

New Testament Session #3

The Gospel of John: The Divine Word and the Sacraments of the Church

Differences Between John and the Other Gospels

It is clear that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are stylistically very similar and that there are clear differences between the tone of these three works and the Gospel of John. If you read the Gospel of John and any of these other three straight through (which I highly recommend that you do) you will see that this is the case. Certainly each of the biblical authors was free, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to pick which events of Jesus' life they wished to discuss and which aspects of his teaching they wished to emphasize. At the time it was also well within the bounds of acceptable historiography and biography to paraphrase speeches, and even reorder the words of someone's teaching, as long as the essence of what they taught was preserved. This helps us to deal with the differences that we see when we compare the Gospels, but interesting and perhaps challenging questions remain.

Some have used these difficulties as an excuse to essentially dismiss the Gospel of John. It is seen as a later exaggeration inconsistent with the other three Gospels. Even some believing Christians have seen the Gospel of John as the result of later Church traditions, and not a portrayal of the historical Jesus. There are also Catholic and non-Catholic scholars whose faith and belief we need to respect, these are orthodox and practicing Christians, who accept John as the inspired word of God because it communicates the teaching of the late 1st century church but who also see a significant break between the Jesus of history and Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospel of John. Their views should not be dismissed too quickly, they raise some good questions, but I think they greatly overstate the significance of the challenges posed when it comes to arriving at a proper understanding of the Gospel of John. A number of scholars, the best I've come across is Craig Blomberg in his book *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, show that the degree of difference between John and the other three Gospels has in many cases been exaggerated.

An extensive discussion of these differences would take us far beyond the scope of what we can hope to accomplish tonight. But for those who want a careful defense of the historical reliability of St. John's Gospel I cannot recommend Blomberg's book highly enough. If the differences among the gospels when it comes to style and content are something that causes difficulties for you please make use of this book. For the sake of this evening's presentation I am going to follow Blomberg in holding to a high view of the historicity of the Gospel according to St. John.

The Divinity of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John

If we see the Gospel of John as historical reliable than we see the profound clarity with which Christ reveals his divinity, and we also see the high view the early Church had of

his divinity. This is known as Christology, the study of who Christ is, the study of his being and essence.

The opening words of the Gospel of John are:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. John 1:1-:3

Jesus, the Word, is said to be God. He is shown to be pre-existent, meaning he was God before his incarnation and birth. Also, it is said that nothing came to be without him, meaning he is involved with the creation of the world. So Jesus is not part of the created world, he pre-exists all that has been created. He is pre-existent, everything came to be through him, and he is God. It is hard to see how we could be given a loftier portrayal of Jesus.

These opening words are not those of Jesus himself but in John 8:58 we hear our Lord say:

Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM. John 8:58

Jesus claims to have pre-existed Abraham, and uses the phrase I AM, God's own divine title which was revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Jesus has clearly claimed to be eternal God himself.

These shocking claims when it comes to Christ's divinity are part of the reason that many have tried to explain away the Gospel of John. By denying it's historical reliability they can claim that such thought does not reflect the words of Jesus Christ himself.

Authorship and Date of Composition

These issues lead us into a discussion of who wrote the Gospel of John and when it was written. There have been attempts to argue that the Gospel of John was written in the 2nd century AD. Some have dated it as late as 150 AD.¹ The discover in 1920 of a fragment of the Gospel of John which can be dated to approximately 125 AD puts a limit on the arguments that can be made by those who argue for the later writing of this work.²

This late of a dating of the Gospel of John would of course rule out the Apostle John as its author. It was the overwhelmingly consensus of the 2nd through 4th century Christians that the Apostle St. John was in fact the author of this Gospel.³ Now while none of them actual claimed anything like witnessing John writing it they were certainly in a much

¹ Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, eds., *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of John* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002), 13.

² Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ*, 61-62.

³ Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 23-26.

better position to have knowledge about whether he did or not than we are. This does not mean it is impossible that they were incorrect, but a strong argument would have to be made to show that they were.

