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The Gospel and Epistles of John [Lecture Notes]

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

Dominican University of California, scottgsinclair329@gmail.com

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The Gospel and Epistles of John (3 units)

There are no course prerequisites.

Instructor: Dr. Scott G. Sinclair, scottgsinclair@hotmail.com

Course description: This course will study the major themes of John's Gospel and Epistles. It will pay special attention to the gospel's Christology and presentation of the stages in the Christian spiritual life.

Student learning outcomes: Students will 1) demonstrate a knowledge of the social setting and major ideas of the Johannine Epistles, 2) demonstrate a knowledge of the social setting of John's Gospel, 3) demonstrate an understanding of the Gospel's major themes, especially, its Christology and its presentation of the stages in the Christian spiritual life, 4) reflect on whether the course material is helpful in the students' own quest for meaning and spiritual well-being.

Textbooks: A Bible, preferably a modern translation. Scott Gambrill Sinclair, *The Past from God's Perspective: A Commentary on John's Gospel* (N. Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL, 2004; available for free on line). These lecture notes. Students should bring a Bible and the notes to class.

Assessment: There will be quizzes, a midterm, and a final.

Upper division students must write a 6 to 10 page paper. The paper will compare three approaches to a passage in John's Gospel selected by the student. The paper will first summarize what the passage literally says and whether it is historically plausible. Then the paper will summarize the conclusions of a critical scholar (other than the instructor) about the passage and finally the conclusions of the instructor himself. The paper will go on to discuss the merits and problems of these different approaches.

John's Gospel and Epistles

Lecture Notes

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

Preface

- I. The primary thing that separates Christianity from other religions is the claim that Jesus is the incarnation of the one God and that salvation is available only through belief in him.
- II. This claim appears prominently in the Gospel and Epistles of John, and they became the foundation for subsequent orthodoxy.
- III. Consequently, when we deal with these Johannine books, we are dealing with the very basis of traditional Christian faith.
- IV. It is difficult to lecture responsibly on these documents in a class that contains both Christians and non-Christians.
 - A. If the instructor simply presents "objective" information and ignores the question of whether these documents are true, anyone who is interested in this vital issue will be frustrated. Moreover, the instructor will not have taken the documents themselves seriously.
 - B. On the other hand, if the instructor takes a position, students who do not share this viewpoint will feel abused.
- V. The approach we will use is to focus on how the documents (especially, the gospel) suggest that we can verify that their message is true. This approach will allow us to take the claim of the documents seriously, and each student will be free to struggle individually with whether the claim is justified.
- VI. I must, however, at the outset make it clear that I am a traditional Christian, because I believe that the Johannine books are true.
- VII. The Gospel of John has inspired much art, and, as time permits, I will briefly show you some illustrations.
- VIII. An outline of the course.
- IX. What is your personal attitude toward traditional Christian belief, and why did you take this course?

The Basic Background of the Johannine Books: The Biblical Heritage and the History of the Early Church

- I. Any document presupposes that its readers have a wealth of prior understanding.

- II. John's Gospel and Epistles presuppose that their readers know
 - A. The Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament).
 - B. At least some of the history of early Christianity.
- III. The Old Testament
 - A. The basic doctrines of the Hebrew Scriptures
 - 1. Ethical monotheism: There is only one God, and he is good.
Some implications of ethical monotheism
 - a. Since God is the creator of the universe, matter is good.
 - b. Evil is due solely to the free choices of created beings (especially, angels and humans).
 - 2. God is transcendent (i.e., not part of the universe). Hence, humans know him primarily through revelation in history.
 - 3. Special election. God has entered into a unique relationship with a particular people, the Jews (also called the Israelites and the Hebrews). As part of this relationship, God demands that the Jews keep a special law. Some aspects of this law:
 - a. According to tradition, God gave it to Moses, an early leader of the Israelites.
 - b. The law did not distinguish between ethical rules (e.g., do not steal, do not kill) and cultural norms (e.g., what to eat, wear).
 - c. The law was an important basis for Jewish identity.
 - d. The sect of the Pharisees, which dominated Judaism during the period when John's Gospel and Epistles originated, specialized in spelling out what the law demanded (for example, what constituted work and could not be done on the weekly holiday of the Sabbath).
 - B. Prophecy and apocalyptic.
 - 1. Ancient figures in Jewish history sometimes spoke about the future, and many of these predictions are recorded in the Old Testament. By the era of the Johannine writings, people believed that these "prophets" had foretold the future in detail. One such prediction was that soon the Messiah (a Jewish savior) would come.
 - 2. Some late prophets proclaimed that history, at least as we have always known it, was about to end. These figures we call apocalypticists.
 - C. History. Some of the major periods, persons, and events of ancient Judaism as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here I am not concerned with the modern question of how accurate the biblical account is.
 - 1. The first period of Jewish history is the Patriarchal (c. 2000-1300 BCE) According to the Bible, in this era individuals who would become the ancestors of the Jews (Hebrews, Israelites) first encountered God and received prophetic promises concerning their descendants. The most memorable of the Patriarchs were Abraham and Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel). At the end of the period, the Jews migrated to Egypt where they fell into slavery.

2. The time of Moses and Joshua (13th. cent. BCE). According to the Bible, in the name of God Moses inspired the Jews to escape from Egypt into the desert. There God gave to the Jews the "Mosaic Law" (see above). Subsequently, under Moses's successor, Joshua, the Jews conquered Israel (Palestine).
3. The judges (12th cent. BCE). Local charismatic figures ruled a decentralized Israelite state.
4. The monarchy (11th cent.-6th cent. BCE). For half a millennium a series of kings ruled Israel. The most important of these was the second one, David, who founded a continuing dynasty.
5. The exile and post-exilic period (6th cent.-4th cent. BCE). When the Babylonians conquered Israel, they took the Jewish leaders into exile. Subsequently, the Persians conquered Babylon and allowed Jews to return to Israel. After the exile, the Samaritans (northern Jews) broke with the rest of the community and began to worship at their own temple rather than the one in Jerusalem.
6. The Greek period (330-165 BCE). The Greeks conquered all of the Middle East (including Israel), and Greek became the dominant language in many areas and remained so for centuries. The Gospel of John and the Epistles are in Greek.
7. In 164 BCE. the Jews successfully revolted against Greek rule and remained independent for a century.
8. In the centuries immediately before the Common Era, the Romans gradually conquered the entire Mediterranean. They took control of Jerusalem in 63 BCE. And they remained in power throughout the Mediterranean during the first century when Jesus lived and John's Gospel and Epistles were written.

IV. The early history of Christianity

A. Jesus (c. 6 BCE - c. 30 CE)

1. Life
 - a. After an obscure childhood, he became an itinerant Jewish preacher and miracle worker and gathered a band of followers.
 - b. In the end, the Romans executed him on the charge of being a revolutionary.
2. Message: The "kingdom" (rule) of God is near.
 - a. In accordance with Old Testament prophecy, God would take control of the world, judge everyone, and produce a new and greater Israel. Note that Jesus probably looked forward to the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's new "kingdom."
 - b. Jesus in his own ministry was beginning the New Israel, and how people responded to Jesus would determine how they would fare when God took control.
 - c. People must welcome the marginal and despised, love their enemies, give up privileges, and live as equals.
 - d. Even during his lifetime some believed that Jesus was the

predicted Messiah.

B. After Jesus's death his disciples had experiences which convinced them that he had risen from the dead and become master of the universe and would soon return to judge the world and raise the dead.

C. They began to proclaim that Jesus was Lord and that people must worship him.

D. Soon "Christians" were preaching not only to Jews, but to Gentiles.

E. In due course, Christians began to produce written accounts of the life, death, and resurrection, and the teaching of Jesus. These books came to have the name "gospels" (Greek: "good news"). The first, Mark, appeared around 70 CE. Matthew and Luke appeared perhaps fifteen years later.

F. Toward the end of the first century several trends occurred that would have an immediate impact on John's Gospel and Epistles.

1. The "orthodox" Jewish community and the church became estranged. As a result, "Christianity," which had begun as a movement within Judaism, became a separate religion. As we shall see, John's Gospel expresses the bitterness which Jewish Christians felt after they were expelled from the Jewish community. A major reason for the expulsion was the Christian claim that Jesus was Divine, a claim which traditional Jews felt was incompatible with monotheism.

2. The Church itself became divided between early "Catholics" and Docetists.

- a. Catholics had the common-sense belief that Jesus was fully human.

- b. Docetists felt that Jesus was too exalted to be human and instead was a Spirit who only appeared (*dokein*) to have a material body but did not have an actual one.

- c. Many scholars feel that the Gospel and Epistles of John insist on the "flesh" of Jesus to combat Docetism.

Assignment: Read the Gospel of John, 1,2,3 John, and Revelation

The Authorship and Interrelationship of the Johannine Books

I. Traditionally the church has attributed five New Testament books to John, the fisherman who followed Jesus and became part of the inner circle of the twelve apostles: Revelation, 1, 2, 3 John, and the Gospel. All of these books are in Greek, the dominant language of the Eastern Mediterranean during the first century.

II. Consequently, traditional Christian art combined elements from these diverse books in portraying John.

A. From the Gospel of John we get pictures of

1. Jesus calling John to abandon fishing and follow him.
2. John leaning on the chest of Jesus at the Last Supper.
3. John standing with Jesus's mother by the cross.

4. An eagle accompanying John or symbolizing him. The Gospel's soaring theology helped lead to the identification of John with an eagle.

B. From the book of Revelation we get pictures of John seeing and recording visions while in exile on an island.

Visual feature: Some representations of John in Christian art.

III. The books themselves make diverse claims about who their writers were.

A. Revelation tells us its author is "John" (1:2-4, 22:8) but never claims that this John is one of the twelve.

B. 1 John is anonymous but insists that it is passing on old, authoritative tradition (1:1-4).

C. 2 & 3 John in verse 1 tell us that their author is the "Elder," but it is not clear what claim this title is making.

1. "Elder" could be a designation for a church office.

2. "Elder" could be a claim to have spent a long time in the church and have first-hand knowledge of the tradition.

3. Perhaps both apply.

D. The gospel records that its author is the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (21:20-24) who frequently appears in the second half of the book.

However, the gospel never tells us that his name is "John" or that he is an "elder" or one of the 12.

1. Five passages have undeniable references to "the disciple whom Jesus loved": 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20.

2. A pattern in these passages is that he is one up on Peter.

3. On the basis of this pattern we may plausibly conclude that the unnamed disciple in 1:35-42 and 18:15-16 is the Beloved Disciple (hereafter referred to as the "BD").

4. We should assume that the portrait we have is of a real person who has been idealized.

a. Only if he was a real person would his death be a problem (21:23) and would he be claimed as the source of the community's tradition (21:24).

b. Only if the portrait has been idealized would he constantly be one up on Peter.

5. Because of the idealization it is difficult to decide how much of the material about him is historically accurate. Personally, I am skeptical about the historicity of most of the material concerning the BD's activity during the life of Jesus but do believe that he was a disciple of Jesus and the author of at least much of the present gospel.

6. Unlike some conservative scholars, I am doubtful whether he was John the fisherman who was one of the twelve apostles. The gospel's picture of the BD does not fit with what we know about John the apostle. Note, especially, that John the apostle came from Galilee, whereas in the Gospel the BD only appears in Judea during the lifetime of Jesus.

7. Instead, I believe that the BD was an otherwise unknown follower of Jesus who lived in or near Jerusalem and saw Jesus whenever Jesus went to the area. Most of John's Gospel occurs in Jerusalem and its environs when Jesus is there to observe Jewish holidays.

IV. Of the five Johannine books Revelation is clearly the most dissimilar to the others and has only an indirect historical connection to them.

A. The content with its bizarre images is different.

B. The literary style is very different.

C. The social situation is also different, since Revelation opposes emperor worship, whereas this issue does not arise in the other books.

V. The remaining four Johannine books have great similarities in content, style, and social situation and must be closely connected in the history of composition.

A. 2 & 3 John are similar in almost every respect, since both are about the same length, are by the "Elder," concern the granting and withholding of hospitality to traveling missionaries, and have remarkable overlaps in language and imagery (especially, 2 Jn. 12-13, & 3 Jn. 13-14).

B. 1 John and 2 John have many similarities, including, the reference to a new commandment which has been from the beginning (2 Jn. 5, 1 Jn. 2:7-8) and deceivers who deny that Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh (2 Jn. 7, 1 Jn. 4:1-3).

C. 1 John and the gospel have many similarities, as is apparent in both the opening verses (Jn. 1:1:1-4, 1 Jn. 1:1-3) and the climax (Jn. 20:31, 1 Jn. 5:20). The gospel too talks about the "new commandment" (13:34) and insists that Christ came in the flesh (1:14).

D. All four documents share the stylistic simplicity of basic sentences with a very restricted vocabulary.

VI. Because of the great similarities between 2 & 3 John, it seems very likely that the same person wrote both documents about the same time. The only other reasonable possibility is that one of the letters (2 Jn.?) is a later imitation.

VII. Because of the similarities between 2 John and 1 John, it is probably best to assume the author is the same, though the documents do not claim a common authorship, and 2 & 3 John are too short to establish what their author's normal style was.

VIII. Whether this author is that of the gospel is more problematic.

A. The issue is complicated by the fact that the gospel probably had at least two authors.

1. Most of the gospel was apparently written by "the disciple Jesus loved" (John 21:20-24).

2. However, after his death another person did some editing (John 21:24-5).

B. There are considerable differences in style and thought between the gospel and the first epistle, but these differences do not appear to be decisive.

1. Some examples of differences:

a. "*oun*" ("so") occurs over 190 times in the gospel, but never

in 1 John.

b. The gospel emphasizes that through Jesus God has *already* saved and judged the world (e.g., John 3:17-21), whereas 1 John stresses that the Day of Judgment is near (1 John 2:18).

2. Still, such differences may be due to differences in genre and situation and need not imply different authors.

C. The similarities between the documents may be due to a community theology and writing style.

D. My own guess is that at least the main author of the gospel is not the author of the epistles, and I think that this has become the majority viewpoint among critical scholars.

IX. What seems likely is that the gospel and the epistles come out of the same community and probably out of a small leadership circle, perhaps the BD and his students.

Discussion: Does it matter who wrote the Gospel and Epistles of "John"?

Assignment: Read 1, 2, & 3 John.

The Johannine Epistles as a Response to a Social Situation

I. 2 & 3 John are epistles. Note that 2 & 3 John basically follow the standard form for letters in the Greco-Roman world. The standard form (see, e.g., Acts 15:22-29):

Name of sender

Name of intended recipient

"Greeting"

(often) A brief wish, prayer, or thanksgiving

The letter body (i.e., the real message)

(often) Travel plans

(often) Greetings to and from people

"Farewell"

II. 2 & 3 John are halfway between personal and institutional documents.

A. The Elder clearly knows the recipients personally and affectionately looks forward to meeting with them (2 Jn. 12-13, 3 Jn. 13-14).

B. Nevertheless, these letters deal with church policy.

III. 1 John seems to be a written sermon that was mailed out.

A. Although it has traditionally been called an "epistle," it lacks the literary elements noted above.

B. Instead it reads more like a sermon.

C. Nevertheless, the document repeatedly stresses that the author has written and sent it (e.g., 2:12-14).

IV. These documents were delivered by an emissary from the author, since there was no public postal system.

V. All three documents are salvos in an ecclesiastical war.

A. 1 John denounces a group which has split with the author's supporters

- (2:18-19). This opposing group denies that Jesus is the Messiah (Greek: "Christ;" 1 Jn. 2:22, 5:1) and came in the flesh (4:1-3). The primary purpose of 1 John is to keep its intended readers from deserting to the opposition.
- B. 2 John is an attempt to keep a congregation from receiving representatives from the other side (vss. 7-11). "Lady" in verse 1 probably refers to a church, not an individual. Note verse 13.
- C. 3 John reflects an attempt to get another group to receive representatives from the author. It appears that because of Diotrephes the author has been unable to get a congregation to accept his emissaries (vss. 9-10). The writer turns to Gaius who in the past has been more receptive (vss. 5-8).
- VI. There is scholarly disagreement over who the other side was.
- A. Some scholars (e.g., Raymond Brown) argue that the other side was Docetists who denied that Christ had a fleshly body.
- B. Other scholars (e.g., Daniel Streett) argue that the other side were traditional Jews who rejected the claim that Jesus was the Messiah and, especially, the claim that he was the human life of God.
- C. My own opinion is that the epistles do not give us enough information to identify in detail what the other side believed.
- VII. However, at least the other side did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah who came in the flesh, and the belief that Jesus was the Messiah in the flesh clearly contradicts both traditional Judaism and Docetism.
- VIII. An important implication is that the other side did not believe that the suffering and death of Jesus brought salvation. Note that the claim "Jesus died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3) was a required belief in early mainstream Christianity.
- A. If the opponents whom 1, 2, and 3 John attack were Docetists, they did not believe that Christ could suffer (since he did not have a body).
- B. If the opponents were traditional Jews, they did not think that he was the Messiah, and, therefore, his suffering did not bring salvation (and may have been deserved!).
- IX. An outline of the possible evolution of the crisis.
- A. Both the author's group and its opponents apparently evolved out of a single community (1 Jn. 2:19).
- B. There was a split in some important center (Ephesus?).
- C. There followed a struggle for control over outlying congregations. 2 & 3 John reflect this struggle.
- D. One thing that made the split difficult to resolve was the lack of authoritative leadership. Note the ambiguity of 3 John concerning the authority of the "Elder" versus that of Diotrephes.
- Visual feature: The archaeological remains of ancient Ephesus, the city where, according to early Christian tradition, John spent his last years.
- Discussion: Should letters addressed to specific ancient situations be in the New Testament?
- Assignment: Reread 1, 2, & 3 John.

