuel Swedenborg’s visionary theology, the imagery of the Last Days is not about the material world. In the Last Days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will turn to blood, plagues will be unleashed on the earth, the believers in Jesus will be taken up into heaven (this is called “the rapture”), a dragon will appear and sweep stars from the sky, the earth will real like a drunken woman, and many other cosmic events. For Swedenborg, this did happen, but it happened spiritually. There is a world of spirit in which our minds and souls dwell while we are in the body. The

imagery just described are all symbolic of spiritual realities. For instance, the dragon sweeping stars from the sky symbolizes false teachings sweeping away truth. While these events happened in spirit, they were related to this world. Religions taught (and still teach) that love for each other and good deeds did not contribute to salvation. Instead, faith that Jesus died for our sins is what saves. For Swedenborg, this is the dragon sweeping the stars from the sky. Other cosmic imagery have similar symbolic value in spiritual realities.

The question of life after death in Swedenborg is quite different from traditional Christianity. In Swedenborgian theology, a person's soul lives in the spiritual world—heaven or hell—forever. Swedenborg argues that our physical bodies have decomposed after death, making them unable to live again. For really old bodies, there is little left of the material form except dust. There is no rebirth of the material body. Instead, the soul, which gave life to the material elements, lives in the realm of spirit.

In Swedenborgian thought, there is a spiritual body that lives in heaven or hell. The soul has the complete bodily form that our material bodies had. This is because it was the soul that formed the material elements into the bodily form. This living form continues to live after the death of the material body.

**Glorification:** To the best of my understanding, only the Swedenborgian denomination speaks of the Glorification. In Swedenborgian thought, the Glorification is when the human Jesus is fully united with God (the Father). There were moments of union while Jesus was on earth. This is akin to meditation states, that a person can attain during special moments, but not stay elevated in for long periods. Gurus do remain in these exalted states for long periods, but many practitioners only attain them for varying lengths of time. So with Jesus, His union with the Father happened during certain intervals while He was on earth.

However, after the death of Jesus' mortal body, the union with God became complete and total. God became man and man became God in the One Body of Jesus. This is what Glorification means. "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified" (John 13:31). This body, which was God in the flesh and the flesh in God, had spiritual power. It could go through solid objects, yet could assume physical properties—Jesus ate a fish after His resurrection and glorification. We saw above that the Christian Creeds say that Jesus had two natures—fully human, fully divine. This total union of God with man and man with God became complete with the resurrection of Jesus.