A number of points are raised by those who object to the idea that St. John wrote the Gospel attributed to him, including that the historical John could not have the literary skill or geographic knowledge needed to write this text.⁴ I was planning on spending a great deal of time responding to these claims, but it does not really seem to be worth any significant chunk of the limited time that we have this evening. If we are willing to admit some minor work was done on this text by a later editor after the bulk of it was written by St. John then there are no serious objections that can be mounted to the claim that the Apostle himself wrote this.⁵ As I began my research for this presentation I had planned on us needing to really spend some time wrestling with the identity of the author of this text, but it really does seem that no significant challenges have been raised that could effectively challenge the consensus of the early Church on this issue.

Traditionally it has been believed that the Gospel of St. John was written between 90 and 100 AD. Recently some conservative scholars have tried to argue that it was actually written between 60 and 70 AD. Just as the arguments put forward by some liberal scholars seem to fail to call into question St. John's authorship of this text, the arguments of some conservative scholars do not seem to provide any compelling evidence that calls into question the dating of the Gospel of John to the late 1st century.⁶ We need to accept a certain degree of uncertainty as we consider all of these issues, but we seem to be able to stand on solid ground in making the claim that the Gospel of John was written by the Apostle John towards the end of the 1st Century AD.

The Breaking Down of Barriers in the Gospel of John

John 1:1-18 serves as a prologue to what is known as the Book of Signs within the Gospel of John (1:19-12:50).⁷ This section of the Gospel shows one of the key differences between this text and the other three Gospels, which is that the Gospel of John talks about fewer of the things that Jesus did, but talks about them in more detail.

We could talk about the nature of Jesus' miracles and the implications of the power he displays in performing them, but for those of us who are here tonight that's probably not the key issue we need to focus on as we study this section of John. What is more important for us to note is the barriers that Jesus breaks down between the Gentiles and the Jewish people, and other societal expectations and norms which Jesus goes against.

Women and Gentiles, John 4:1-42 Jesus meets with Samaritan woman at well

⁴ Ibid, 31-35.

⁵ Ibid, 37-40.

⁶ Ibid, 42-44.

⁷ Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of John*, 15.

Breaks cultural norms

A Jew associating with a Samaritan (4:9)

Barriers between Jewish and non-Jewish worship to be done away with (4:19-:24)

Man publicly associating with woman he is not related to (4:27)⁸

Also worth noting

20:11-:18, legal testimony of woman regarded as being of very little value but Mary Magdalene is 1st witness to the resurrection

Healing on the Sabbath

John 5:1-:18 crippled man healed on the Sabbath

John 9:1-:16 healing of blind man on the Sabbath

Leads to persecution and opposition, some claimed he was violating law of God

Sabbath laws, other OT rituals meant to set Jewish people apart

Tear them away from idolatry, child sacrifice, sexual immorality of neighboring nations

See notes for sessions 3-6 of just completed Old Testament unit, particularly session 4

<http://www.sspeterandpaul.net/giftsoffinestwheat.htm>

Particular rules not ultimate good, ultimate good is love of God and neighbor

The way in which these particular rules were to be followed was meant to be based on love of God and neighbor, Jesus opposes those who had made them ultimate good and stood in the way of greater goods (such as the healing miracles Jesus performed)

Also worth noting

7:53-8:11, repentant sexual sinner in better position than proud who live in religiously correct manner

⁸ Ibid, 24-25.

The Promises of Jesus to His Followers

Following the section known as the Book of Signs we have The Foot Washing (John 13:1-:30), The Last Supper Discourse (John 13:31-16:33), and Jesus' High Priestly Prayer (John 17:1-:26).⁹ In these sections Jesus sets examples that are to shape his followers, makes promises to come to their aid, and prays on their behalf.

Jesus sets an example

13:12-:20 model of service

13:31-:35 commandment to love

Makes promises to come to the aid of his followers

14:12-:14 will answer prayer

14:15-:31 promises to send Holy Spirit

15:1-:8 those connected to Jesus will prayer fruit

Prays on behalf of his followers

17:1-:26 Jesus prays on behalf of his disciples and those who will believe because of them

John 3 and Baptism

It is in light of what we've already learned about the Gospel of John that we should understand what this book has to show us about the sacraments. The sacraments are not magic. Mindless, rote participation in the sacraments is useless. They are not mechanical actions which guarantee salvation to those who merely go through the correct external religious actions. They are gifts given to us by Jesus.