The Basic Theology of the Johannine Epistles

- I. The Johannine Epistles have an artificially simple and repetitive style.
 - A. The vocabulary is very restricted.
 - B. The sentence structure is very basic.
 - C. The same ideas and even words keep reappearing.
- II. To some extent this style appears to have been typical of the community's theological discourse, since the Gospel of John also has a striking simplicity both in vocabulary and syntax and is very repetitive.
- III. Nevertheless, the letters press this simplicity to its limit.
- IV. Apparently, the medium is part of the message. The simple style is a reminder to the reader that the epistles are repeating the established basics of Christianity. 1 John even addresses the readers as "little children" (e.g., 5:21), even though it is clear the most of them were in fact adults (e.g., 2:13).
- V. By emphasizing that they are merely repeating the "basics," the letters underline their claim that the opponents have not remained in the truth (2 Jn. 9).
- VI. Unfortunately, the simplicity of the letters is a major problem for the modern interpreter.
 - A. To achieve simplicity, the letters use vague general terms (e.g., "truth") and string simple sentences together.
 - B. One result is that even though the individual sentences are basically clear, they are often imprecise, and the continuing flow of the author's thought can be confusing.
 - C. In addition, the letters seldom explain the presuppositions of their statements or explain how their theology compares and contrasts with other possible positions.
- VII. To try to get at the underlying thought, we will have to fill out the thought by drawing on ideas that we meet in John's Gospel and that the letters seem to presuppose.
- VIII. We may take reassurance from the fact that the repetitive style suggests that
 - A. The message is not complicated
 - B. Nevertheless, it is so profound that we cannot absorb it at once, but must continually return to it.
- IX. At the risk of making an artificial synthesis, we may summarize the author's position by saying that the foundation of Christianity is love, and that love is only real if it manifests itself in sacrificial acts. Hence, love grounds the importance of the incarnation and of Christian ethics (e.g., 1 Jn. 3:16).
 - A. The final basis of 1 John's theology is that "God is love" (4:8, 16).
 - B. God manifests his love by sending his Son (4:9), who suffered and died for us in the flesh (cf. 5:6).
 - C. This love cleanses us from all sin and enables us to love both God and other human beings. "We love because he first loved us" (4:19).
 - D. Accordingly, we show that we have known God and abide in him by doing two things:

1. Believing that God sent his Son Jesus in the flesh.
 2. Living as Jesus lived by doing costly acts of love (3:16-18).
- E. An important implication of what we have reviewed so far is that the doctrine of the incarnation and a life of practical ethics reinforce each other.
- F. Therefore, anyone who denies the incarnation or who does not do costly, loving acts cannot know God, since he is love.
- X. This theology is a response to the opponents who either claimed that Jesus could not have suffered (since he did not have a body) or that his suffering did not matter (since he was not the Messiah and perhaps deserved to suffer).
- XI. An issue with which 1 John must struggle is how Christians can be spiritually secure, since all humans are sinners and their sacrificial acts are what must demonstrate their knowledge of God and soon God will judge the world.
- XII. 1 John insists that its readers can be secure despite their sinfulness and the coming judgment.
- A. The spiritually mature can be secure because
 1. "Perfect love casts out fear" (4:18). This statement probably presupposes the following (as we can see from the gospel):
 - a. God does not punish people for their sins. Note that 1 John continues by saying that "fear has to do with punishment." Jesus did not come to judge the world (John 3:17, 12:47), and God's love keeps him from taking vengeance.
 - b. Instead, God simply tells people the truth, including the truth of how they have hurt him and others.
 - c. The spiritually immature are tempted to flee from the truth and remain in darkness (John 3:19-20).
 - d. By contrast, the spiritually mature know that the only way to growth is by facing the failings of the past and then going forward.
 - e. Hence, the mature long for God's judgment.
 - f. Of course, the spiritually mature are open to receiving God's love.
 2. The spiritually mature also know that they are at least basically living as Christ lived (1 Jn. 4:17) and they can rejoice that the judgment will reveal so much good that they have done (cf. John 3:21). Note: We must not allow a masochistic spirituality to keep us from remembering that we do good deeds and that God rejoices in them and that at the judgment we will share in his joy.
 3. The spiritually mature know that they will see Jesus as he is and that ultimately they will become like Jesus in his risen state (1 Jn. 3:2). Here we may note that it is especially the love that the spiritually mature have for Jesus which allows them to know their final glorious destiny and live in transforming hope.
 4. The spiritually mature do not worry when the "world" criticizes them, because the same world rejected Jesus (1 Jn. 3:1).

- B. The less mature can also be secure. 1 John assures us that
1. God is greater than our consciences which can be overly severe, and, if we are basically doing what is right, there is no need to worry (3:19-20). After all, everyone is a sinner.
 2. If we confess our sins, we receive forgiveness (1:9). We know the blood of Jesus cleanses us and that he is our advocate with the Father (2:1). Moreover, the faithful also pray for our forgiveness, and God listens to them (5:16). Perhaps all of these statements are ways of saying
 - a. The weak Christian finds reassurance through the community (which includes both the other members of the church and Jesus).
 - b. The community gives us this assurance by providing many channels to experience God's transforming love. Note that Jesus reveals this love on the cross, and the community makes this love present to us through prayer.
 3. The very fact we believe indicates we are open to God's love and presence and will reach salvation (cf. 5:13).
 4. We already have the Spirit, and, hence, already participate in eternal life with God. All we have to do is remain faithful.
 5. Accordingly, the only time we need to be afraid is if we surrender basic Christian belief and leave the church. Of course, this is what the author claims that the other side has done.
- C. 1 John is a sermon of assurance (5:13) which demonstrates that one does not need to have a cheap Christianity to be spiritually secure.

Discussion: How do you deal with your own spiritual insecurity, and how does your approach compare with that of the Johannine Epistles?

1 John and the Problem of Who God Is and How We Know

I. Most New Testament books do not deal extensively with the problem of who God is and how we can know, because the Old Testament deals with these questions, and the New Testament understanding of God in many ways resembles that of the Old. For example, both testaments insist on ethical monotheism.

II. Nevertheless, the frequent silence on the topic of God in the New Testament can be misleading because

A. Jesus's understanding of God differs from that of at least much of the Old Testament (contrast, for example, the picture of God in Exodus 20:5 and Matthew 5:43-48).

B. Christians know God primarily through Jesus and only secondarily through the Old Testament.

III. Happily, 1 John, perhaps because it deals with the basics, does explore in some detail who God is and how people can know about him.

IV. As a result, certain passages from 1 John have always been influential as

Christians have thought about God (e.g., “God is love,” 4:8, 16).

V. 1 John explicitly contrasts its understanding of God with that of Pagan religions to which many of its readers presumably had once belonged (note the concluding verse).

VI. Accordingly, we will have to take a quick look at what Pagan religion taught.

VII. Pagan religion in the Greco-Roman world.

A. By “Pagan” religion I mean the many cults of gods and goddesses and other spiritual beings in the Greco-Roman world.

B. It is hard for me to generalize about Paganism.

1. I am not a specialist in this field.

2. Pagan religion obviously was very diverse, including traditions from many different times, places, national groups, and social classes.

3. The written accounts come from a sophisticated intellectual elite who tend to idealize Paganism.

4. The vast majority of Pagan worshipers (including most of those who subsequently converted to Christianity) were illiterate and presumably had a less exalted religious vision.

C. Nevertheless, we will not go too far wrong by holding that the Pagan deities were basically personifications of the great forces in the political, psychological, and natural realms. Note, especially, the worship of

1. Rome, the emperor, and the God of War.

2. Deities symbolizing sex and wine.

3. Deities representing such natural forces as thunder and the sea.

D. In such a religious system there are at least two major problems:

1. Are the gods ultimate? For example, is there something behind nature that created and governs it?

2. Can the Pagan gods inspire people’s highest devotion and best ethical behavior? Note that at least the myths about many of the gods and goddesses portray them as far from perfect (since the forces they represent often act arbitrarily). Moreover, the use of images to capture these deities made them especially immanent. Since the gods represent the world (e.g., sex and wine) as it is, they often justify irresponsible ethical behavior rather than challenge it.

VIII. An outline of the epistles’ understanding of God and how readers can know it is true:

A. “God is love.” The letters insist that there is “no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5) in God (unlike the Pagan deities).

B. Out of his love God created the world.

C. Therefore, God loves the world.

D. Yet, because the world—especially, its political and economic systems—is seldom loving, we cannot know God primarily by looking at the world. Note that for 1 John (and the Gospel) the problem is not matter but the structures of personal and social sin (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

E. God reveals who he is by sending his Son who definitively manifests the Divine love, especially by dying on the cross (e.g., 1 Jn. 4:10).

F. This revelation of Divine Love challenges us to love in response (1 Jn. 4:11).

G. We receive all this knowledge by listening to the tradition that goes back to those who were with Jesus “in the beginning” (i.e., when he was alive), and we must interpret this tradition in its plain sense (1 Jn. 1:1-3).

1. Jesus revealed the truth.
2. The first disciples had fellowship with him.
3. We learn about Jesus through them and their successors.
4. But to learn we must maintain fellowship with them. Of course, the schismatics have abandoned this fellowship by leaving the church.

H. The proof of the truth of this gospel is its transforming power in the Spirit (e.g., 1 Jn. 3:24).

I. If we do not respond to the message by loving others, then we really do not believe it and do not know God. If we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen, we cannot know God whom we have not (1 Jn. 4:20).

Discussion: Do you believe in God, and if so, what is God like? How do you feel about the claim that “God is love”? If you do not believe in God, what do you believe in?

Sin and Atonement and a Theology of the Self

I. Sin and atonement (making up for sin) are fundamental themes in the Johannine letters.

II. Nevertheless, certain parts of what they teach seem, at least initially, to be disturbing.

A. The tension between the letters’ insistence that

1. Everyone sins, and if we claim that we do not, we deceive ourselves (1 Jn. 1:8).
2. That no one who abides in Jesus sins, but instead has overcome evil (1 Jn. passim).

B. 1 John’s ominous concluding section that warns us of a mortal sin for which we should not even attempt to pray (5:16). This second problem we will consider in detail during the next section.

III. These disturbing ideas certainly have deep roots in the tradition, and, in some sense they go all the way back to Jesus.

A. The tension between the claim that we still sin and yet, since we abide in Jesus, we have overcome evil has its roots in Jesus’s proclamation that the kingdom in some sense is already present but nevertheless is still to come definitively.

B. The mortal sin about which one should not even pray is surely the Johannine interpretation of Jesus’s declaration that there is a sin against the Holy Spirit which cannot be forgiven (Matthew 12:31-32, Mark 3:28-30, Luke 12:10).

- IV. At the same time, these disturbing ideas in the epistles are undoubtedly a response to the schismatics who at least from the author's perspective are the very embodiment of sin, even the "Antichrist" (see the next section).
- A. The author apparently views the actions and beliefs of the opponents as the unforgivable sin.
 - B. No doubt this stern view expresses the bitterness that accompanied the schism.
- V. Nevertheless, these disturbing ideas are also the necessary consequence of the basic Christian claim that Christ has begun a new reality in this world, and people overcome sin primarily by believing in this reality and participating in it.
- A. For Jesus we overcome sin by entering the kingdom. Jesus believed that his ministry was introducing a new power into history, a power that was breaking the hold of Satan.
 1. Jesus performed exorcisms.
 2. And he called "sinners" (i.e., people whose past behavior had been so unacceptable that the larger society saw no hope of helping them and so had excluded them).
 - B. Then after the resurrection the church proclaimed that we overcome sin by accepting the Christian message, receiving the Holy Spirit, and joining the church (where the power of Christ's Spirit is especially present).
 - C. Of course, for the epistles we overcome sin by remaining in the traditional institutional church and traditional "orthodox" faith (e.g., that Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh).
- VI. We can now see how the epistles can claim that those in Christ do not sin and yet we all sin.
- A. Christians have turned themselves over to the power of Christ's Spirit. Hence, we have in principle conquered sin.
 - B. Nevertheless, in practice we keep falling away.
- VII. Hence, the solution to sin in practice is not "trying harder," let alone pretending that we do not sin. Instead, the solution is continually turning back to God and asking for forgiveness and his enabling power to grow in righteousness.
- VIII. Underlying this approach to overcoming sin is an understanding of what the self is.
- IX. Before going into the Johannine understanding of the self and sin, we may briefly note some competing understandings of self and sin and how salvation is attained.
- A. The common-sense view.
 1. The real self is our present self with its virtues and failings.
 2. Salvation comes from working to overcome our faults and strengthen our good points.
 3. A difficulty with this view is that
 - a. We often lack the power to overcome our faults (especially, by ourselves).
 - b. The awareness of our failings makes us feel negative about ourselves, and that negativity in turn makes it even

more difficult to improve.

B. The romantic view

1. The real self is an inner, spiritual essence that is utterly unique.
2. Sin is not being true to this hidden, special identity and instead conforming to social expectations.
3. A difficulty with this view is
 - a. The inner spiritual essence that is unique to us probably only constitutes a fraction of our total identity.
 - b. When we concentrate on this essence, we tend to devalue the rest of our being.
 - c. Consequently, popular opinion rightly dismisses “romantics” as impractical dreamers.

C. The existentialist view

1. We exist before we have an identity.
2. We determine our fundamental identity by the choices we make.
3. Consequently, we must make choices that produce the person we wish to become.
4. A difficulty with this view is
 - a. We have no basis for knowing what we can or should become. If we know in advance what we can or should become, we have an implicit understanding about what our “essence” is, and the existentialist rejects essentialism.
 - b. If we do not know what we can or should become, how can we choose it?

D. The Buddhist view

1. There is no self (i.e., abiding, independent essence). Buddhism stresses that all things are transitory, are a loose association of disparate elements, and nothing has independent existence.
2. Sin arises from the illusion of self.
3. We achieve “enlightenment” by realizing that we have no self.
4. At least from a Western perspective, one problem with this view is that if there is no self, there is no moral accountability. Note that Buddhism seems to want it both ways:
 - a. Buddhism insists that I will suffer for my evil deeds.
 - b. Yet, in the final analysis there is no “I” to suffer. Note that an essential doctrine of Buddhism is that people suffer for the mistakes made in their previous incarnations; yet, of course, we cannot even remember these lives and have no intuitive sense of continuity with them.

X. The view of the Johannine Epistles (and indeed the New Testament in general) is

- A. The real self is the being that God is creating as we entrust ourselves to him.
- B. There is real continuity between that being and who we are now. Therefore, we do suffer for our sins.
- C. But there is also great discontinuity.

- D. We learn who our ultimate self is by looking at Jesus.
1. In this present life we are becoming the earthly Jesus. Note the claim in the epistles that as Jesus was so are we in this world (1 Jn. 4:17).
 2. Then at the resurrection we will be conformed to the risen Christ (1 Jn. 3:2).
- E. Through the assurance that our ultimate self is (becoming) Jesus, we have the transforming hope that allows us to accept ourselves as we presently are and become who God intends for us to be (1 Jn. 3:2-3).
- F. Because the real self is not who we see in the mirror but who we see in the face of Jesus, Christian faith gives us a radically different vision of who we are than “the world” does, and 1 John insists that “faith” overcomes the world (1 Jn. 5:4).
1. The world does not know us.
 2. But God knows us, and we know God’s understanding of ourselves through faith.
- G. Of course, all of the above depends on the fact that we are already choosing to allow God to transform us.
1. Other visions of the self are not necessarily untrue to experience. Hence, their abiding popularity.
 2. But the experience in question is that of a life without Christian faith and commitment.

Discussion: What view of the self do you prefer, and why?

