

Chapter 10

The Gospel of John

Review:

As it's been about six weeks since we left off gradually walking through the gospel according to John, I would like to begin today's session with a little review.

All the documents in what we call the "New Testament" are compositions designed to clarify, preserve, and pass on the faith of those who were sent to be apostles of Jesus Christ. This would include the eleven original disciples who followed Jesus during his three-year ministry in Galilee, Judea, and Samaria. (It is the gospel of John that gives us the three-year timeline.) It would also include the person chosen to replace Judas (Matthias), and Paul. There are also some so-called "general letters" attributed to people who were thought to be eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection such as James, and the author of the letter to the Hebrews.

While "the Bible" of the first generation Christians was what we call the Old Testament, it became clear that after some of the apostles were martyred, as Peter and Paul were in the early 60's A.D., and after others had scattered far and wide to convey the gospel to distant lands as Thomas was said to have done by traveling all the way to India, (the first church in Jerusalem lost track of him), and as it became clear that Jesus was not going to return as the glorified Lord of heaven and earth any time soon--because of all these factors, the early church realized that it would be necessary to compile written records of the faith in order to accomplish this need to clarify, preserve, and pass on the faith.

The first question to answer was, "Who had the authority to define exactly what this new faith is?" After all, even during the first century, what came to be called "Christian faith" had morphed into several forms. We will look at that in an upcoming class, but for now, suffice it to say that the answer to this question was simple. Only those who were eyewitnesses to the resurrection could have the authority to share what faith in Jesus Christ meant. So, as the early church began the process of selecting from among the many writings those which would eventually become "canonical" (meaning authoritative scripture), they chose only those documents that could be traced to one of the apostles.

That only those documents written by, or under the guidance of an eyewitness to the resurrection, and that this was the criteria for an authoritative record of what the Christian faith was both point to something very important concerning the birth of this new faith. We will be going into this in more detail in another class, so I just want to mention it here.

Christianity is often identified as a "religion of the book." Other religions of the book include Judaism and Islam. The reason the latter two are so identified is because they are based on the idea that God revealed his will for humanity to a specific

prophet—Moses or Mohammed—and that the prophet wrote it down in the form of specific religious laws and rituals. Those who adhere to these religions are therefore binding themselves to lead a life based on these rules of behavior. In order to be “righteous” (be in a right relationship with God), a person must be obedient to the laws and rituals that God revealed to the prophet. In Judaism this is called “Torah.” In Islam it is the Koran that records these prophetic revelations.

What is central to these religions therefore is right behavior, not correct doctrine. They are more a matter of *orthopraxis* (correct conduct) than they are of *orthodoxy* (right teaching or doctrine).

The Christian faith is not a religion of the book in this sense. What gave rise to Christianity was not a new set of laws or ritual (although its own distinctive rituals evolved over time) but rather the experience of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. What happened to the apostles was that through an encounter with Jesus after he had risen from the dead, they too experienced resurrection life. This being the case, they came to the conclusion that Jesus was not just a prophet from Galilee, but the present and living Lord of heaven and earth.

Christianity is based on the experience of the ongoing presence of Jesus Christ in their lives and the effect this presence had on them. From this experience, they in turn interpreted Jesus’ life and teachings on the basis of the Hebrew scriptures.

The clearest example of this can be seen in the earliest documents of the New Testament, namely, the letters of Paul. Paul did not know Jesus during his Galilean ministry. He never heard him speak and therefore seldom refers to anything he said. At the heart of the gospel as we have it in Paul is the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel message is how Paul interprets his experience of the resurrected Jesus in his life—an experience that began when Jesus revealed himself to Paul on the road to Damascus, as recorded in The Book of Acts. He appeared to Paul as a great light that literally blinded him. He could hear him speak, but he could not see him (as Jesus was said to have appeared later to others in the four gospels).

In his letters, Paul describes the presence of Jesus in a spiritual way. In Romans, he said Jesus became “a life-giving Spirit.” In Galatians he says, “It is not I who live but Christ who lives in me.” This spiritual presence of Christ results in new life for all who experience it.