Jesus, who has broken down barriers between Jews and Gentiles.

Jesus, who has taken steps to elevate woman to a place of proper dignity.

Jesus, who has attacked and opposed those who see worship and faith as merely external manners.

Jesus, who has revealed himself as the fully divine and pre-existent savior of the world.

⁹ Ibid. 15.

The sacraments are to be understood and received in light of who Jesus is, and in light of how he has shockingly revealed that he has the right to define who has the right to fully encounter God and what nature this encounter is to take.

Scott Hahn, the evangelical protestant pastor turned Catholic theologian who most of you are probably familiar with once encountered someone who claimed that because Catholics had the sacraments they didn't need the strong preaching, intense prayer, and fervent singing that are seen in the lives of so many Protestants. Hahn replied that *because* Catholics have the sacraments we have an even greater responsibility to display these things.

This is completely consistent with what the Gospel of John has to tell us about the sacraments. The sacraments are physical means of grace God uses to strengthen those who fervently follow him. Any understanding of things that leads to baptism, reconciliation, and holy communion (limiting ourselves here to the three sacraments that seemed to be explicitly mentioned in the Gospel of John) becoming primarily or exclusively cultural or family events is a travesty, a tragedy, and an insult to God.

We seem to encounter a reference to Baptism when Jesus tells Nicodemus:

Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. John 3:5

It is hard to see how being born of water can refer to anything but baptism. The linking of these two words seems to indicate that Jesus is referring to one act by which we are born of both water and Spirit.¹⁰ The early Christians would have already been formed by such things as Jesus' command prior to his Ascension "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19-:20), St. Peter's words at Pentecost "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38), and St. Paul's teaching that baptism is a share in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. This is seen in his letter to the Romans "Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-:4) as well as his letter to the Colossians "You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." (Colossians 2:12)

Given how the views of the first Christians would have already been formed by the words of Jesus, Peter, and Paul about baptism, how could John 3:5 be anything to them but a reference to baptism?

A proper understanding of sacramental grace means we must realize that baptism doesn't guarantee salvation to those who later reject God, or that receiving this sacrament

¹⁰ Ibid, 22.

removes the later demands of discipleship. Nor does it mean that those who through no fault of their denied the opportunity to be baptized, such as the good thief on the cross, are denied the opportunity to receive God's grace. But when we look at what the New Testament as a whole has to say about baptism we see that it is a normative part of Christian life, and it is something that is not just symbolic but actually communicates grace.

God, who chose to save the world by doing something as ordinary as being born into a poor family in a backwater town, communicates his grace through means as ordinary as water and the spoken formula of baptism.

John 6 and the Eucharist

Next let's look at John 6 and its implication for our understanding of the Eucharist.

John 6:35-:59, Bread of Life Discourse, some see it only as referring to faith in Jesus, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox see it as referring to faith and receiving Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

6:53-:56, shocking words, eat my flesh, drink my blood

6:66 many leave after hearing this speech

Doesn't call them back, we don't hear "I just meant you need to believe in me", or "It's symbolic, what I really meant is...", let's them walk away

Was Jesus referring to the Eucharist? Well, as was previously mentioned St. John was very particular when it came to what incidents from Jesus' life he wrote about. He had a reason for including these events and words, and he would have known how they would be received. He would of course have been very familiar with the church's understanding of words which referred to eating Christ's body and drinking his blood was.

Of course the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, previously recorded in the other three Gospels, would have come to mind. There Jesus said "This is my body" (Matthew 26:26, Mark 14:22, Luke 22:19) and "this is my blood" (Matthew 26:27, Mark 14:24). Not "this looks like my body", not "this symbolizes my body", not "this should remind you of my body", but "this is".