The Unforgivable Sin and the Antichrist and the Nature of Salvation

- I. At the end of 1 John, we come to a disturbing note. After the author has encouraged us to pray for any brother (or sister) who has fallen into sin, we read that there is a deadly sin and, apparently, that we should not pray for those who commit it (1 Jn. 5:16-17).
- II. One assumes that here we have a Johannine version of the “sin against the Holy Spirit” that Jesus himself declared can never be forgiven.
- III. Such statements about irremediable sin have caused great pastoral problems, since neurotic people easily imagine that they have committed it!
- IV. In dealing with Jesus’s statement, we should begin by noting that Jesus liked to exaggerate to make a point.
- A. Jesus did not like legalism (judging people on outward conformity to the letter of the law).
 - B. Instead, he was concerned about the heart (our hidden core).
 - C. He believed that it was especially easy for people to deceive themselves by following the letter of some law while in reality not expressing love for God and neighbor.
 - D. Perhaps to avoid the dangers of legalism and encourage people to reflect on what was in their hearts, Jesus normally made statements (e.g., parables) that pointed in a certain direction but were so extreme or

- strange that people could scarcely take them literally.
- E. In the gospels, we have an explicit illustration of Jesus making an extreme statement and then insisting that he was exaggerating.
1. Jesus first said that a rich person could not be saved, just as a camel cannot squeeze through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:25).
 2. Then in response to an objection Jesus softened the statement by insisting that “with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27).
- V. It is conceivable that 1 John is also exaggerating when it claims that the opponents cannot be forgiven.
- VI. Nevertheless, Jesus and the New Testament writers who talk about the unforgivable sin were certainly suggesting that some particular sin is extremely serious.
- VII. This sin is whatever makes it impossible to participate in the divine power that overcomes sin.
- A. For Jesus the unforgivable sin is to assume that the kingdom is the work of Satan. Note that Jesus says that criticizing himself is still forgivable (one can endorse someone’s program without necessarily endorsing the person; Matthew 12:31-32). Assuming that the kingdom is Satanic utterly excludes the possibility of entering it and benefiting from God’s definitive saving initiative in history.
 - B. For the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke the unforgivable sin is
 1. Calling the good that Jesus and Christians do evil and thereby necessarily excluding oneself from any positive influence from them (Matthew 12:31-32, Mark 3:28-30).
 2. Apostasy (which by definition excludes one from the church where the Holy Spirit is chiefly present) (Luke 12:10; cf. Hebrews 10:23-31).
 - C. For the Johannine Epistles the unforgivable sin is apostasy and the renunciation of the faith that Jesus is the (Divine) Messiah who came in the flesh. This sin excludes us from the spiritual power which comes from believing that God shared our human existence and from participating in a community that shares this belief.
- VIII. In trying to understand the unforgivable sin we must ask what salvation is and how we obtain it.
- IX. A common-sense view is that salvation is the good things in this life, including prosperity, health, and social prestige, and we obtain them by disciplined, sensible effort (hard work, controlling our tongue, not engaging in substance abuse, and so forth). Note that this view basically appears in the Old Testament book of Proverbs.
- X. One need not doubt that at least much of the time sensible effort does lead to the good things in this life.
- XI. The primary issue is whether the good things in this life are sufficiently satisfying and permanent to qualify as salvation. From a Christian perspective, the answer must be “no.”
- XII. The dominant view in the Old Testament is that salvation is the blessings, whether material or spiritual, that come in a community that is in faithful

covenant with God.

A. We find this view especially in the book of Deuteronomy, and since the principles of Deuteronomy provide the basis for the interpretation of Israel's history in the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings, this view is probably the principal one in the Old Testament.

B. One assumption of this view is that if we are faithful to God, then he will provide us with the good things in material and political life (prosperity, health, victory in battle).

C. Nevertheless, an even greater blessing is the joy that comes from experiencing the loving presence of God in the midst of our community. Note that Deuteronomy talks about the joy of worshiping God at his temple in Jerusalem.

XIII. In this theology sin is violating Israel's covenant with God and is serious because

A. It is the betrayal of a personal relationship with God and causes him pain and anger.

B. It endangers the well-being of the covenant community as a whole.

XIV. The unforgivable sin is the unrepentant worship of other gods. This sin is disastrous because

A. It makes it impossible for the guilty individual or group to enjoy the blessings (whether material or spiritual) that come from a faithful relationship with God.

B. The exclusive worship of Israel's God is the most important condition of the covenant. It is the first of the Ten Commandments.

XV. Consequently, Deuteronomy mandates death for the worship of other gods. The sinner must be destroyed from the midst of the community in order for the community to be pure.

XVI. It would appear that Deuteronomy was more a theoretical document rather than a description of how the worship of other gods was handled in practice. From the prophets we learn that most people worshiped various deities (e.g., Baal)!

XVII. Nevertheless, ancient Judaism tried to maintain its purity by excluding people who for whatever reason were not considered sufficiently righteous.

XVIII. Before criticizing this approach, we should note that it is how most religious organizations—including Christians ones—have functioned in practice.

XIX. Nevertheless, part of the mission of Jesus was to overcome such exclusion. He felt that the criminally insane, the morally rejected, and the politically incorrect (the demoniac, the prostitute, and the tax collector) had to be brought into God's people.

XX. Underlying this mission of inclusion seems to have been a theology that salvation consists in a willingness to be part of a final community that in principle is open to all.

A. Jesus looked forward to the coming of the "kingdom of God."

B. Apparently, the "kingdom" was a community that ideally was to include all of Israel and ultimately all of the world.

C. Final salvation must come from being in this community because the

- exclusion of any person is painful to God and makes the community radically incomplete (note the parable of the lost sheep; Matthew 18:10-14, Luke 15:3-7). Hence, any community which at least does not long for and ultimately expect the inclusion of all falls short of God's glory.
- XXI. In keeping with this vision, Jesus and the writers of the New Testament suggest that the church is a foretaste of the coming of the kingdom in power. As such the church
- A. Works to include as many people as possible.
 - B. Looks forward in hope to the (re)inclusion of everyone.
 - C. As much as possible, tolerates "sinners" while urging them to repent.
 - D. When it must exclude people, it does so in order to bring them to repentance.
 - E. Suffers with and for the people it has excluded and hopes for the salvation of all.
- XXII. A very disturbing element of the Johannine Epistles is their claim that the opponents are the Antichrist (1 Jn. 2:18-22, 4:3; 2 Jn. 7). Note that the term "Antichrist" (literally, someone who replaces Christ) is first used in 1 and 2 John.
- XXIII. Modern scholarship tends to view this charge as primarily an expression of the bitterness caused by a schism and a warning to the faithful not to desert to the other side.
- XXIV. In addition, the charge reflects an eschatology (understanding of the end of this present world) that had been popular since the book of Daniel.
- A. Daniel was written as a response to a persecution of Judaism which threatened to destroy the entire religion.
 - B. The instigator of this persecution was the Greek ruler Antiochus IV (Epiphanes).
 - C. To steel the faithful to face martyrdom, the book of Daniel portrays Antiochus IV as the final monster in history who would immediately precede the coming of God's glorious rule (which would include the resurrection of the dead).
 - D. Daniel set an expectation that just before the end of this present world and the triumph of God a supremely evil person would appear who would persecute the faithful. Note that although we do not know how the world will end, the scenario that a supremely evil ruler will cause universal destruction is plausible.
 - E. The expectation of the arrival of a supremely evil person just before the end of the present world was taken over by the early church and appears in a number of New Testament documents (e.g., 2 Thessalonians, Revelation).
 - F. The Johannine Epistles share this general outlook and merely identify their opponents who left the community as somehow the Antichrist.
- XXV. As the epistles savagely attack their opponents as the Antichrist, we must suspect that the author and his community are (like Christians in all times and places) falling radically short of the inclusive love which they profess.
- XXVI. Nevertheless, we must also recognize the theological power of the letters' critique.

- A. The letters assume that the incarnation and the death of God's Son is God's supreme gift to the world.
- B. The letters also assume that the author's church as the community which acknowledges this supreme gift has (or, as least, is called to have) a special love for one another.
- C. Consequently, those who leave the Church reject both God's supreme gift and the love which Christians have for one another.
- D. And they also implicitly deny the possibility that God's love can bring salvation to all.

Discussion: Do you think some sin is unforgivable, and, if so, what sin?

Visual feature: Images of the Antichrist.

A Concluding Reflection on the Johannine Epistles: Towards an Understanding of Christian Love

- I. "Love" is the center of the Christian proclamation.
 - A. Jesus insisted that the two great commandments were to love God with all one's being and to love one's neighbor as oneself (e.g., Mark 12:28-31).
 - B. Paul insisted that the center of Christian life was "faith, hope, and love" and, "the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).
- II. The Johannine Epistles bring the centrality of love to its logical conclusion by insisting that "God is love" (4:8, 16), thereby making love the foundation of all reality both in the old and new creations.
- III. Unfortunately, fundamental principles tend to be difficult to grasp, perhaps because there is nothing more basic that one can use to define them.
- IV. Hence, for Christians love must in some sense always remain both a mystery and a gift, especially since love is the supreme expression of God who himself is the supreme mystery and gift in our lives.
- V. Nevertheless, we should make some attempt to understand Christian "love."
- VI. We may begin by noting that love is an attitude which manifests itself in concrete ways.
 - A. Love clearly is an inner state, a "feeling" or "commitment," and to some extent we can perceive that inner state directly in others. We pick up the "vibes." Note: If we perceive that this inner state is lacking, things which otherwise express love no longer feel like love. Birthday greetings from a computer do not make us feel loved.
 - B. Nevertheless, love must manifest itself in concrete actions. Saying that a husband who always mistreats his wife loves her borders on nonsense.
- VII. A comparison of two important models of Christian love and the strengths and weaknesses of each.
 - A. The model of Christian love as one type of love—namely, self-sacrificing love.
 - 1. According to this model there are several kinds of love for which it is customary in theological discussion to use Greek terms.
 - a. Eros: Romantic love that gratifies the need for a sexual

relationship. By extension eros can be any passionate, ecstatic love that longs to possess and be possessed. Note that eros is exclusive. We do not want to share our spouse or even our favorite outfit.

b. Philia: The affection between friends that gratifies our general need for fellowship. Note that philia is inclusive. We want our friends to be friends with each other.

c. Agape: Self-sacrificing love that primarily gratifies the needs of someone else without giving us any selfish benefit.

2. Christian love is agape and was especially shown by Jesus's death on the cross.

B. In evaluating this school of thought we may say

1. It does respect that

a. Greek does have different words for love, and usually (though certainly not always) the New Testament uses "agape" for Christian love.

b. The New Testament does make clear that self-sacrifice is central.

2. Nevertheless, there are besetting problems with this model of love

a. Christian love is not merely self-sacrificing but longs for fellowship. Note that in early Christianity an "agape" was a fellowship meal!

b. Love that is purely self-sacrificing will inevitably begin to become either

1) patronizing

2) masochistic.

C. The model that Christian love is the ideal blending of every type of legitimate love (Otto Bird, Donald Gelpi).

1. According to this model, there are several types of love

a. Gift love. I love you because you are in need.

b. Appreciative love: I love you because you are beautiful.

c. Need love: I love you because you satisfy my needs.

2. The deepest form of love must combine all of these dimensions.

D. In evaluating this school of thought we may say

a. All of these dimensions are necessary for the deepest kind of love.

b. Nevertheless, there are problems:

1). The other school of thought is surely correct in emphasizing the primacy of self-sacrifice in the Christian proclamation.

2). In many cases this combination of love is virtually impossible if we concentrate on the way things presently are. Thus, it is simply untrue that everyone is "beautiful."

VIII. I think that we can combine the strengths of the two schools of thought by remembering that from a Christian perspective "the really real" is the

eschatological and our freedom to choose. Therefore,

A. Christian love must begin with self-sacrifice.

1. Our love is itself a response to the self-sacrifice of Jesus who died for us while we were sinners.

2. This self-sacrifice allows us to become lovers.

3. In our own lives we must bestow undeserved love on others so that they too may have the opportunity to grow. This self-sacrifice includes

a. Bearing the spiritual and psychological pain of others (e.g., as we listen to their problems).

b. Bearing the social pain of others (as we accept criticism for associating with them).

c. Bearing the financial burden of others.

B. Nevertheless, Christian love always looks forward in hope to union with the beloved, a union that will be an unspeakable blessing to us. Note, especially, that God looks forward to us becoming his “friends” when we will be utterly “beautiful” (John 15:13-15).

C. As love looks forward, however, it respects the freedom of the other to accept or reject love and the growth which this love would empower.

D. As we look forward, we can see evil people as “beautiful,” but yet be realistic.

1. Their beauty consists in the facts

a. Through God’s power (including God loving them through us) they can choose to become better.

b. Because they are not yet living up to their potential, they are suffering now or are numb.

2. Nevertheless, we must respect their freedom to choose not to answer God’s call, and we must realize that in and of themselves they may not be beautiful and they may choose not to become so.

Discussion: What is your understanding of love?

Appendix: 1, 2, & 3 John for non-Christians

I. 1, 2, & 3 John can be disturbing to non-Christians because of the polemical insistence that salvation is through Jesus Christ, and, indeed, only through believing that Jesus Christ came in the flesh.

II. Still, at least many people who do not believe that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God might agree with the following:

A. The center of all reality is love.

B. To be able to love to the fullest extent possible, we must first receive love from the center of reality.

C. Hence, we must struggle with the question of how such love can be received, and, if we reject the Christian message that such love is found primarily through Jesus, we must come up with a different source.

Assignment: Read the Gospels of John and Mark.

The Style of John's Gospel and Its Implications

- I. The style of John's Gospel has an artificial simplicity, even monotony.
 - A. John's Gospel has a vocabulary and syntax that are very simple, seemingly deliberately so.
 - B. A few motifs (e.g., water, light) and phrases (e.g., "I am," "Truly, truly, I say to you") keep coming up.
 - C. The narrative takes predictable turns, such as the alternation of event, dialog, and monologue.
 - D. There are basically only two themes:
 1. Jesus's relationship to the Father
 2. Jesus's relationship to the world and the believer.
- II. As we have seen, the Epistles of John have a similar style.
- III. Consequently, the style apparently was typical in the church from which these documents originated.
- IV. Nevertheless, the style of John's Gospel has an important implication which differs from the implication of the style in the epistles.
 - A. As we have seen, the simple style of the Johannine letters suggests that the letters are repeating the basics of Christian teaching. The letters even address the adult readers as "little children."
 - B. By contrast, the striking sameness in the gospel suggests John's message is simple and yet infinitely profound.
 1. The message is not complicated or obscure.
 2. However, it is so profound that one can only receive it gradually. Hence, repetition is necessary.

The Puzzle of the Fourth Gospel; Some Explanations; an Evaluation

- I. John's portrait of Jesus differs greatly from that in the first three gospels (which scholars call the "synoptics").
 - A. The chronology is different. There are three Passovers during Jesus's adult ministry in John, whereas in the synoptics there is only one.
 - B. The events are seldom the same prior to the final week of Jesus's life. Note that John concentrates on Jesus's early ministry in Judea, whereas the other gospels concentrate on his ministry in Galilee.
 - C. Jesus's way of speaking is very different. Instead of short sayings and parables, we have long unified discourses. Note that the sermons of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem to be collections of sayings made after the fact rather than records of what Jesus said on one occasion.
 - D. The content of Jesus's teaching differs. Instead of the coming of God's kingdom, we have Jesus proclaiming himself.
 - E. John's Gospel polemically insists on the divinity of Christ.
- II. The book is full of literary anomalies. Here are some examples:

- A. Sometimes an expected conclusion is suddenly postponed (especially, 14:30-31/15:1, 20:30-31/21:1).
 - B. Sometimes sections do not seem to be in the right order (e.g., chs. 5 & 6).
 - C. There are awkward intrusions in the narrative (e.g., 1:15, 19:25-26).
 - D. The narrative contradicts itself (e.g., 2:23 versus 4:54; 13:36 versus 16:5).
- III. To explain such oddities, the ancient scholars, Clement and Origen (2nd-3rd. c.), suggested that John deliberately wrote a spiritual gospel (Clement's statement is in Eusebius Ecc. Hist. 6.14.7.; Origen, John Commentary 10).
- A. John wrote after the other evangelists and did not want to repeat their work.
 - B. Instead, he wished to produce a gospel that emphasized the spiritual meaning of what Jesus had said and done.
 - C. To achieve this goal, he sacrificed historical accuracy.
- IV. To solve the Christological problems, some modern scholars have postulated a long historical development in which there was a gradual shift from seeing Jesus as a mere man to seeing him as divine.
- V. To solve literary problems, many modern scholars postulate
- A. The copying of written sources, especially, a signs source which contained 7 miracles and the ending of which now appears in 12:37ff. and/or 20:30. Note the problem in John's Gospel that the "second sign" is not actually the second (see 4:54 and 2:23, 3:2).
 - B. Various editions of the gospel
- VI. Evaluation of traditional scholarly attempts to explain the Christology (the branch of theology which deals with the significance of Jesus).
- A. In my opinion the ancient viewpoint that John is a spiritual gospel which sacrifices historical accuracy to present mystical insight is undoubtedly correct.
 - B. The modern emphasis on the impact of a long history also seems correct.
 - 1. Between the death of Jesus and the gospel's final editing there was a eventful history, some of which the gospel clearly refers to.
 - a. Jewish Christians in the community that produced John's Gospel were expelled from the synagogues (9:22, 12:42, 16:2).
 - b. The primary author of the gospel died, and an editor had to revise the book (21:23-24). The primary author may have been the last surviving person in the community who knew Jesus (cf. Mark 9:1).
 - c. As we have seen from the epistles, the Johannine community itself split.
 - 2. The final form of the gospel comes from c. 90-100.
 - a. The expulsion could not have occurred until the Pharisees took control of Judaism, and this would not have happened much before 90 CE.

B. By contrast, it is virtually certain on the basis of chapter 21 that an editor revised the work. I myself believe the final editor made major changes.

C. Nevertheless, there are severe problems with traditional textual approaches.

1. As is increasingly recognized, they do not take the final editor and document seriously enough.
 - a. Presumably, the final editor thought that the revised document was a meaningful whole, and we need to discover how.
 - b. The final document is what the church canonized, and, therefore, Christians at least need to make sense of it as it stands.
2. Reconstructions of sources or earlier editions are extremely hypothetical.

VIII. In response to the problems of older scholarly approaches, some contemporary scholars ignore the history of the text and concentrate on the gospel's final form.

IX. However, to make sense of the text as it stands without reflecting on the history that produced it, one must assume that often the text "victimizes" the reader.