As time went on, this experience of Christ as the very living presence of God had to be interpreted and understood using the Hebrew scriptures. And so, Jesus becomes identified as the Messiah promised through the prophets. This was no easy task because the expectations of the Messiah were not met by Jesus. On the contrary, he died the death of a criminal by crucifixion, a fate considered to be a curse from God. (Deuteronomy 21:23) Therefore, throughout the apostolic era, the first Christians struggled to understand their experience of the presence of Jesus as their living Lord

from the point of view of the scriptures. This struggle is embodied in the story from Luke's gospel of the "road to Emmaus." (Luke 24:13-27)

So Christianity is not a religion of the book in the same sense as Judaism and Islam. Rather it is a faith that arose out of those who experienced Jesus as their living Lord.

The earliest documents in the New Testament are, as already been said, the letters of Paul. These were written throughout the decade of the 50s A.D., twenty to thirty years after Jesus' ministry. The gospels began to appear around 70 A.D. when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. Mark was the first, followed by Matthew and Luke, both of whom used Mark as one of their sources. These three are called the "synoptic" gospels because they all follow the same basic synopsis of the life of Jesus.

The gospel of John came along 10-20 years after the last of the synoptics. Most scholars date this gospel to around 90 A.D. John did not use the other gospels to guide him in the composition of his version of Jesus' life and ministry. This gospel is composed of stories and sayings that were preserved by his particular community. Tradition says that the apostle John, together with Mary and others, fled to Ephesus during the Jewish War (66-70 A.D.) and established a community there. It would come to be known as the Johannine Community. The folks from this congregation of first century Christians are said to have preserved their own unique memories of Jesus, and later someone from that community compiles these stories into the gospel as we now have it.

Philosophically, John's gospel is much more refined than the synoptics. Moreover, this gospel was obviously influenced to a greater degree by non-Jewish culture. For example, the term *Logos* is used to identify who Jesus was and is. This term derives from Greek philosophy and was used in particular by the stoic philosophers to refer to the principle that underlies all creation. It might be translated as "reason," the idea being that the reason that gives insight corresponds to the way creation works.

Another vital difference between John's gospel and the synoptics is that Jesus' message is recorded as being primarily about himself rather than primarily about the nearness of the kingdom of God. Jesus is clearly identified as having come from God as the pre-existent and eternally living Son of God. His origin, of which he is entirely aware, is heaven, and so when people encounter him, they encounter God. He is the connection between heaven and earth, and his mission is to bring the life of the Spirit of God into the lives of human beings.

This being the case, there are many controversial stories in John's gospel concerning Jesus' identity. Some can "see" that he is the Son of God and some can't. The difference between one who "sees" and one who doesn't is the presence of faith. Faith is the spiritual organ of sight in John's gospel. It is not a belief about Jesus. It is an ability to "see" God in Jesus.

This being the case, faith is thought of as the result of a spiritual new birth. Faith is a gift that comes from having received the Spirit of God. Moreover, the Spirit, when it comes into union with a person's whole being, conveys the gifts of God to human beings. It is because of the presence of the Spirit that we are able to receive peace, joy, hope, and eternal life. This perspective on Jesus' ministry, namely, that he came to convey the "treasures of heaven" to us, has led to John's gospel being referred to as the "spiritual gospel."

Two other concepts are important to recall as we continue the story at Chapter 10. First, the identity of Jesus is a major concern in John's gospel. It is in all four gospels but more explicitly in John. Jesus uses many "I am" sayings to identify himself. This comes from the Hebrew name for God, "I am who I am." To this, Jesus attaches various labels that describe different dimensions of who he is. For example, "I am the light of the world," "I am the bread of life," "I am the resurrection and the life," and "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Secondly, the word used for "miracle" in John's gospel is "sign." The idea being conveyed is that these miraculous deeds point to the presence and power of God in Jesus' ministry. They are a "sign" pointing beyond themselves to the divine presence. Moreover, because of this, some people are able to take the first step that eventually leads to faith and new birth by the Spirit because they witness these signs.

When we left off at the end of Chapter 9, Jesus was arguing with those who believed he had accused them of spiritual blindness—a condition that results from a lack of faith. Since faith is a gift born of having received the Holy Spirit, only faith can see and discern spiritual truth. Without the presence of the Spirit in a person's life, that person is blind by definition. It is not possible to have any knowledge of God through our ability to apprehend the world around us because our five senses are capable of only perceiving objects within the space/time continuum. We can observe the "objective" world of creation. We can even use our ability to reason and understand such that we, in a limited way, comprehend how the world of creation operates. Moreover, this gives us the almost magical ability to create technology, go to the moon, and understand natural history—even cosmic history. Nevertheless, as impressive as these things are, we have absolutely no native ability to discern the presence, power or activity of God.