The words of the gospels are built on by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 1 Corinthians 11:23-:25

Paul wrote these words in his letter, but notice that he is referring to something that he had already taught to the Corinthians, and which had previously been passed on to him. This passage is particularly important because Paul goes on to say “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27) and “anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor 11:29). Receiving communion unworthily is sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. How can you sin against what isn’t there?

Additionally we should turn to St. Luke. He was a traveling companion of St. Paul’s during the course of portions of his missionary work. Having written the Gospel which bears his name, and having traveled with St. Paul, his teaching on holy communion is of course going to be consistent with what we see in the accounts of the Last Supper and what we see in the writings of St. Paul. When we see repeated references to the “breaking of the bread” in St. Luke’s writings (Luke 24:30, 24:35, Acts 2:42, 2:46, 20:7, 20:11, 27:35) it seems extremely likely that at least most of these references must be understood as referring to the Eucharist.

So if we look at Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, and 1 Corinthians and understand the context in which they were written we see frequent references to the first Christians taking part in the Lord’s Supper, and the assumption is that in doing so they are eating Christ’s body and drinking his blood. This is the context in which John 6 was written. How can this text be seen as primarily referring to anything but the followers of Christ truly receiving his body and blood as they shared in holy communion?

Thanks be to God that in the modern world most of those to whom the title Christian is given belong to Churches, the Catholic and Orthodox churches, which believe in Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. Sadly not all Christians belong to these churches. The words of Jesus “Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53) show us that these Christians are in a sadly deficient position. Those who belong to groups which do not have Christ’s true presence in the Eucharist, meaning Protestants, are lacking an essential aspect of Christian life. We can draw comfort from recognizing that most followers of Christ who do not have the Eucharist are in this position out of ignorance, and are not personally responsible for having caused the divisions that we see within Christianity. The circumstances that have caused them to be separated from the Eucharist are different enough from those to whom Jesus’ words of condemnation are addressed that we have good ground for the hope that Christ truly is at work within them. This does not minimize the significance of deliberately spurning Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, nor does it remove the responsibility that we have to work tirelessly to make sure that all receive the fullness of Christ’s teaching.

John 20 and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

John chapter 20:19-:23 tells us the story of one of Christ’s post-resurrection appearances to his disciples:

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. "If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." John 20:19-:23

These verses are the core of Catholic teaching on the sacrament of reconciliation. We go to confession largely because this passage shows us that some of Christ's first disciples were given the authority to forgive sins. This is a truly extraordinary thing and it must lead us to ask if confessing our sins to another person lessens our trust in God.

Jesus gave the apostles the authority to forgive sins in verse 23. This immediately follows verse 22 where he breathed on them as they were given the Holy Spirit. They can do what Jesus told them to do in verse 23 only because of what he gave them in verse 22. The only way sinful men are able to forgive sins themselves is because God's power has been given to them. This is something they're not capable of themselves, but which God makes them capable of doing through what he has given them. The trust we place in their ability to forgive sins isn't because of what they're capable of on their own, it's because of what God has made them capable of. Our trust is in God's grace given through the Holy Spirit, not in the human abilities of those who've received this gift.

As we think about what the Gospel of John teaches us about the sacraments of the church we see that we must be careful that to not become more spiritual than the bible. Jesus had his apostles, disciples, and other followers pass on his saving message. God used human authors to write the Old and New Testaments. God has from the very beginning commanded his followers to come together to worship and praise him, he hasn't only sent them off to the corners of their rooms to pray in silence and connect with him personally. He wants us to pray individually, but anyone who thinks spiritually can be a purely personal thing does not in any way understand the one, true God who has revealed himself to us. God always has used earthly, physical stuff.

He has used the spoken and preached word, the written word of scripture, and the real and ordinary people who have been called to be his followers. So if God chooses to deliver forgiveness to us through human beings, that shouldn't be shocking. It's the pattern he has always used. God uses his physical creation to deliver grace, and through the apostles, and through the ordained ministers who are their successors as the leaders of the church, he gives us his body and blood, and he delivers us the forgiveness of sins.