X. Yet, much of the gospel is painfully clear, and we may wonder whether anyone who wrote the gospel intended to confuse the reader.

XI. In this course we will consider an alternative approach. I will argue for two points:

A. As the gospel explicitly claims, its principal author was an eyewitness of Jesus's ministry (21:24), but in the gospel he tries to describe the past from God's perspective.

1. The gospel does not tell us what people at the time thought was happening or what Jesus literally said.
2. Instead, the gospel tries to tell us what was the ultimate meaning of the life, deeds, and teaching of Jesus.
3. The gospel explicitly states that after the resurrection the Holy Spirit would lead the disciples into all truth and that in doing so the Spirit would interpret the past (14:25-26, 16:12-15).
4. Consequently, the gospel itself attempts to tell us what God was saying and doing through Jesus, and, of course, this differs from what the eyewitnesses thought at the time.

B. After the death of the evangelist, an editor made the gospel into a mystical treatise in which Jesus invites readers to move through the various stages of the Christian life. This editing produced the anomalies in the present document.

1. In a highly original interpretation, L. William Countryman outlined the first 20 chapters of John on the basis of the spiritual progression in a Christian's life: Prologue, conversion, baptism, Eucharist, enlightenment, new life, mystical union. Note that this

progression does explain certain peculiarities, e.g., chapter 6 and the suppression of the institution of the Eucharist on the night before Jesus's death.

2. My own study of the gospel has convinced me that Countryman is basically correct, but that it was the editor --not the original author--who imposed this scheme and that it is summarized in chapter 21.

3. To produce this structure, the editor had to rearrange and supplement the existing text and in doing so produced the literary tensions (e.g., that the second "sign" is not in fact the second).

XII. In the following lectures we will

A. Look at John's global treatment of major themes.

B. See how the gospel reinterprets the life and teaching of the historical Jesus, or to use my model, how the gospel attempts to view Jesus from God's perspective.

B. Look at how the final editor made the gospel into a recapitulation of the Christian life and produced the "problems" in the present book.

Assignment: Study John 1 & 20. Start reading Sinclair.

The Theme of the Gospel: We Are Saved by Believing that Jesus is God Infleshed

Discussion: What, if anything, do we need to believe about God or the world to be deeply loving and hopeful, and can we believe it?

I. From a literary perspective 1:1-18 and 20:24-31 are especially important for the interpretation of the gospel as a whole.

A. To be sure, each of these passages is closely connected to adjacent material and is part of a larger unit.

B. Still, these sections are crucial, because they are the introduction and the climax of the gospel, as we can see from position, content, and style. Consequently, they should give guidelines to interpret the whole book.

II. From these passages, to say nothing of the rest of the gospel, we can see that John's Christology (the branch of theology which deals with the significance of Jesus) is chiefly concerned to make three points:

A. Jesus is God infleshed.

1. Note the uncompromising statements that Jesus is divine (1:1, 1:18 [P66, P75, S, B, and others], 20:28). An emphasis on the divinity of Jesus pervades the gospel. Note particularly the "I am" statements. In the Bible (Exodus 3:13-14, Isaiah 43:25) God sometimes reveals himself with the phrase "I am."

2. Note also the uncompromising emphasis that Jesus has a fleshly body (1:14, 20:24-27). This emphasis occurs elsewhere (e.g., 19:34).

B. Why it is important to believe that Jesus is God infleshed.

1. In order to know God and see his glory; receive grace and truth; become God's children.

2. Receive life in his name.
 3. Additional reasons appear elsewhere: receive requests in prayer; receive the Spirit; become God's friends.
 4. All of these reasons seem to be closely related, or even different ways of saying the same thing.
- C. An explanation of how we come to believe, or why believing is possible and makes sense.
1. The testimony of John the Baptist and the evangelist and the church
 2. The resurrection appearances and the miraculous "signs" and the witness of those who saw them
 3. The structure of the gospel as a whole as it leads us from conversion to mystical union. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (20:29).
- III. A more detailed examination of the claim that Jesus is God infleshed.
- A. John maintains the divinity of Christ by stressing that Jesus is both one with the Father and yet distinct from him.
- B. John is not only aware that this unity in distinction is a paradox but insists that we must accept it as such (e.g., 1:1).
- C. Nevertheless, John does provide explanatory models of how Jesus and the Father can both be the one God.
1. The word and the speaker. Jesus is the self-expression of God.
 2. Mutual knowledge (e.g., 10:15). The Father and Son know each other fully.
 3. Mutual donation, mutual honoring (e.g., 5:22). They give themselves fully to each other in order to honor one another.
 4. Perfect imitation (e.g., 5:19). What the Father does, the Son does.
 5. Mutual indwelling (e.g., 17:21). They live in each other.
 6. Progressive mission (e.g., 17:18-19). As the Father relates to the Son, the Son relates to the world.
 7. Of course, the very terms "Father" and "Son" suggest how Jesus can be God. He derives his being from the one divine "nature" and shares in an intimate personal relationship with his "parent."
 8. All of the models are somehow part of the mutual love of the Father and the Son.
- D. It is to be noted that John is not interested in the imminent Trinity (i.e., how God relates to himself).
- E. Excursus on *logos*:
1. The term is broader than the standard English translation "word" and includes "reason." Note that from "*logos*" we get the English word "logic."
 2. It was an important concept throughout ancient religious writing (e.g., in Stoicism). And the author and editor of John's Gospel probably were aware that their diverse audience would be familiar with the term.

3. Nevertheless, the primary background of the term in John is probably in the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures, rather than in Greek philosophy. The term “*logos*” especially evokes the Old Testament’s
 - a. Belief in pre-existent wisdom through which God created and maintains the universe (cf. Proverbs 8).
 - b. Word of God which comes to the prophets and allows them to speak and act in God’s behalf.
4. By saying that Jesus is the “word,” the gospel stresses that he is God’s primary way of communicating with the world and transforming it. Note that in the gospel stories the words of Jesus often have the same power (e.g., to work miracles) as the word of God does in the Old Testament.

F. For John Jesus is primarily the only link between God and the world. This theme is prominent already in the prologue (1:18). As the only link Jesus somehow summarizes and replaces (or fulfills) all other links.

1. Jesus absorbs all titles. Note that shortly after 1:18 the gospel goes on to describe Jesus with a host of titles (Lamb of God, Messiah, Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel, Son of Humanity).
2. All that is good in the past bears witness to him.
3. Everyone who is sincere comes to Jesus (e.g., 18:37).

IV. It is because Jesus is the only link that he needs to be both divine and human, since he must fully bridge the gap between God and us.

- A. Because Jesus is divine, he can perfectly mirror God and reveal Him. “He who sees me has seen the Father” (14:9).
- B. Because he is human, we can see Jesus (1:14), and he can serve as a model for us to imitate.
- C. Through the combination of divinity and humanity in Jesus we can enter into the life of God himself. The various models of how Jesus and the Father are one are also models of how we enter into the divine life.
 1. The word comes to us, and through his teaching we become divine (1:12, 10:34-36).
 2. Jesus’s knowledge of the Father allows us to know Him through Jesus (1:18).
 3. We become involved in the mutual donation and honoring, since we are what the Father and the Son give each other (e.g., 17:6), and we enter into the honor. Note the tremendous implications of this.
 4. The perfect imitation allows us to imitate God. E.g., we love one another as the Father loved Jesus.
 5. The indwelling of the Father and the Son includes us (e.g., 14:20). They make their home in us (14:23).
 6. The progressive mission, of course, includes us.
 7. We may summarize the above by saying that the love which unites the Father and the Son is always reaching out to include us. Note that the ultimate goal of human life is to see the eternal glory of Jesus and the Father (17:24) and to become God’s friends (15:13-

15).

V. Accordingly, John's Christology is soteriological (concerned about salvation).

VI. John's doctrine of the atonement: Because Jesus is God in flesh, he overcomes sin by revealing

A. Who God is, especially God's love for the world.

B. What the world is, particularly its evil in rejecting and killing God's Son.

C. Who we can become; that is, we can be like Jesus.

Discussion: How do you feel about John's answer to the question of what we must believe and why we can believe it? What do you think is the ultimate goal of life?

Assignment: Reread John's Gospel. Continue reading Sinclair.

The Problem of the Credibility of John's Gospel and Its Christology

I. Review: The basic message of John's Gospel is that we are saved by believing that Jesus is God in flesh.

II. John's Gospel claims to be based on real history.

A. The gospel explicitly states that its primary author was an eyewitness of what it records and that his testimony is reliable (21:24).

B. Except for the prologue, the gospel deals with earthly events.

III. At times we can verify that the historical record is basically accurate.

A. Many of the events in John appear to be independent accounts of events recorded in the first three gospels.

B. Some of these events (e.g., the demonstration in the temple) have all the signs of having actually taken place.

C. Occasionally, John even gives details (Jesus baptizing alongside John the Baptist before the latter's arrest, Jesus repeatedly visiting Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals, the date of the Last Supper) which seem to be more reliable than those of the synoptics.

IV. From what the gospel itself tells us, we can see that even its high Christology has its starting point in some undeniable historical facts. Note, especially, John 5:16-18. Here the gospel cites the undeniable facts that Jesus felt that he knew what God allowed on the Sabbath and called God "Father" and uses these to claim that Jesus is equal to God.

V. Nevertheless, the gospel insists that scripture and the Holy Spirit guided its interpretation of the history and that no one can know its truth by their own power.

A. The gospel repeatedly states that at the time certain events occurred no one realized their true significance (2:22, 12:16, 20:9).

B. In the gospel Jesus himself declares that after his death the Spirit will explain to the disciples the significance of what he said and did (14:26, 16:12-15). Indeed, the gospel explicitly tells us that during his lifetime Jesus spoke in enigmas but after his death spoke "plainly" about God (16:25).

- C. Jesus also insists in the gospel that no one can recognize the truth about him without the Father's leading (e.g., 6:44).
- VI. From a negative perspective we can certainly attest that on our own power we cannot verify John's claims today.
- A. Historically the gospel often conflicts with the synoptics (see above) and usually seems far less accurate. Whole scenes, such as the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, appear to be late and unreliable. Historically, it is unlikely that Jesus ever converted Samaritans (e.g., Matthew 10:5).
- B. It would appear that much of the material in the gospel was freely composed by the Beloved Disciple.
- C. Especially Christ's speeches seem to be primarily the theology of the evangelist, not the sayings of the historical Jesus. Note the vast difference between the speeches of Jesus in John's Gospel and in the synoptics. Incidentally, it was common practice in ancient histories to compose speeches which reflected the author's point of view and to place these speeches in the mouths of historical characters.
- D. Naturally, the opening of the gospel cannot be based on history.
- E. It seems unlikely that Jesus ever made explicit claims that he was more than a human being.
- F. Hence, we must conclude that the historical evidence itself scarcely justifies the gospel's claims, especially its claims about Jesus.
- VII. In the period when the Beloved Disciple wrote, many people must have attacked the reliability of his gospel.
- A. As the gospel itself makes clear, the Jewish establishment was outraged by the claim that Jesus was divine (cf. 5:18, 8:58, 10:30-31).
- B. Christians within the Beloved Disciple's community may have denied that Jesus had a fleshly body (1 John 4:2, 2 John 7).
- VIII. Members of the community were under enormous pressure to disown the gospel's Christology.
- A. The gospel narrative makes it clear that the Jewish synagogues were expelling people who confessed Jesus's divinity (9:22, 12:42, 16:2), and some Jewish Christians chose to remain secret followers of Jesus rather than confess him publicly (cf., e.g., Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea [3:1-2, 7:50-52, 19:38-39]).
- B. The epistles suggest that the majority of the Johannine community may have sided with those who denied that Jesus was God's Son who came in the flesh, and that "the Elder" was sometimes having great difficulty even getting his point of view heard (1 Jn. 4:4-5, 3 Jn. 9-10).
- IX. The credibility of the Gospel became even less with the Beloved Disciple's death.
- A. The Beloved Disciple was apparently an eyewitness both of Jesus's ministry and of the resurrection and in his own life had come to the Christology that Jesus was God infleshed. Hence, as long as he was alive, he could attest that the gospel was true.
- B. With his death no living person could defend the gospel in the same

way.

C. His death was itself troubling since people in the community had believed that he would live until Christ's second coming (Jn. 21:23; cf., e.g., Mark 9:1).

D. Apparently, about the time he died, people in the community began to be aware of other gospels which had a very different presentation of Jesus (cf. John 21:25).

X. Accordingly, the final editor had to face the problem of how people could now know that the gospel was true.

Discussion: How do people who believe that the Bible is true respond to attacks on the Bible? How should they respond?

Assignment: Read Matthew chapters 3 and 11. Study John chapters 1 and 3. Read the sections in Sinclair that deal with John 1 and 3.

An Illustration of the Technique of the Fourth Gospel and the Problem of Credibility: The Gospel's Treatment of John the Baptist

(time permitting) Workshop on different accounts of the ministry of John the Baptist.

I. (review) In the last lecture we noted that John's Gospel draws on history but interprets it in a special way.

II. (review) According to the gospel, we can only see the truth of this interpretation by the leading of God.

III. We may go on to say that what the gospel intends to offer is God's perspective on human history. The gospel tells what God was doing. Note that in the gospel various characters unwittingly accomplish God's will (e.g., Caiphas; see Jn. 11:49-53).

IV. Of course, in offering God's perspective, the gospel intends to correct other perspectives which the author and editor felt were mistaken.

V. We can see the technique by looking at the gospel's treatment of John the Baptist.

VI. When the gospel was being written, many people were apparently arguing that Jesus must have been inferior to John the Baptist, since John baptized him (cf. Hebrews 7:7).

VII. The author and editor of the gospel were anxious to correct this perspective, and in the gospel John the Baptist repeatedly insists that Jesus is greater than he is (1:27, 3:28-30). The Baptist bears witness to Jesus as the Christ and perhaps even as God (e.g., 1:34), and it is thanks to this testimony that many believe (e.g., 10:40-42).

VIII. However, in the first three gospels John's relationship to Jesus seems very different.

A. John baptizes Jesus in Matthew and Mark (Mt. 3:13-17, Mk. 1:9-11).

B. When John is in prison, he sends to Jesus to *ask* if the latter is the one who is to come (Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23).

IX. We may suspect that even the synoptics exaggerate John's support of Jesus,

since they too reflect subsequent Christian theology. The Jewish historian Josephus, who briefly discusses John the Baptist, does not connect him with Jesus.

X. Historically, it seems likely that John predicted that soon God would send the Messiah to judge Israel and the nation had to get ready. The Messiah would administer a spiritual “baptism” and save the righteous and destroy the wicked (e.g., Matthew 3:11-12).

XI. To prepare for this coming judgment, John provided a “baptism” of repentance.

XII. John certainly baptized Jesus, but initially it probably never occurred to John that Jesus was the Messiah. However, shortly before his execution, John was impressed with what he was hearing about Jesus and sent messengers to ask who he claimed to be.

XIII. Historically, it is plausible that Jesus was originally John's disciple, and withdrew to Galilee only after the Baptist's arrest (cf. Mark 1:14).

XIV. It was probably only at that point that Jesus began to insist that the rule of God was now becoming present in his own ministry and that, therefore, the least of his followers was greater even than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11).

XV. The fourth gospel in its portrait of John includes some of this old tradition. John the Baptist stresses that the one who is to come is to baptize with the Spirit (1:33) and that John is preparing the way of the Lord (God's Messiah; 1:23). At one point Jesus baptizes alongside John the Baptist (3:22-30).

XVI. Even more interesting, in the gospel, John the Baptist insists that although God sent him to prepare for Jesus, he did not know Jesus initially but only after Jesus received the Holy Spirit (1:31-33).

XVII. Of course, the Beloved Disciple edited heavily the words of the Baptist, and supplied most of what he says in the gospel.

XVIII. From the BD's perspective Jesus did baptize with the Holy Spirit and did judge Israel and thus fulfilled John's prophecy of what God would do.

XIX. Apparently then, what the Beloved Disciple is claiming is that *from God's perspective* John the Baptist was sent to prepare for Jesus's coming and John's prediction of the coming of the Lord did get Israel ready and make it possible for people to believe in Jesus. However, the Baptist himself was not fully aware of what God was accomplishing through him.

XX. There is evidence that the Beloved Disciple himself started out as a disciple of John the Baptist and through his testimony ultimately came to believe in Jesus.

A. As we have seen, in the present gospel the Beloved Disciple is always anonymous and normally is one step ahead of Peter.

B. In 1:35-42 we read of an anonymous (a second) disciple who listens to the Baptist's testimony and comes to Jesus immediately before Peter does.

C. Many scholars believe that this is the Beloved Disciple, and that historically he was a disciple of John the Baptist and subsequently became a follower of Jesus.

D. An important piece of evidence for this conclusion is a textual problem.

1. 1:35-42 parallels 1:43-51. The second scene occurs “on the next

day” and is about the same length. The structure of the two scenes is also similar. Jesus calls one person who immediately gets someone else and brings him to Jesus.

2. The parallel would be closer if Andrew was the only disciple in the first story. The mention of a second anonymous disciple is also strange, since he adds nothing significant to the story.

3. Later we will see that the editor of John’s Gospel inserted the references to the Beloved Disciple, since they often do not fit with their larger context (see, e.g., 19:25-27).