As the book of Genesis makes clear, God is not a contingent being who exists in space and time. Rather, he is transcendent to space—he is everywhere—and he is always present in an eternal moment. God is not available to our ability to perceive or understand. Therefore, unless God reveals himself, we remain entirely blind to who he is, or even whether he exists. God's being is beyond our perceptual field of vision. Because of this, no one during Jesus' lifetime who actually saw him was able to perceive in him the presence of God. As he indicated clearly to Nicodemus, a person would have to have been given the gift of the Spirit of God, and thereby have come to faith in order to see him as the Son of God. Those who had not received the spirit

were therefore blind to who he was and is. For this reason, they suffer from spiritual blindness.

In Chapter 10, Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd and the sheep to illustrate what he means. In the first two paragraphs, he refers to himself as “the gate” through which the sheep enter and are led out of the sheepfold. But the gate is also the shepherd. Two points are being made here.

First, the sheep are led through the gate to pasture where they received the nourishment they need for life. It is through Jesus that we receive the spiritual sustenance and nourishment that lead to abundant life. He is the way in which God has opened Himself up to us, so that we can receive what God desires to give us. God desires to give us “spiritual” pasture—that is, peace, joy, love, and eternal life. In order to have access to God, God needs to open the door, or rather, the gate that leads to him. It is only God who can provide these spiritual gifts precisely because they are “spiritual” gifts, not material blessings that come from creation.

Secondly, the sheep know the shepherd’s voice and respond to it. They will follow the shepherd. They will not follow another voice because the voice of a stranger—the voice of someone other than the One in whom God is calling—would be a “thief or a bandit.” That is, should someone other than the person who is sent by God call to us, as if they could provide “spiritual nourishment” (hope, love, life, etc.), he is really only stealing the sheep for his own purposes. Such a person is an idol.

Jesus uses the word “thief” here because an idol—anything or anyone who makes promises they cannot deliver on—is committing spiritual theft. Should one of the sheep (us) be duped into giving themselves and their hearts to anything other than God, rather than gaining spiritual blessings, we would be losing them. There are many things in this world marketed as if they can give hope, abundant life, and meaning. Consider television commercials. During Christmas, we hear that this is “the season of Audi.” Imagine that! Or even more obvious, consider the acceptance speeches of the presidential candidates. Apparently, no matter which one we elect, the Kingdom of God will arrive. There were two of the most “messianic” speeches ever delivered. The question is whether or not the sheep will put their faith in these voices, thinking that the promises of abundant life will thereby be fulfilled.

In verse 14, Jesus once again reverts to an “I am” metaphor. “I am the Good Shepherd.” He then defines what this means. A “good” shepherd will lay down his life to save the sheep from enemies such as wolves. A “hired hand” will not do that. A hired hand cares for the sheep in order to receive a wage, not because he loves the sheep. Therefore his interest is personal gain, not the good of the sheep. Since he is interested in what’s in it for him, should a wolf show up, the hired hand would flee to save his own life. That is, anyone or anything that desires the faith of our hearts to benefit himself is a false messiah. The sheep are not safe in the hired hand’s care.

Jesus, on the other hand, said he will “...lay down my life for the sheep.” What makes Jesus a good shepherd is that he so loves the sheep that he will sacrifice his life so that the sheep will not only be protected, but so that they will receive “spiritual” pasture—a metaphor for spiritual blessings such as eternal life.

The wolf is a symbol for evil. The wolf desires to eat the sheep, threatening them with non-being. Once eaten, their lives are no more. While any hired hand (symbolic of an idol) will flee from this existential threat, the good shepherd will lay down his life and thereby “save” the sheep.

This metaphor works well in describing what kind of messiah Jesus is. Jesus did not fulfill the commonly agreed-upon expectations of a Jewish messiah. According to tradition, this figure would restore the kingdom of Israel and thereby free God’s people from their gentile oppressors. Jesus didn’t do that. Rather, he died as if cursed by God. (Deuteronomy 21:23) What no one understood at the time is that in order to bring the blessings of God’s Kingdom, the Messiah needed to overcome the existential threats of sin and death. For this reason, Jesus gave his divine life over to these threats, allowing them to do their dirty work. At first, it seemed as if sin and death had conquered the Messiah.

However, as Jesus says in verse 17, he laid his life down, “...in order to take it up again.” Instead of being conquered, he conquered. He neutralized the threats in the sense of thereby providing divine life for us. He could not live in us as the One who overcame sin and death, and providing eternal life without first defeating these enemies. This is the way in which we can now receive the spiritual blessings he promised to provide as a good shepherd provides pasture for the sheep.

Moreover, he is very clear on the fact that he does this voluntarily. No one, including God the Father, forces him to do this. It is an act of love. It reflects the love of the Father, and as such, reveals that in Jesus Christ, God is reaching out to us in love so that we might enjoy fellowship with him in a bond of everlasting life.

This section ends with the Jewish authorities once again arguing with one another. Some conclude that Jesus has a demon and is out of his mind. Others counter with the question, “Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” (Vs. 21) Jesus was very confusing to his contemporaries. This metaphorical speech had layers of meaning that they could not understand. How could they? Their understanding of God and the expectations of a messianic figure as interpreted from the Hebrew scriptures did not cohere with Jesus’ witness to himself. On the other hand, as John points out, the “signs” that Jesus performed should have given them pause, and led them to consider whether a false messiah could have done such things. This was the position of Nicodemus. Moreover, it no doubt reflects the positions taken by various Jews who heard the apostles preach. Some rejected it as outrageous. Some thought about it. A very few came to believe it.

The scene then shifts to the Festival of the Dedication—a commemoration of the rebuilding of the temple after the Jews returned from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah. Jesus is walking through the temple grounds and “the Jews” once again gather around him, still unable to deal with the “cognitive dissonance” his preaching gave rise to. “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” (Vs. 24)

Cognitive dissonance happens when what you think is true and what you experience as being true are two different things. For example, when people actually believe the grandiose promises of some politicians, and when they eventually discover that these promises were a pipe dream—this causes cognitive dissonance. Luke’s story of the walk to Emmaus is a good scriptural example. The two witnesses to the crucifixion had thought Jesus was going to “restore Israel.” Instead, he died the death of a criminal. Jesus resolves their “cognitive dissonance.” By interpreting the Hebrew scriptures and thereby demonstrating that Messiah had to suffer before “entering into his glory.”

Here also Jesus makes an attempt to resolve their confusion. However, he does so in an accusatory fashion and with an answer that sounds to them like idolatry. First, he frustratingly says that he has told them through the signs he performed. That is, they should have been able to clearly see he was the Messiah by virtue of his ability to make the lame walk and the blind see. These works “...testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.” (Vs. 26) This statement opens up a whole new can of worms. It confronts us with the whole controversy of what has come to be called “the doctrine of predestination.”

According to this idea, no one can “see” that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, unless God has chosen him/her by giving the gift of the Spirit. This is not the only place this idea seems to be in play in the New Testament. For example, in the synoptic gospels, when Peter confesses that Jesus is “the Messiah; the Son of the Living God,” Jesus responds by saying, “Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Moreover, throughout John’s gospel, Jesus has been saying in one way or another that no one can “see” Jesus as the messiah without the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Also, Paul says, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Spirit.”

Here, Jesus goes on by clearly indicating that the Father has given him the sheep who are able to hear his voice and follow him. In our own Lutheran tradition, this is expressed by Luther when he says that we cannot come to faith by our own power, but that it is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Does this mean, as Calvin thought and as St. Augustine before him thought, that only those whom God chooses to give the Spirit can believe in Jesus and thus be saved? Here Jesus expresses this by saying that, what the Father gives to him, no one can snatch out of his hand.

But here's the thing. Passages from scripture should not be cherry-picked for the sake of formulating doctrines of the church. We need to take all passages into account and let scripture interpret itself as we consider what is written as a whole.