XXI. If the anonymous disciple in 1:35-40 is the BD, then in his own life he came to Jesus at least in part because of the Baptist's ministry. The Baptist had predicted the coming of the Messiah, the BD believed this prediction, and subsequently concluded that Jesus fulfilled it.

XXII. Therefore, we can well understand how the BD could claim that John the Baptist bore witness to Jesus, and that from God's perspective the Baptist's primary mission was to prepare people to receive Jesus, even if the Baptist himself was not fully aware of this.

XXIII. Of course, we need not agree.

XXIV. The question we must face is on what grounds we can decide whether or not the gospel's interpretation of the Baptist's role is correct.

XXV. I think we should admit that on historical grounds we cannot determine whether the gospel’s portrayal of John the Baptist is true.

A. Historically, the gospel's presentation of the Baptist has a firm basis.

B. Nevertheless, it also remains a very special interpretation which cannot be proven from the data.

XXVI. What is true of the presentation of the Baptist is true of the rest of the fourth gospel as well. The gospel has a firm basis in historical facts but also remains an inspired interpretation of those facts. Hence, its truth must be decided on some other basis than historical accuracy. Of course, this is what the gospel itself claims.

Discussion: Can we ever say that God did something in history? If so, how? If not, does history have any meaning?

(time permitting) Some paintings of John the Baptist.

Assignment: Study John 9 & 11. Read the sections in Sinclair that deal with John 9 and 11.

Learning to Read Johannine Narrative

A reading of John 2:1-11

I. The narratives in John's Gospel are paradoxical from a literary perspective.

A. On the one hand, they are full of problems, such as missing information, improbable psychology, awkward intrusions, strange turns of events.

B. Yet, on the other hand, the stories in John often are literarily brilliant.

II. The uneven literary quality of the gospel narratives is primarily due to the fact

that the Beloved Disciple and the editor had special goals and techniques.

- A. The gospel is primarily concerned about theological issues and is willing to sacrifice literary values to achieve theological goals. Two related goals are paramount:
 - 1. Making points about Jesus
 - 2. Showing how one comes to faith in him.
 - B. The gospel is also concerned about the needs of the Johannine community and is willing to sacrifice historical accuracy to be able to speak to later pastoral problems.
 - C. In general the gospel is not interested in making its narratives realistic or even plausible.
 - D. The gospel writers also have only a limited concern with the psychology of the characters in the narrative.
 - E. Instead, the writers rely heavily on theological symbolism. Often this symbolism appears in the multiple meanings which a word or phrase may have.
 - F. However, the gospel sometimes achieves brilliant literary effects in making its theological and pastoral points.
- III. We can illustrate what has just been noted by looking at the healing of the man born blind.

- A. As the conclusion of the story makes clear, the purpose of the story is theological (9:38-41), and the plot primarily symbolizes spiritual development, both positive and negative. Sight in the story is primarily spiritual perception and only secondarily the physical ability to see.
- B. The story portrays "the Jews" not as they were in the lifetime of Jesus, but as they were when the gospel was written. Note the expulsion from the synagogue (vs. 22). Many of the original readers of John's Gospel had been expelled from the synagogues!
- C. The plot has various literary holes. How do the disciples know that the man was *born* blind (9:2)? How does the man born blind know that "Jesus" (vs.11) is the name of the person who healed him? When did the Pharisees who are with Jesus in 9:40 arrive?
- D. It would have been easy for the evangelist to eliminate these problems, and we must suppose he was not greatly concerned about such things.
- E. Nevertheless, the story on the whole is very impressive literarily. Note, for example, the following (Raymond Brown):
 - 1. The gospel cleverly manipulates the plot so the blind man begins confessing Jesus before seeing him. Note that the climax of the story is when the man sees Jesus, and this seeing symbolizes full insight.
 - 2. The Pharisees keep stressing what they know as they descend into deeper and deeper ignorance, whereas the man who admits ignorance and has little knowledge comes to more and more truth.
 - 3. In the end the Pharisees pass judgment on themselves (from the reader's viewpoint), since they condemn a courageous individual whom the reader knows to be innocent.

4. We even have a convincing portrait of how religious teachers become defensive and dishonest when they are exposed.
 5. An especially powerful detail is the irony in the Pharisees' declaration that they do not know where Jesus comes from (9:29).
 - a. The Pharisees' statement is intended as an insult, because Nazareth is so insignificant (cf. 1:46).
 - b. But, in reality the Pharisees do not know where Jesus comes from, since he comes from the Father.
- F. These literary achievements express John's theology.
- IV. How to analyze Johannine narrative.
- A. First read the story (and its larger context) and determine the theological and pastoral points which are being made. Take special care to be open to any theological symbolism. Oddities in the story may be due to such symbolism.
 - B. Then see how the features of the narrative dramatize those points.
- V. An abbreviated analysis of another Johannine narrative, the raising of Lazarus (11:1-53).
- A. From a strictly literary viewpoint, the plot is full of very disturbing details (Why does Jesus wait two days after news arrives that Lazarus is sick (vss. 6-7)? Why does Jesus weep at the grave if he knows he is about to raise Lazarus from the dead! (vs. 35).
 - B. The theological and pastoral purpose of the story is
 1. To show that Jesus is the resurrection and the life (11:15, 25-26), i.e., the one who gives spiritual life in this world and eternal life in the next.
 2. To show that Jesus can give life to others only by giving up his own. It is the raising of Lazarus which forces the authorities to decide that Jesus must die (vss. 46-53), and the story is a transition to the Passion.
 3. To portray Lazarus as a martyr who enables others to come to faith. He even gets to die twice in the gospel to glorify God! (11:4, 14-15; 12:9-11).
 - C. Once we keep these points in mind, many details become literarily powerful. For example:
 1. Thomas's resigned "let us also go that we may die with him" (11:16) is full of irony.
 - a. In Jerusalem Jesus will give up his life to save his disciples from physical death (especially, 18:8; see also 17:12).
 - b. Yet, ultimately the price of faithfulness will indeed be dying because of Jesus (16:2).
 2. Jesus's tears take on a new meaning: Jesus weeps because raising Lazarus will lead to his own death (11:45-53). Note the irony of 11:36--Jesus loves Lazarus more than they know!
- VI. (time permitting) An exercise in interpreting Johannine narrative.
- Assignment: Decide how you would interpret John 2:1-11. What does the Gospel

invite the reader to conclude?

What was your interpretation of John 2:1-11?
Here is mine.

One Possible Detailed Analysis of John 2:1-12, the Changing of Water into Wine

- I. (review) The Gospel of John attempts to look at the past from God's point of view.
 - A. To some extent all historians do something like this (i.e., look at the past through the supposedly superior perspective of later times).
 - B. Nevertheless, John does so consciously.
 1. In the gospel Jesus promises the disciples that after his death the Spirit will remind them of what he said (14:26) and lead them into all truth (16:12-13).
 2. At various points in the story, the narrator explicitly says that he is now telling what no one at the time understood but what in retrospect he knew that God was doing through Jesus (e.g., 12:12-16).
- II. Hence, the Gospel of John does two things simultaneously
 - A. It tells us what happened in the past.
 - B. It guides the reader to see that past differently from the characters in the narrative (except for Jesus) and differently from the way that historically people understood the events at the time.
- III. To accomplish this double task, the gospel
 - A. Exercises considerable freedom in inventing the past, but, in my opinion, the gospel always maintains some real contact with "what actually happened."
 - B. The gospel relies heavily on literary symbolism and allusions, both to other books in the Bible and to other passages in John.
- IV. We can see an excellent illustration of the pervasive literary symbolism and allusions by looking at the story of the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana.
 - A. An abundance of wine in the Bible is a characteristic of the blessed age to come (e.g., Amos 9:13).
 - B. A wedding feast is a symbol of the blessed age to come, and the groom, a symbol of God (e.g., Isaiah 62:1-5) or the Messiah (e.g., Matthew 22:2). Of course, in John's Gospel Jesus is both divine and the Messiah.
 - C. The "hour" in John's Gospel is the crucifixion and the resurrection (e.g., 13:1).
 - D. "Six" in biblical numerology connotes incompleteness or even evil. In Revelation 666 is the number of the Beast (Rev. 13:18)!
 - E. Concern with ritual purity in John's Gospel bespeaks the old age. For Christians baptism replaces the purification rites under the old Law (cf. 3:25-26).
 - F. Obedient servants in the Bible are the true followers of God.

- G. A "sign" in John's Gospel is a miracle that points to Jesus and reveals some dimension of who he truly is.
- V. Consequently, read on the symbolic level the story suggests that
- A. Jesus is the true Messiah ("groom") who brings the true blessings of final salvation. Whereas the nominal groom provided the inferior wine, Jesus provides the superior wine and in great quantity.
 - B. This salvation fulfills the hopes of the Old Testament faith and makes its rites obsolete. The six water jars which were intended for purification are now used for a different purpose.
 - C. This salvation especially comes through Christ's death and resurrection (his "hour"). The story stresses that Jesus's true hour has not yet come.
 - D. To recognize who Christ is and become his true disciples we must be prepared to "do whatever he tells" (2:5) us. Note that the servants draw 180 gallons of water simply because Jesus tells them to do so.
 - E. If we faithfully obey Christ's commands, he will give us some secret "sign" that he is indeed the Messiah who is bringing salvation, but the world probably will not even notice that the sign occurred. The servants know where the wine originated, and the disciples see Christ's glory, but the master of ceremonies and the groom notice nothing.
 - F. The secret sign(s) will strengthen our faith. The story ends with the words, "His disciples believed in him" (2:11).
- VI. Because the story is so full of symbolism, the story may be fictional.
- A. The story does not appear in the synoptics which otherwise tell us a great deal more about Jesus's miracles and ministry in Galilee (where Cana is located) than John's Gospel does.
 - B. If we strip the story of all its symbolic elements, virtually nothing remains (John Meier).
- VII. Nevertheless, the story clearly resembles the feeding of the multitude which is in all the gospels and is historical. Regardless of whether one believes in miracles, the meal certainly occurred.
- VIII. I believe that the historical feeding of the multitude basically had the same symbolism as the story of the changing of water into wine. By feeding the multitude Jesus intended to give
- A. A foretaste of the full coming of the kingdom when all would have plenty to eat
 - B. Of his own special role as the inaugurator of the kingdom.
- IX. Hence, the story of the changing of water into wine is one illustration of the freedom of John's Gospel to present a fictional retelling of the past which
- A. Brings out the "spiritual" meaning of what happened that the evangelist discovered in retrospect
 - B. Remains basically true to what literally took place during the ministry of Jesus.
- X. From a literary perspective the changing of water into wine is a transitional story which brings the themes of previous material to a climax and introduces subsequent themes.
- A. The previous section of the gospel concerns conversion (L. William

Countryman), and John uses a series of successive "days" to structure the section (1:29, 1:35, 1:43).

B. The story of the changing of water into wine brings that section to a conclusion by

1. Completing the week. "On the third day" (2:1) probably means three days later, since four days have already been mentioned, and it would have taken Jesus a couple of days to get to Cana from Judea (cf. 1:43). Therefore, the total number of days is seven. Note that the structure of days explicitly ends with Cana (2:12-13). A parallel week is mentioned in 12:1.
2. Telling us that secret signs will complete our initial conversion.
 - a. According to the stories in the conversion section, conversion begins when
 - 1). Someone bears witness to Jesus
 - 2). And invites people to come and see for themselves.
 - 3). If they do, Jesus tells them something about who they truly are, and they believe in him.
 - b. The material before the turning of water into wine ends with the promise that the disciples will see greater things which will confirm their faith (1:51).
 - c. Then, as we have noted, Jesus works a miracle which confirms the faith of the disciples (2:11), but the other guests at the wedding do not even realize what occurred.
 - d. The story of the changing of water into wine also fulfills the symbolism of the strange promise in the previous verse "you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Humanity."
 - 1). The promise refers to Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:12) and means that the disciples will discover that Jesus is the link between God and the world.
 - 2). The changing of water into wine shows that Jesus is the one who brings God's salvation to the world.

C. At the same time the changing of water into wine is the "beginning of the signs" (2:11) and points forward to all the subsequent signs in the gospel. Note, especially, that the story of the second "sign" explicitly refers back to the first and also occurs at Cana (4:46-54).

D. The themes of the "signs" in John's Gospel are

1. We misunderstand the miracles of Jesus if we only see them as physical wonders to provide for our material needs (6:26-27).
2. Instead, we must see them as pointers to Jesus as the one who brings a new relationship to God. Jesus will sometimes refuse to work a miracle unless the person requesting it shows some faith (e.g., John 4:48-50).
3. We must also see the miracles as pointing to the definitive "sign," namely the death and resurrection of Jesus. Note what

Jesus says in the story that immediately follows the changing of water into wine (2:13-22). Note 20:30 also.

- E. All of these themes appear in the story of changing of water into wine.
1. Jesus does more than simply provide physical wine.
 2. The miracle points to Jesus as the Messiah who brings final salvation.
 3. Jesus refuses to work the miracle until the characters show faith. Notice his challenge to Mary and her confident directions to the servants and the fact that the miracle apparently did not even occur until after they had drawn 180 gallons of water and taken the water to the master of ceremonies.
 4. Nevertheless, Jesus insists in the story that his "hour" (i.e., his death and resurrection) must come first. The changing of water into wine is only a pointer. Salvation comes through the cross and Jesus's triumph over death.
- (time permitting) Some paintings of Jesus turning water into wine.

Assignment: Study John 21, and read the section in Sinclair that deals with John 21.

The Final Editing of John's Gospel as One Response to the Problem of Credibility; John 21

I. (review) After the death of the Beloved Disciple, there was considerable doubt about the reliability of his gospel.

II. At this point an editor revised the work.

III. It would appear that for the most part the editor did not compose new material, since the style of the gospel is fairly uniform. Within the first 20 chapters, the most likely free compositions of the final editor are the passages about the Beloved Disciple.

A. These passages interrupt their contexts (e.g., 19:25-27; we first have a list of those who are present, and the list does not include the BD, and suddenly he appears without introduction).

B. They would have been immodest coming from the BD, since they portray him as the ideal disciple.

C. On the other hand, after the BD's death the final editor would have wished to put the hero of the community into the gospel and portray him as the ideal disciple.

{I will subsequently refer to the final editor as "he," since very few women in the ancient world were literate. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the editor was a woman.}

IV. Instead of composing much new material, the editor rearranged the pre-existing material (e.g., he reversed what are now chapters 5 and 6) in the gospel and probably added additional material taken from various writings (sermons?) of the Beloved Disciple (e.g., chs. 15-16).

V. The editor was reluctant to compose new material probably because of the

BD's authority. The BD had been a disciple of Jesus and an eyewitness of his ministry and resurrection and a leading figure in the early history of the Johannine community. The editor undoubtedly revered the BD and did not have the authority to change his work drastically.

VI. To discover the editor's viewpoint, therefore, we need to pay special attention to the changes he made in the order of the material and at the additional materials he took from the Beloved Disciple's other writings and inserted in the gospel.

VII. We must concentrate on the basic message of these additions and changes. Since he was only editing, not composing from scratch, the result probably only basically fit his purpose.

VIII. The place where we are most likely to discover the editor's overall design is chapter 21.

A. This chapter is the passage that most obviously comes from the final editor. Note that the conclusion of the Beloved Disciple's gospel must have been 20:30-31.

B. At least much of chapter 21 cannot have come from the BD's own writings. Perhaps he did narrate a miraculous catch story earlier in his own gospel and the final editor moved the section. However, such things as the closing dialog involving Jesus, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple cannot have been part of this earlier account.

C. As the concluding passage of the gospel, chapter 21 would be an appropriate place for the final editor to summarize his own perspective.

1. Since the editor was adding a chapter, he was not changing anything here that the BD had written and had greater freedom.
2. By giving a summary of his theology at the end of the edited book, the editor would make that summary an interpretative key to the gospel as a whole. Concluding passages often guide our overall understanding of a work.

IX. In interpreting chapter 21, as in interpreting other Johannine narratives, we should focus on its symbolic system, and we should see the story as addressing the situation of the intended readers.

A. The editor as a follower of the BD would naturally have wanted to imitate the master's style as much as possible when editing the master's book.

B. Moreover, by this point the reader has been conditioned to approach narratives in a certain way, and the editor would have assumed that the reader would approach the final narrative in the same way.

X. As in the other narratives, we should see oddities in the plot as an especially potent indicator that deeper theological symbolism may be present.

XI. In chapter 21 there are at least two oddities.

A. The story of the catch and of the meal do not fit together well. Jesus is cooking (a?) fish on the beach and yet asks Peter to bring him some fish!

B. It is odd that the narrative tells us that Peter was naked and that he tied on his clothes and jumped into the water.

XII. In my opinion, we can make sense of the chapter as a whole if we assume

that it symbolically portrays the stages in a Christian's spiritual life and growth.

A. The opening portion suggests conversion.

1. The disciples are back in their pre-conversion setting as it appears in the synoptics. They are home in Galilee fishing.
2. Christ has already risen from the dead, but the potential disciples do not know him and are in darkness and labor without success.
3. The story of the miraculous catch is a conversion story in Luke (Lk. 5:2-11), and by the time the final editor of John was writing, members of his community apparently were reading the other gospels (cf. John 21:25). In addition, it is possible that in the BD's gospel this was the third sign and was a conversion story (Robert Fortna).
4. In the story Jesus challenges the disciples and then provides a sign. As a result they recognize him and come to him (i.e., they are converted).

B. The section about Peter being naked, tying on a garment, and jumping into the water symbolizes baptism. The next step after converting to Christianity is sacramentally becoming a Christian through the ceremony of baptism. In the early church baptismal candidates probably stripped, tied on a temporary covering, and were then baptized by immersion.

C. As is generally recognized, the subsequent scene in which Jesus feeds the disciples symbolizes Eucharist. Note, especially, Jesus *taking the bread and giving it*. Elsewhere the New Testament uses such language in connection with the Eucharist. In the ancient church someone was not supposed to receive the Eucharist until after baptism.

D. The beginning of the dialog between Jesus and Peter stresses committed discipleship. Peter must now go on to love Jesus and feed his sheep. The three questions that Jesus asks Peter here mirrors three questions earlier in the gospel as to whether Peter is Jesus's "disciple" (18:17, 25-27). On that earlier occasion, Peter denied Jesus. Now Peter must go on to committed discipleship.

E. The end of the dialog points to giving up one's very life for Jesus. After feeding Jesus's sheep, Peter must suffer a martyr's death.

F. Then we have a scene in which Jesus announces a still higher vocation: Taking his place in the world until his second coming. The Beloved Disciple must abide until Christ's return. Just as Jesus was in the Father's breast and revealed him to human beings (1:18), so the Beloved Disciple was at the chest of Jesus and must now reveal him.

XIII. On the basis of chapter 21 we may make a hypothesis: The editor of John's Gospel subtly rearranged the material left behind by the Beloved Disciple so that the present canonical gospel basically recapitulates the growth in the Christian life from conversion to taking Jesus's place in this world. I say "basically," because the editor mostly rearranged material, and the gospel could not perfectly reflect the Christian life. The editor had to paint in broad strokes.

XIV. We will test this hypothesis by looking at the first 20 chapters of John

section by section and seeing what changes the editor seems to have made and noting where the major divisions in the present gospel are and what the predominant themes are in each section. Of course, we cannot always be sure whether a seeming change was due to the editor. If we notice a consistent pattern, however, we can at least be certain of what he was trying to do.

XV. We may further hypothesize that if the gospel depicts the spiritual growth in the Christian life, then this growth also might explain how readers can come to know that the claims of the gospel are true. Note that 21:24 suggests that the final editor was concerned about establishing the truth of the gospel.

Signs in John's Gospel

Discussion: Do you believe in miracles, and, if so, what is the purpose of miracles? What are the strengths and weaknesses of a religion based on miracles?

I. As the literary climax of the gospel makes clear, "sign" is an important theme in John (20:30-31).

II. The concept of sign dominates the first half of the gospel.

A. The theme of Christ's "hour" divides the gospel into two halves approximately at 13:1.

B. About the dividing point we have a summary (12:37) which suggests that the first 12 chapters are a series of signs.

C. At various places in chapters 1-12 (2:23, 3:2, 6:2) we have references to multiple "signs" (miracles) that the gospel does not describe further.

D. We also have a series of miracle stories with accompanying discourse and differing reactions. Specifically, there appear to be 7 narrated miraculous "signs": 1) changing water into wine, 2) the healing of the royal official's son, 3) the healing of the man by the pool, 4) the feeding of the multitude, 5) the walking on water followed by the instantaneous arrival of the boat at land, 6) the healing of the man born blind, 7) the raising of Lazarus. In the Bible seven is a sacred number (e.g., Genesis 1). Note that there are no signs in the second half of the gospel except for the supreme sign of the resurrection (20:30).

E. Accordingly, the first half of the gospel is sometimes called "the Book of Signs."

III. As noted previously, many scholars feel that John made use of a written sign source, probably a pamphlet which used a series of miracles to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. Some evidence for this viewpoint:

A. The numbering of the first two signs (2:11, 4:54) and the fact that this numbering conflicts with 2:23 and 3:2.

B. There are seven miracles in John (excluding the resurrection), and seven symbolizes completeness in the Bible.

C. Several of the miracles, especially, the feeding of the multitude and the walking on water, have parallels in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

D. The summaries in 12:37ff. and/or 20:30-31 would have made a fitting

- conclusion to an early Christian pamphlet that narrated miracles to prove that Jesus was the Messiah.
- IV. Nevertheless, as we have seen, I do not believe in such a source.
- A. The numbering relates the two stories in question and does not necessarily conflict with 2:23 and 3:2; 4:54 merely tells us that the healing was the second miracle Jesus worked "after coming from Judea into Galilee." Moreover, even if there were a conflict, it could be due to a redaction of the gospel itself rather than use of a source. My own guess is that the conflict arose when the editor moved the healing of the royal official's son to a later point in the gospel.
 - B. The evangelist could have chosen miracles himself out of the oral tradition or eyewitness testimony or personal memory.
 - C. The accounts of the "signs" in John's Gospel have the literary sophistication and the complex theological insights of the rest of the Gospel. Recall the analysis of the changing of water into wine. Hence, it appears that the evangelist has not copied a source (Raymond Brown).
- V. The explicit numbering of the two miracles at Cana draws attention to them and suggests that we should find here the basic theology of sign.
- VI. From these "signs," as well as other material, we can conclude that a sign is a miracle that points beyond itself to Jesus, especially to some aspect of his ministry and identity. In 2:18-19 Jesus responds to a demand for a sign by pointing to himself and his death and resurrection. Some of the signs and their symbolism:
- A. Turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana points to Jesus as the messianic bridegroom who provides messianic food. Note, especially, 2:10 (cf. 3:29).
 - B. Multiplying the loaves at Passover points to Jesus as the one who provides the bread of life which is his flesh in the Eucharist.
 - C. Walking on the water stresses the divinity of Christ. Jesus identifies himself by saying, literally, "I am; do not be afraid" (6:20; cf. Exodus 3:14). In the Old Testament only God can control the waters.
 - D. Healing the blind man points to Jesus as the one who enlightens. Note, especially, the end of the story.
 - E. Raising Lazarus points to Jesus as the one who gives eternal life. Note the dialog with Martha (11:21-27).
- VII. If we look at the two numbered signs, we see that both increase faith, but only because some (potential) faith exists already. In the second story Jesus refuses to work the sign until the man first believes (especially, 4:50).
- VIII. What is true in these stories is true of the whole gospel: Signs lead to faith, but only when some openness is already present. NO sign will convince those who are closed.
- IX. Accordingly, a sign exposes people and helps the righteous move toward greater faith and salvation and causes the evil to move toward death. Compare 5:1-18 & chapter 9.
- X. Nevertheless, the increased faith that results from signs is weak and unreliable (2:23-25).

- XI. We must go beyond a faith based solely on miracles.
- A. If we do not, we think of Jesus only as a helpful miracle worker, and the miracles cease to be signs (6:26-27).
 - B. To help people move on, Jesus sometimes hesitates or refuses to work a miracle.
 - C. What the signs point to and what ultimately replaces them in the pilgrimage of faith is the cross, resurrection (2:18-22), and the Spirit, and the love Christ's followers have for one another.
- XII. Some comments on the relationship of the miracles in John to those of the synoptics and Jesus.
- A. In some respects the Johannine miracles differ from those of the synoptics and, presumably, of Jesus.
 - 1. John has no exorcisms. Does John have a more sophisticated theology that does not believe that medical problems can be caused by demons?
 - 2. In the synoptics the miracles point to the kingdom and are part of its substance, whereas in John they point to Jesus and are only signs.
 - B. Nevertheless, John's understanding of miracle flows naturally from that of the synoptics and Jesus.
 - 1. For Jesus and the synoptics the miracles are also signs of the kingdom and even of Jesus's role in inaugurating it (e.g., Matthew 11:2-6.)
 - 2. And the kingdom is basically letting others have the same power and freedom and relationship to God which Jesus had. Hence, pointing to the kingdom is close to pointing to Jesus.
 - 3. I suspect John's understanding of the miracles arose out of meditation on them in the light of the resurrection and its Christological implications.
- XIII. I think that John's theology that miracles are signs and are especially for those who are spiritually open but not advanced is profound
- XIV. Nevertheless, in the edited gospel, the signs also point toward the different stages of spiritual growth.
- A. The miracle at Cana concerns conversion (2:11).
 - B. The healing of the royal official's son stresses the need for a more mature faith.
 - C. The healing of the man by the pool points to baptism.
 - D. The feeding of the multitude followed by the walking on water points to Eucharist.
 - E. The healing of the blind man symbolizes gaining spiritual sight (perception) and thereby becoming a committed disciple.
 - F. The raising of Lazarus symbolizes dying for Jesus and rising to eternal life.
- (time permitting) Some paintings illustrating the last and greatest of the seven signs, the raising of Lazarus.
- Assignment: Reread John and pay especial attention to what the gospel says

about signs.

John 1:1-2:12, Jesus Challenges People to Initial Conversion

Discussion: What makes people convert to a religion? What would make you convert? Do recent converts often become overenthusiastic?

I. The opening verses of the gospel have a striking literary problem: The sections about John the Baptist (1:6-8, 1:15) seem intrusive.

II. This problem is probably due to the final editor who added material about John the Baptist and produced the awkwardness.

III. In studying John's Gospel, we must use literary clues to divide the book into smaller units.

A. To understand a document, we normally break it up into sense units.

B. Modern documents use spaces, punctuation, or numbers to indicate where the breaks should be (e.g., "chapter 3").

C. Ancient biblical documents did not have these markers. The chapter and verse numbers in modern Bibles are later additions.

D. Ancient authors gave literary signals in the text to indicate breaks.

E. When analyzing a biblical book, we must look for these literary indicators and determine where the breaks are.

IV. Literarily, the additions concerning John the Baptist unite the opening verses of the gospel (1:1-18) to 1:19-2:12 and make 1:1-2:12 a single unit (L. William Countryman). Structurally, a series of successive days ties 1:19-2:12 together.

A. Each scene takes place on another "day" until 2:12. There the sequence ends because Jesus and his entourage go to Capernaum for "not many days." Subsequently, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover, and, as we shall see, I believe that the next major literary unit consists of what happens from this Passover through the following one.

B. 1:19-2:12 concerns the testimony of John the Baptist and the conversion of the first disciples.

C. The editor's insertions into 1:1-18 concern the testimony of John and people believing in Jesus through that testimony and so unite 1:1-18 to what follows. Note that 1:15 and 1:30 are virtually identical. Apparently the editor found 1:30 and added 1:15.

V. Countryman argues that the basic order of the gospel is the order of the stages of the spiritual life and that 1:35-2:25 (I prefer 2:12) is about conversion. I would merely add that it is only in this section that we have stories in which people who *will* become committed followers of Jesus achieve *initial* faith.

A. Elsewhere we have stories in which people believe but where this belief apparently goes no farther (e.g., 11:45).

B. We also have stories in which people believe and then at once go on to more mature faith (note, e.g., ch. 9).

C. By contrast, in 1:35-2:12 we have initial conversions of at least four people who will later become committed followers.

VI. By connecting the opening verses to 1:35-2:12, the editor gives us an

additional way of reading the opening verses, namely, as a description of a person before conversion. This situation is

- A. All that exists was made through Jesus, and he is the light which enlightens everyone.
- B. He has become incarnate, and various people (e.g., John the Baptist) have borne witness to him.
- C. Most of his own people have rejected him.
- D. However, some people accepted him, and he gave them power to become God's children.
- E. No one can know who Jesus really is without God or some other person bearing witness.
- F. Therefore, those who have not heard this witness are in darkness, out of touch with the source of all light and life.

Workshop: What are the structural parallels between 1:35-42, 1:43-51, and 7:45-52?

VII. It is clear that 1:35-51 consists of two parallel scenes, the calling of Andrew and Peter and the calling of Philip and Nathaniel. These scenes are about the same length, occur on succeeding days, and have the same literary structure (see below).

VIII. These stories present parallel accounts of conversions.

- A. In each scene we have a conversion chain: Jesus calls someone who then immediately goes and brings a third person to Jesus.
- B. In each case the invitation issued by the new convert is basically the same: We have found the one foretold (1:41, 1:45).
- C. In each scene we have the invitation to come and see (1:39, 1:46).
- D. In each scene the stress falls on an encounter between Jesus and the final person called, an encounter in which Jesus makes a solemn pronouncement which tells them something about themselves.

IX. There are striking parallels to 1:35-51 in the later stories of the woman at the well (4:1-42) and of Nicodemus and the Jewish leaders (7:45-52), even if these later stories are not primarily about conversion.

X. A Johannine model for conversion.

- A. Conversion begins when someone testifies to the identity of Jesus. The person giving the testimony may be a recent convert, and the testimony may not be mature theology. The titles that the various missionaries give to Jesus (e.g., "Messiah") fall far short of John's central theme that Jesus is God incarnate.
- B. The person issues an invitation to come and see. Note that the reader must reinterpret this invitation to apply it.
 - 1. In the gospel narrative, characters come and see the physical Jesus.
 - 2. The readers of the gospel cannot do this.
 - 3. Probably, for readers, coming and seeing is reading the gospel itself and visiting a Christian community where Christ's Spirit dwells.
- C. The invitation to come and see is a challenge to one's openness, and

- how one responds reveals one's deeper spiritual state. Notice the contrast between Nathaniel who is without deceit (1:47) and the Jewish leaders in 7:45-52.
- D. If one chooses to come and see, Jesus confirms the message by revealing something about one's true self.
- E. When this occurs, a convert can become too enthusiastic, and it may be necessary to say that more is to come.
- XI. This model of conversion had a special relevance to John's church which often had to depend on the testimony of recent converts, because people who were known to be Christians were expelled from the synagogues (e.g., 16:2). However, the model continues to be relevant today.
- A. Recent converts often have an enthusiasm and a connection to the world that facilitate missionary work.
- B. A conversion only becomes complete when it leads to a new self-understanding.
- XII. (review) 1:35-51 points forward to the Wedding at Cana (2:1-12) which somehow completes it.
- A. The gospel ties these units together by the system of consecutive days--a system which ends with Cana (note 2:12).
- B. 1:35-51 climaxes with the promise that Nathaniel will see greater things which will confirm his initial faith.
- C. The miracle at Cana is then described as the beginning of the signs, and we are told Jesus's "disciples believed in him" (2:11).
- XIII. (review) I think the basic theme of the story is that hidden signs will help establish the initial faith (or openness) of those who follow Jesus. The narrative emphasizes that the people in charge do not even know that a miracle has occurred, but yet the miracle inspires faith in Jesus's disciples.
- XIV. There is a clear break between 2:12 and 2:13 with a change in time, place, and tone.
- XV. A theme of the next section is that faith based on miracles is insufficient, and one must go on to something more.
- A. The double climax of 2:13-25 contrasts the immediate, untrustworthy faith of the many (vss. 23-25) and the later, better faith of the disciples (vs. 22). The first type of faith is based on signs only, whereas the superior type is based on the resurrection, the scripture, and the words of Jesus.
- B. Significantly, shortly thereafter Jesus declares that belief on the basis of signs is only a prelude to being born again (3:2-3).
- XVI. An attempt to explain 1:51.
- A. This verse is of extraordinary literary importance, since it is both the climax of a section and a major prediction about coming events.
- B. Nevertheless, the passage is difficult because the prophecy is odd and has no literal fulfillment in the gospel.
- C. In this passage Jesus replaces Jacob's ladder as the only link to God (cf. Genesis 28:10-17).
- D. The prophecy is fulfilled because the signs all point to Jesus as the link.
- E. Consequently, 1:51 supplies the correct understanding of who Jesus is

in contrast to the partial understandings of the initial converts.

1. Andrew, Philip, and Nathaniel give Jesus various titles (“Rabbi,” “Messiah,” “King of Israel”). Note that in this context “Son of God” only means “King of Israel” (= “Messiah”).

2. From the viewpoint of the evangelist, these are all true but insufficient.

3. By contrast, Jesus in this passage insists that he is a human being (“son of humanity”) who nevertheless is the only link to the Father. This claim is the same as the definitive Christology of the gospel’s opening verses.

F. One implication is that new converts cannot immediately know who Jesus really is. They must learn this later, and they can only learn it from Jesus himself.

Assignment: Read the sections in Sinclair that deal with John 1-2.

Judgment

Discussion: Does God judge people and punish them? If so, on what basis does he judge, and how does he punish? A look at John 3:16-21. Does Jesus judge or not? When is judgment?

I. In John's Gospel the theme of judgment is frequent and important. Judgment sometimes seems to be the purpose of Jesus's ministry (9:39, 12:31).

II. Yet, John's presentation of judgment is full of paradoxes.

A. Sometimes the gospel tells us that Jesus does not judge (3:17, 12:47), and sometimes it tells us that he does (5:30, 8:26) or even both (8:15-16a).

B. Sometimes judgment is in the future (especially, 5:26-29); sometimes in the present (e.g., 3:18). Sometimes judgment takes place when Jesus is crucified and, therefore, from the reader's perspective is already past (12:31-33).

C. 5:45 tells us that Moses will judge.

III. In part these paradoxes arise because Jesus does not judge in the imperfect way that others do. Jesus

A. Does not judge superficially or arbitrarily (7:24, 8:15), as his enemies do.

B. Does not judge independently but instead announces the Father's judgment (e.g., 5:30).

IV. The paradoxes about judgment also arise from John's attempt to deal with three perennial questions:

A. Is salvation past, present, or future?

B. How can God be perfectly loving and yet judge?

C. Is judgment on the basis of external criteria or on whether people did what they thought was right?

V. John's basic theology of judgment--a synthesis.

A. The Father and the Son are the only source of light and life (already

1:4).