For example, Luke also has Jesus saying, "Everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Everyone who seeks will find. Everyone who asks will receive." We could cite numerous other passages that clearly suggest a more universalistic approach to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What is clear is that faith is a gift of the Spirit. No one can truly receive by faith the living presence of Jesus without the gift of the Spirit, for it is the Spirit that conveys the presence of Christ to us. So the only question is whether the Spirit is offered by God the Father to all, or does God decide who will receive the Spirit and who won't?

Such a question implies that we can peer into the mind of God. This is ridiculous on the face of it. My personal suggestion is that we do what God wanted Abraham to do regarding God's promises: we hear them over and over and over again. The gift of the Spirit comes, as Paul said, through "hearing." That's not hard, unless the allure of other things gets the better of us. We need to focus on God's promises with an open heart both in worship and prayer. Leave the rest to God. Our faith is in God's promises as they come to us through the proclamation of the Gospel. No amount of speculation or obsessive navel-gazing, which is what this doctrine has led to, is of any value. Besides, with respect to this particular passage, Jesus' statements regarding who can and cannot hear his voice was not the source of the major scandal. It was this: "The Father and I are one," (Vs 30)

To the Jewish listeners, this was a clear case of idolatry. A human being was claiming divine status. Again, according to Genesis 1-3, only God is God. No created being has divine attributes—by definition. Therefore, when Jesus says this, he is in contradiction with one of the most central aspects of Jewish heritage. They therefore begin taking up stones to stone him to death.

Jesus counters by pointing to his good works. Is that why they wish to stone him? "No," they reply, but because he blasphemed by making himself equal to God. Jesus then quotes a scripture verse that calls those who receive God's word "gods." (with a small "g") The idea here could have been that human beings receive divine attributes such as everlasting life and are thereby "divinized" to use an eastern orthodox doctrine. He then reverts to speaking of his signs: works that he performs by the will of God, and which testify to the fact that the Father lives in him. They try to arrest him again but he escapes.

Jesus returns across the Jordan River near where the Baptist had his ministry. Many folks came to him there and some believed in him. This sets the stage for his last and most dramatic sign—the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This story is recorded in Chapter 11.

Thus endeth Chapter 10.

Postscript

From a purely historical point of view, it is impossible to say the extent to which Chapter 10 records actual historical events in Jesus' life and ministry. We could fall back on the traditional doctrine of the inspiration of Holy Scripture and hold to the idea that the Holy Spirit basically dictated these words to John, making them "true." However, this idea is a doctrine of faith, not one that can be verified through historical research. Moreover, the doctrine in this form turns the apostle John into a mere secretary for the Holy Spirit, leaving his own heart and mind out of the picture. A far more helpful approach would ask questions regarding John's own historical context and what he was trying to say to later Christian communities.

One of the primary observations we may make in this regard is that the so-called "Johannine community" in the latter half of the first century was struggling to come to terms with a couple of difficult issues--issues that faced all Christians during the first few centuries of the church. One was already mentioned, namely, how were those who witnessed Jesus' resurrection from the dead and who experienced him as their present living Lord (a word previously used only for God among Jews) going to interpret the Hebrew Bible such that it made sense to call Jesus the Messiah? Moreover--and connected to this--why did the Jewish community largely reject Jesus as either a false or a failed messiah?

While the first Christians were all Jews—understandable since Jesus only appeared to Jews—by the time this gospel was written, Christianity had spread largely to gentiles. During this period there was a vigorous conversation taking place among Jews regarding Jesus' status. As is made clear in the letters of Paul, some Jews accepted the proclamation that Jesus was their Messiah but with the full conviction that this faith did not abrogate their duty to observe the law in all its details. One of the leaders of this group was the Lord's brother James who became the leader of the Jerusalem Church—the mother church of Christianity. This Palestinian Jewish group would come to be called "Ebionites." The existence of this group highlights the fact that the early church had many disagreements with respect to interpreting Jesus' mission in light of the scriptures.

Other Jews—the majority—rejected Jesus' Messiah-ship altogether. This led to an eventual expulsion of Christians from Jewish synagogues. This context suggests that these stories were at least in part shaped by the issues that faced the first generation of Christian believers. All of this makes sense when you consider the fact that the gospels were composed to teach, guide, and preserve the faith for generations hence. It also helps us to better understand why each of the four canonical gospels has its own unique picture of Jesus and what his ministry looked like.