B. Hence, apart from the Son who reveals the Father, the world is in darkness and death.

C. The Son comes to save the world by revealing God's love and humankind's sinfulness and who we can become through faith.

D. Nevertheless, the Son's coming exposes the world and, consequently, divides it.

1. Those who are good are open to him and become disciples.

2. Those who are evil are closed and become his enemies.

E. Consequently, Jesus's coming initiates judgment, since those who acknowledge him enter life, and those who do not acknowledge him reject the one source of genuine hope.

F. The final judgment at the resurrection is simply the culmination and ratification of the process. I think this final judgment is ultimate exposure. That is why Moses (5:45-47) and the word Jesus has spoken (12:47-48) will be the final judge. People who knew the writings of Moses or heard the teaching of Jesus had the opportunity to respond by believing in Jesus.

VI. John's answer to the three perennial questions.

A. When is judgment?

1. It is past in the sense that Jesus has already definitively revealed God's love and human sinfulness and who we can ideally become (i.e., like Jesus). Since the crucifixion especially revealed God's love and human sinfulness and the self-sacrifice that a transformed human life can make, it is the supreme moment of past judgment.

2. Judgment is present because Christ's revelation continues to challenge and expose us (e.g., when we read the gospel).

3. It is future because on the last day God will definitively ratify and end the process.

B. How can God be loving and still judge us?

1. God's love causes him to reveal the truth about himself and us.

2. By accepting that truth we enter into God's life-giving presence; by denying it we cut ourselves off.

3. Our response is largely based on whether we are good or evil, since it is harder to face the truth that we have done evil (3:18-21).

4. Hence, God is loving, and there is judgment.

C. Are we judged by external or internal standards? Internal standards prepare us to receive Christ, and he is the ultimate standard.

Discussion: Do you agree with John's theology of how God judges us?

VII. Progressive judgment.

A. As we have noted, Christian life in John is a series of stages leading to final blessedness. The stages are conversion, baptism and Eucharist, committed discipleship, martyrdom or taking Jesus's place in this world.

B. Each of these steps has an increasing price. Conversion requires coming and seeing; sacraments require the humble acceptance of paradox (note, especially, 6:52-66) and coming forward for a public confession;

committed discipleship, the acknowledgment that we are in darkness and slavery (8:31-37) and the willingness to accept rejection from any community that abides in darkness (ch. 9); martyrdom is death in this world (12:9-11); the cost of taking Jesus's place in this world is loving as Jesus loved.

C. Therefore, there is judgment at each stage of the Christian pilgrimage, because we can say no to the invitation to grow and thereby, reject life (6:66, 7:45-52, and 8:31).

D. Notice that just as the presence of Jesus makes his followers become better and better, so it makes his enemies grow worse and worse.

VIII. One helpful corollary to John's theology that judgment is exposure is that there is no judgment for those who have not heard God's word. Such people, of course, are in darkness; however, since they have not rejected God, they are not under judgment (9:41, 15:22a).

IX. Judgment and paradox in the thought of the historical Jesus are much the same as in John's Gospel once we accept John's equation of the kingdom with Jesus. Compare John 15:22-24 and Luke 11:31-32.

A. Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom was primarily an announcement of salvation; it was "good news."

B. However, to reject the kingdom is to reject salvation and exclude oneself. (Note such parables as the Great Supper and the Prodigal Son.)

C. Rejecting the kingdom has both present and future consequences.

D. Jesus's words and deeds expose us and are a foretaste of final exposure.

E. To follow Jesus we must deal with who we are; and the closer we are to him, the more spiritually demanding he is (progressive judgment).

F. Jesus (like the Jesus in John's Gospel) used outrage and paradox to shatter people's normal way of seeing so they could begin to perceive God's coming in ordinary things.

Assignment: Read Mark 11-16; study John 2:13-6:71. Read the sections in Sinclair that deal with John 2:13-6:71.

John 2:13-6:71: Jesus Challenges Us to Receive the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist

Discussion: Are ceremonies like graduations and weddings important? Are baptism and Eucharist (Mass, Holy Communion) important? Why or why not?

I. The synoptics mention one Passover during Jesus's ministry.

II. At this one Passover he does three things:

A. He first stages a protest in the temple.

B. He next institutes the Eucharist

C. He is then arrested, condemned, and executed.

III. Historically, all these things happened together. The protest in the temple was the cause of Jesus's arrest, and Jesus instituted the sacrament because he realized that he would soon die.

IV. In John's Gospel there are three Passovers during Jesus's ministry, and on

each of them he does one of the three things noted above, and he does them in the same order.

- A. On the first Passover he protests in the temple (2:13-22).
 - B. On the second he institutes the Eucharist (ch. 6).
 - C. On the third he suffers arrest, condemnation, and execution.
- V. Although we cannot be certain, it seems likely that the present non-historical arrangement comes from the editor.
- VI. The editor also reversed what are now chapters 5 and 6.
- A. Chapter 5 flows naturally into chapter 7.
 - B. In the present arrangement the geography is defective.
 - 1. At the beginning of chapter 6 Jesus goes across the Lake of Galilee even though up to that point he has been in Jerusalem!
 - 2. The note in 7:1 is also strange because it seems to imply that Jesus has just gone to Galilee, but in fact he has been there for some time.
 - C. In addition, the statement in 4:44 that Jesus was dishonored in his homeland works much better if chapter 6 immediately follows chapter 4 (note 6:60-71).
- VII. The editor moved 3:22-30 to its present location.
- A. Note that the geography of 3:22 presupposes a different literary context, since Jesus is already in Judea.
 - B. 3:10-21, 31-36 read much more logically if we omit 3:22-30.
 - C. Historically, John the Baptist was probably arrested before Jesus began work in Galilee (Mark 1:14), and the odd note in John 3:24 suggests that the editor was aware of this.
- VIII. The editor also moved 4:46-54 to its present location.
- A. There are important connections between 4:46-54 and 2:1-11, and originally these stories must have been closer together. Note, especially, the references to Cana and Capernaum, the fact that these stories concern the first and second signs, and that the second story explicitly refers back to the first (4:46).
 - B. In its present position 4:46-54 conflicts with 2:23, 3:2, and probably 4:45.
- IX. In the canonical (edited) gospel, 2:13-6:71 is a unit with the theme that the sacraments are Christ's body and replace the temple. The fact that the unit begins and ends on a Passover helps tie the section together.
- A. In the cleansing-of-the-temple scene we learn that Jesus's body is the true temple (2:21).
 - B. In chapter 4 Jesus insists that the Jerusalem temple has lost its value and must be replaced by true worship (4:20-26).
 - C. Then in chapter 6 Jesus insists that salvation comes through eating his flesh and drinking his blood.
- X. To a striking degree, sacramental material in John is restricted to chapters 3-6. John lacks references one might expect elsewhere, particularly Jesus himself getting baptized and the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.
- XI. However, in 3-6 the most explicit sacramental references are poorly

integrated into the text, and, apparently, the editor added them.

A. 3:5 has the only reference to "water" in Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus which otherwise deals with "spirit."

B. 4:1-2 is inconsistent over whether or not Jesus himself baptized (cf. 3:22).

C. 6:35-51a is a complete composition by itself, and 6:51b-58 seems tacked on. Note that in 6:35-61 Jesus is the bread of life; in 6:51b-58 his "flesh" is the bread.

XII. In the present (edited) gospel, however, the theme of 3:1-5:47 is Jesus invites people to receive baptism.

A. The section begins with Jesus telling Nicodemus that one must be born again by water and the spirit (3:5).

B. We then have a scene in which Jesus and his disciples baptize alongside John the Baptist, more people go to Jesus than to John, and the Baptist acknowledges Jesus's superiority (3:22-26).

C. Next we have the encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well (4:1-42). The section begins with an explicit reference to baptism (4:1-2), and in the following story Jesus insists that he alone can give the living water which lasts forever. In the larger context, this water must be the water of baptism.

D. Then we have the story of the healing of the royal official's son (4:43-54). In this story Jesus challenges the father to go from an initial faith to a firmer one--a faith more appropriate for baptism. At the end of the story we read, "He and his whole household believed" (vs. 53). In the early church often whole families were baptized together (e.g., Acts 16:15, 33).

E. Finally, we have the story of the healing of the paralytic by the pool (5:1-16). Like the woman by the well, he could not be saved by natural water. Note the theme that it is disastrous to return to sin (5:14). Post-baptismal apostasy was a major problem for the early church, including the Johannine community (e.g., 1 John 2:19).

XIII. In the present (edited) gospel chapter 6 concerns the Eucharist.

A. In the story of the feeding of the multitude there are Eucharistic overtones in the mention of Passover and in Jesus taking the bread and giving thanks.

B. Subsequently, Jesus says that the feeding is a sign of something more than normal food (6:26-27).

C. Finally, Jesus insists that life comes only from eating his flesh and drinking his blood (6:51b-58).

XIV. Accordingly, it seems likely that the editor deliberately produced a section on baptism followed by a section on Eucharist.

XV. This new arrangement continues the recapitulation of the Christian life, since in the early church (and for that matter, today) the next step after conversion is normally baptism followed by Eucharist.

XVI. Jesus insists one must go on to receive the sacraments. Conversion and signs are not enough; people must be born from above (3:2-3) and eat real bread (e.g., 6:53). Note 4:48. The gospel links the sacraments to the giving of the Spirit

(3:3). Hence, without the sacraments there is no salvation.

XVII. Baptism and Eucharist are the realities to which the Old Testament purifications (3:25, L. William Countryman) and manna (6:31-33) point and which replace them.

XVIII. One reason baptism is essential is that it necessitates a public confession of Jesus. Therefore, it is a step beyond conversion which can take place secretly. Note that the baptismal section

A. Begins when Nicodemus comes to Jesus *by night* and confesses faith, and Jesus then challenges him to take the next step (3:1-3; cf. 19:38-39).

B. Ends with the story of the man by the pool who denounces Jesus in order to protect himself (5:11-16).

XIX. The challenge to make a public confession by coming for baptism was especially appropriate for Jewish Christians who kept their faith secret to avoid expulsion from the synagogues (12:42).

XX. One reason that the Eucharist is essential is that it involves an acknowledgment of the reality of the incarnation. The end of chapter 6 insists that in the Eucharist we eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood.

XXI. The theology that the Eucharist points to the reality of Christ's flesh was an implicit criticism of Christians who denied that Christ had a real body. By the time the editor was at work (c. 100 C.E.), Docetism was a growing movement in the Church. At least some Docetists did not receive the Eucharist.

XXII. The passages about future resurrection in John's Gospel occur in the sections on baptism and Eucharist (5:21-29, 6:39-40, 44, 54).

XXIII. Apparently, the editor links the sacraments to meaningful life after death. Since human beings are a psychosomatic unity, we can only believe in real life after death if we also believe that the Spirit can be present in material things and transform them. This faith is the same faith that vindicates the sacraments.

XXIV. Like Jesus's body, the sacraments are material embodiments of spiritual realities and make those realities available to human beings.

XXV. Because the sacraments like Jesus's body are the material embodiments of spiritual realities, they are paradoxical and their importance can be missed.

XXVI. Hence, Jesus speaks about them in ironical ways which challenge people to come to deeper perception.

XXVII. Because the sacraments are paradoxical and require a public confession, they require another stage of spiritual growth beyond conversion.

XXVIII. John insists this growth can only come through God's leading (e.g., 6:44).

XXIX. Not everyone takes this next spiritual step or sticks to it.

A. Nicodemus symbolizes someone who hesitates to receive baptism.

B. The paralyzed man by the pool symbolizes someone who abandons Jesus after baptism. Note the end of the story.

C. 6:66 clearly symbolizes people who cannot go on to receive the Eucharist.

D. 6:67-71 reminds us that we can receive the Eucharist and still subsequently betray Jesus.

XXX. When we receive the sacraments, we can revere Jesus as the one who gave

them and is the life-giving presence in them. He is the living water and the living bread.

XXXI. Nevertheless, John also emphasizes that the sacraments are themselves elementary, and one must go farther. In response to Nicodemus's protest, Jesus insists that up to now they have only been discussing "earthly things" (3:12). See also 3:30-32 and 6:61-63. An odd detail in the walking on water is interesting (L. William Countryman): "They wanted to take him into the boat," but were not able (6:21).

XXXII. I believe that the gospel's presentation of the sacraments is of continuing importance. In church history there have been two tendencies: 1) to devalue or eliminate the sacraments, 2) to make them the heart of Christianity. John's Gospel suggests that the sacraments are a necessary first step.

Testimony, Perception, and True Faith

Discussion: Can we ever know whether what Christianity claims about God and Jesus is true? If so, how?

I. As 1:6-7, 15-16 already make abundantly clear, testimony to Jesus is a central theme in John's Gospel.

II. As we can see from various passages and, most of all from 5:33-40, there are several different kinds of testimony.

A. The testimony of human beings (e.g., that of the woman at the well).

B. The testimony of the Jesus's own words and deeds.

C. The testimony of the Spirit which seems to include the scriptures properly interpreted and inner experience.

III. Of these types of testimony, the lowest is that of human beings.

A. This is the testimony that initiates someone's interest in Jesus and requires no discernment for someone to hear and understand it.

B. To profit from it, all people have to do is "come and see." As we have noted, this invitation exposes whether the hearers are open to spiritual growth.

C. 5:33-40 (especially, vs. 36) explicitly states that even John the Baptist's testimony is inferior to that of Jesus's own words and works.

IV. The testimony of human beings is the lowest kind because it is relatively unimpressive and cannot mediate a direct relationship with Jesus. At most, it bears witness to someone else's faith and thereby challenges the hearers.

V. Therefore, to some extent the testimony of human beings loses its importance after one encounters Jesus. Then one hears Jesus's own testimony, and the testimony of others about him becomes less significant. See John 4:39-42.

VI. Consequently, the ideal evangelist is content to bring people to Jesus and pass from the scene.

A. In this gospel there are two ideal evangelists, John the Baptist (whose testimony already appears in the prologue) and the BD (whose testimony includes the fourth gospel itself).

B. In this gospel these individuals have no dignity of their own apart from

their testimony to Jesus, and they wish none.

1. The Baptist refuses to make any claim for himself except that he is preparing for Christ's coming (1:19-27). It is noteworthy that in the synoptics the Baptist is in some sense the prophet Elijah (e.g., Matthew 17:10-13) whose return from heaven was awaited, whereas in John's Gospel the Baptist explicitly denies this identification.
2. The BD does not even have a name in the gospel but is simply "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

C. Both men apparently are also content to pass from the scene once their testimony is complete (3:29b-30, 21:20-23).

D. Because of this selflessness, these two people are especially reliable. The testimony of people who are seeking worldly success through "religion" is not trustworthy (cf. 5:44).

E. Because these two people and, by implication, others who are like them, are reliable, they are of singular importance. The Baptist appears to be a crucial part of God's eternal plan (1:6-7), and the BD is the link to Jesus, just as Jesus is the link to the Father (1:18, 21:20).

F. What the gospel says about the ideal evangelist coheres with its theme of not seeking one's own glory and is profound and relevant.

VII. The second type of testimony, which is one step up the spiritual ladder, is Jesus's words and deeds (5:36).

A. This testimony is greater because it is more impressive (note, especially, 7:46, 9:32) and because it mediates a more direct relationship with Jesus. Therefore, it is more certain, particularly since Jesus does not seek his own glory.

B. Consequently, Jesus can insist that people should believe on the authority of his words reinforced by his works (10:36-38, 14:10-11).

C. This greater testimony is more difficult to receive.

1. The miracles can be misleading, since they tempt people to see Jesus primarily as a wonder worker who satisfies material needs (6:26).
2. Jesus's preaching in and of itself is incredible, since it consists essentially of a person saying that he is God (cf., e.g., 10:33).

D. To receive and profit from this testimony, one needs a deeper spiritual perception. One must see the miracles as signs pointing to spiritual truths about Jesus and detect the Father bearing witness to him (8:17-18).

E. This deeper perception depends both on one's openness, especially to doing God's will (7:17), and on God's gift (6:65).

VIII. The third type of testimony, which is the final step, is the inner testimony that comes from the indwelling of the Father and the Son through the Spirit (e.g., 14:15-20, 25-26).

A. This testimony is superior for two related reasons.

1. It consists of an unmediated relationship and is certain. People know Jesus and the Father as directly as they know themselves. They know the Father as Jesus does (no longer as servants, but friends; 15:15).

2. This testimony also tells us all that mature Christians need to know, including the proper interpretation of scripture and of the life and the teaching of Jesus. (The Spirit "will teach you all things" [14:26].)

B. This testimony is the most difficult to receive and is utterly beyond "the world," because it depends completely on divine gift and graced perception, and these come only to those who love as fully as Jesus loved (14:15-21).

{If the second kind of testimony to some extent replaces the first, the third kind to some extent replaces the second.}

IX. Some implications (homily):

A. (John Boyle) We are in a better position to know Jesus than those who were with him during the earthly ministry.

B. The problem with most theological discussion is that it deals only with the first and second kinds of testimony and, hence, can never lead to certainty.

C. We need to grow into the third type.

Assignment: Study John 7:1-10:42 and the sections in Sinclair that deal with it.

John 7:1-10:42: Jesus Challenges Us to Committed Discipleship

Discussion: Reactions to John 7:1-10:52. Many people feel that this is the most disturbing section in the gospel because of Jesus's extremely harsh and divisive language. We should note that this material is not an accurate account of what the historical Jesus said. We should also note that the use of extreme language was typical of religious and philosophical debate in Jesus's time and of Jesus's own style of speaking.

I. John 7:53-8:11, The Woman Caught in Adultery.

A. On the basis of external attestation (manuscripts), style, and narrative flow, it is certain this story was not part of the original Gospel of John (i.e., the latest text from which all surviving manuscripts derive).

B. Apparently it was added to some copies of John's Gospel (as well as a few copies of Luke) to prevent the story from being lost.

C. I think the story is historical, but even if it is not, it is consistent with the character of Jesus.

D. The story is a striking example of Jesus's

1. Mercy toward women and "sinners"

2. Challenge of religious leaders

3. Ability to expose hypocrisy and the hidden depths of human hearts.

E. (Raymond Brown) In the place where it normally occurs in the manuscripts, the story illustrates how Jesus does and does not judge (i.e., he does not condemn but exposes people and challenges them to change).

(time permitting): Paintings of the woman caught in adultery.

II. 7:1-10:42 is a single literary unit concerning Jesus's dangerous trip to

Jerusalem.

III. Chapters 7-8 contain two things that are extremely odd:

- A. The demand that Jesus reveal his works to his *disciples* (7:3).
 - 1. This demand seems to conflict with the further demand that he reveal himself to the world, which is what Jesus and his brothers discuss in the subsequent verses.
 - 2. It is strange that Jesus's brothers who do not believe in him would be concerned about his *disciples*.
 - 3. If Jesus is in Galilee, why are his disciples in Judea?
- B. 8:30-31. How can people believe in Jesus here and seek to stone him only a few verses later (8:59)? Moreover, in 8:45-46 Jesus says that they do not believe.

IV. I would suggest that both these oddities are additions by the editor.

V. With these additions the theme of chapters 7-10 is Jesus asks us to go on to committed discipleship.

- A. In chapter 7 Jesus is challenged to reveal his works to his disciples (7:3).
- B. In chapter 8 Jesus challenges people to continue in his word and become his disciples (8:31).
- C. In chapter 9 the man born blind persists in following Jesus despite persecution. In the story the Pharisees explicitly state that he is Jesus's "disciple" (9:28).
- D. In chapter 10 Jesus talks about his sheep who follow him.

VI. To become a committed disciple, one must do two things:

- A. Humbly acknowledge that one is still in slavery and ignorance and must continue to follow Jesus. This is what the would-be disciples in chapter 8 and the Pharisees in chapter 9 fail to do. Note that, by contrast, the man born blind does acknowledge his ignorance (9:12, 25).
- B. Suffer rejection from a world that will not believe in Jesus. This is what Nicodemus and the man born blind do. Such rejection exposes the sinfulness of the world.

VII. These two requirements were especially relevant to some of the Christians of John's own day.

- A. The need to acknowledge that a "committed" Christian is still enslaved to sin and ignorance and must grow further was especially relevant to members of the Johannine community who apparently thought that baptism automatically makes Christians sinless and spiritually wise (cf., e.g., 1 John 2:27, 1:8-9).
- B. The realization that committed disciples must be prepared to suffer rejection from the world was especially relevant to the Jewish Christians who kept their faith secret so that they would not be expelled from the synagogues (cf., e.g., 9:20-23).

VIII. To address his community, the editor re-directed the invective in chapters 7-10 away from Jews and toward hypocritical Christians.

IX. John 7-10 suggests that with committed discipleship comes an inner spiritual seeing.

- A. In chapter 7 Jesus offers the gift of the spirit (7:37-39).
 - B. In chapter 8 Jesus proclaims he is the light of the world (8:12).
 - C. In chapter 9 the man born blind gradually comes to perceive that Jesus is from God before ever physically seeing Jesus.
 - D. In chapter 10 Jesus insists that the sheep recognize their master's *voice* and can distinguish that voice from all other voices (10:4-5).
- X. Only with this inner spiritual perception can someone know that Jesus is God.
- A. In chapter 7-10 Jesus reveals his divinity openly (8:58, 10:30).
 - 1. The section begins with the challenge to Jesus to show himself to the world (7:4).
 - 2. In the climax of chapter 8 and one of the climaxes of chapter 10 Jesus publicly insists on his divinity (8:58, 10:30).
 - B. In response the “Jews” [or “Judeans”; see below]
 - 1. Become divided and confused
 - 2. Attempt to kill Jesus. Note: The hostility between Jesus and the “Jews” here probably reflects later Christian history (especially, 9:22) more than the situation when Jesus himself was alive.
 - C. Jesus insists that the knowledge of who he is cannot come to people who do not wish to do God's will (7:17), but only comes to his sheep who follow him (10:14, 10:26-30).
 - D. These sheep participate in his divinity and can rightly be called “gods” (10:34-35).
- XI. Of course, belief in the divinity of Jesus is absolutely necessary (e.g., 8:12, 8:24).
- XII. Nevertheless, committed discipleship and the perception and faith that accompany it are still not the ultimate spiritual goal. In chapters 7-10 the evangelist keeps insisting that Jesus's hour has not yet arrived (7:30, 33; 8:20).

Irony in the Fourth Gospel; Nicodemus

- I. Irony pervades John's Gospel.
- II. Some important ways that this irony is achieved:
 - A. Giving the reader more information than the characters in the narrative have.
 - 1. From the opening verses on the reader knows that Jesus is the incarnation of the Divine Word.
 - 2. However, the characters in the narrative do not know this.
 - 3. Consequently, the reader understands things that the characters do not and passes judgment on the incomprehension of the characters.
 - B. Jesus using words and phrases which have double meanings (born again/born from above; running water/living water; etc.) which the characters interpret in one way but the reader correctly interprets in another.
 - C. Statements which the characters in the gospel recognize as being true,

but which the reader understands as being true in a much deeper or wider sense (e.g., 11:36, 11:50-52).

III. Literarily, the irony

A. Adds an edge to the narrative and challenges the reader to come to a deeper perception.

B. Binds us to the narrator, since we share an insider's knowledge (Laura Sweat).

IV. John's Gospel insists that Jesus used such irony during his earthly life but after the resurrection spoke plainly (16:25).

V. Historically, it is true that Jesus used irony (exaggerated statements, ambiguous ones, stories with unexpected endings) and that the Church reinterpreted his teaching after the resurrection.

VI. Of course, Jesus's promise in the Fourth Gospel that he will speak plainly after the resurrection is fulfilled in much of the book itself. Most of what Jesus says in the gospel was written by the evangelist in the light of the resurrection and the leading of the Spirit.

VII. In the edited gospel Jesus's promise to speak plainly suggests that as the readers grow spiritually, they no longer need paradoxical explanations.

VIII. Therefore, irony is appropriate in speaking to the sinful or the spiritually immature.

IX. In John's Gospel there is also frequent irony in the sinful/immature responses to Jesus. Here are some examples:

A. The critics of Jesus give contradictory justifications for rejecting him (7:27 versus 7:42).

B. Sometimes people unwittingly speak the truth or part of it (e.g., 7:35, 8:22).

C. A person's objection to Jesus is in fact evidence for him. Note 9:29 versus 7:27.

D. A particularly rich and impressive illustration of Johannine irony is 11:47-52. Note that this passage was written after the Romans had destroyed the temple!

X. The irony in sinful/immature responses to Jesus suggests that the problem of unbelief is not one of simple ignorance. People know at least much of the truth even though they cannot perceive.

Discussion: Do people often know more of the truth than they can admit?

XI. Nicodemus in John's Gospel.

A. Most characters in John's Gospel appear only once or twice.

B. Nicodemus by contrast appears three times (3:1-9, 7:45-52, 19:38-42).

C. Since the last two passages explicitly refer back to the first, the gospel invites us to compare these scenes.

D. Scholars disagree over whether we should see Nicodemus as a positive or negative figure.

E. My opinion is that in the edited gospel he is an illustration of someone who grows by going from conversion to eternal life.

Assignment: Study John 11:1-12:50 and the sections in Sinclair that deal with it.

John 11:1-12:50: Jesus Challenges Us to Die and Gain New Life

Discussion: Do you believe in life after death? If so, what do you think it is like and why? If not, what is the point of our present lives?

- I. The theme of life (and death) pervades John's Gospel. It occurs in the beginning (1:4) and climax (20:31) and is very common elsewhere.
- II. The theme of life has two sets of polarities:
 - A. Physical versus spiritual life (e.g., 6:27).
 - B. Future resurrection versus eternal life which begins in the present (e.g., 11:24-26).
- III. To some extent the tensions between these polarities may be the result of editing. My own opinion is that
 - A. The editor was conservative and (like most early Christians) believed
 1. At death part of us (the "spirit") goes to a preliminary fulfillment or punishment. The righteous dead are with Christ in heaven, and the wicked are suffering elsewhere.
 2. Later Jesus will return in glory to earth, raise and wonderfully transform the bodies of the dead, and reunite them with their "spirits."
 3. The previously dead who were righteous will then reign with Christ on a renewed earth. The wicked will suffer, perhaps underground.
 4. The editor held this view because
 - a. As N.T. Wright has shown, the type of Judaism from which Christianity primarily originated (Pharisaism) believed in a two-step life after death, and apparently Jesus did also.
 - b. The bodily resurrection of Jesus reinforced the view that the bodies of the rest of humanity would finally rise.
 - B. By contrast, I believe that the evangelist was radical and held that at death our transformed selves go to Christ for judgment, and the righteous will remain with him in heaven forever (e.g., 14:1-3; Rudolf Bultmann). According to this view, Christ would not return to earth, and there would be no fleshly resurrection of the rest of humanity. The evangelist held this view because he thought that the bodily resurrection of Jesus was primarily a theological "sign," rather than a model for our future resurrection. Of course, this view worked better the longer that Jesus did not return and raise the bodies of the dead.
- IV. For the rest of the lecture, however, we will concentrate on the canonical text and struggle with what the present gospel itself says, regardless of how it originated.
- V. Jesus (or the eternal Word) is the source of all dimensions of life.
 - A. He gives physical life to all things (1:3-4) and saves the lives of his followers (ch. 11 & 18:8-9).

- B. He is the source of future resurrection (5:25, 28-29; 6:39).
 - C. He is also the source of spiritual life (14:19).
- VI. Nevertheless, the gospel is primarily concerned about spiritual life, not physical, and about present eternal life, not resurrection on the last day.
- A. The gospel contrasts physical life unfavorably with spiritual (e.g., physical bread versus living bread) and makes physical life a symbol for spiritual.
 - B. The texts promising future resurrection are few and reflect traditional theology.
 - C. By contrast, what the gospel emphasizes and what is most original in its thought is eternal life.
- VII. Eternal life is a dimension to life which we receive through Christ and which will continue forever and be affirmed on the last day.
- A. This dimension is hidden from the world (14:18-19).
 - B. Yet, like the wind it is powerfully real and energizing. The same Greek word means both spirit and wind.
 - C. Most important, this dimension of life necessarily lasts forever (4:14).
 - D. We are in eternal life or death now; final judgment merely affirms our present state (e.g., 5:24-29).
- VIII. Eternal life has these properties because it comes from knowing Jesus and God (17:3) who are life (6:57) and abiding in their life-giving Spirit (7:37-39).
- IX. In the gospel produced by the Beloved Disciple, 12:1 apparently began a literary unit that went on to describe Jesus's death.
- A. 12:1 starts a countdown of six days until the "Passover."
 - B. This closing series of days balances the opening series of days in what are now chapters 1-2.
- X. In the present chapters 11-12 the editor probably added most of the material, especially, 11:2, 12:44-50, and the passages about Lazarus (Raymond Brown).
Note
- A. 11:2 previews material which will not be narrated until later.
 - B. Jesus has already hidden himself before shouting 12:44-50.
 - C. In the first three gospels there is no hint that Mary or Martha or the woman who anointed Jesus had a brother named Lazarus, and John 11:1 assumes that readers know who Mary and Martha are but do not know about Lazarus. Moreover, the end of chapter 10 seems to conclude Jesus's public ministry. In chapter 11 we do not have the negative attitude toward the "Jews" that is typical of what the BD wrote.
- XI. In the present gospel, however, chapters 11-12 are a single literary unit.
- A. The otherwise puzzling 11:2 ties the chapters together. By previewing material in chapter 12, the verse invites readers to see 11-12 as a single whole.
 - B. The material about Lazarus, Mary, and Martha pervades both chapters. There is even a reference to Lazarus after Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (12:17).
 - C. A single theme unites this section, namely the theme of life through death.

1. The section begins with the story of Lazarus dying and Jesus raising him from the dead.
2. Then in chapter 12 Jesus repeatedly refers to his own death (7-8, 23-36) and how it will draw all people to himself.
3. The conclusion of the otherwise puzzling 12:44-50 is "and I know that his commandment is eternal life. So what I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me."

XII. In the present gospel, this section repeatedly proclaims that first Christ must die so others can live, and then the committed Christian must be prepared to die as Christ did.

- A. Near the start of the section Thomas says, "Let us also go that we may die with him" (11:16). As usual in John's Gospel, a character speaks more of the truth than he realizes. In this case Jesus must die first so Thomas and others may have life; however, then they must also die.
- B. In this section Lazarus represents the committed Christian. Lazarus is Jesus's friend whom he loves (11:5, 11).
- C. Jesus must die in order for Lazarus to live. Thanks to the work of the editor, it is the raising of Lazarus which impels the chief priests to kill Jesus (11:45-50).
- D. Jesus asks Lazarus to die. Indeed, because of Jesus Lazarus has to face death twice.
 1. Because of his love for him, Jesus does not keep Lazarus from dying.
 2. Then after Jesus raises him from the dead, the chief priests decide to kill Lazarus because through him others are believing in Jesus (12:9-11).
- E. In chapter 12 Jesus insists that not only must he die, but so must his servants (12:24-26).

XIII. If committed Christians die with Jesus, they will immediately rise to new life. Hence, martyrdom is a privilege, and Jesus's love impels him to let Lazarus (the symbolic martyr) die.

XIV. Jesus's challenge to die for him had a special relevance to the Johannine community which was suffering bloody persecution (16:2).

XV. Of course, for those whom Jesus calls to martyrdom, it is the last step of the ideal spiritual life. Martyrs sacrifice their very lives and join Jesus in heavenly glory.

XVI. However, as we shall see, those whom Jesus does not call to martyrdom have a different spiritual goal--taking his place in this world.

Assignment: Study John 10-12 and the sections in Sinclair that deal with it.

Two Important Themes Which Appear in Chapters 10-12

I. John 10-12 contains the climax of an important theme, the rejection of the gospel by most of Jesus's own people.

- A. This theme seems to come up already in the prologue (1:11), and it

grows in intensity thereafter. Finally, 12:35-42 stresses that time is running out and then that it has run out.

B. In discussing John's views on the Jews rejecting Jesus, it is best to distinguish the rejection of Jesus by most of the Jews who heard him, and the later rejection by Jews of Christianity (e.g., 16:2).

C. John gives two contrasting views as to why most of "the Jews" who heard Jesus rejected him:

1. Sin (e.g., 15:22-24)
2. Lack of election (10:26, 12:39-40).

D. John makes no attempt to reconcile these contrasting explanations, and perhaps we should not either. Just as belief is a virtue and a gift, and, therefore, a mystery, so unbelief is a mystery.

E. The rejection of the Jews who knew Jesus and did not believe in him is definitive (i.e., leads to condemnation), because they committed the ultimate sin of killing Jesus and rejected the greatest of signs.

Accordingly, they will not be able to take the necessary spiritual step of perceiving Jesus spiritually when he has departed (13:33, 14:19).

F. The theme of the Jews later rejecting Christianity reflects social problems in John's community.

1. It explains Jewish unbelief to the church. If "Jews" rejected Jesus, the church should not be surprised if Jews are now rejecting Christian preaching.
2. The theme of sinful Jews rejecting Christianity expresses the anger of the church after expulsion from the synagogue.
3. The theme of sinful Jews rejecting Christianity may be an attempt to force secret Jewish Christians (12:42-43) to take a public stand (Raymond Brown).

G. The Gospel of John acknowledges the possibility of Jews converting to Christianity in the present. The risen Christ can now draw all people to himself (12:32).

H. Excursus: Anti-Semitism and John's Gospel.

1. The persecution of the Jews has been one of the most shameful aspects of church history.
2. The New Testament has fed this evil.
3. In addition to what has been said above, the following must be stressed about John's hostility to the "Jews":
 - a. The anti-Semitism in John is not ethnic, only religious. The gospel itself emphasizes that ethnically Jesus was Jewish (4:9, 18:35) and so were his first followers (e.g., 1:47).
 - b. The gospel (and the New Testament in general) is polemical and does not give an unbiased presentation of Jewish belief and conduct.
 - c. John's community was a persecuted minority, not a persecuting majority. Hence,
 - 1). The bitterness of the anti-Semitism is an understandable product of its social situation.

2). At the time Christian anti-Semitism could not have led to persecution of orthodox Jews.

3). John's anti-Semitism should not be read uncritically by later Christians who far from being persecuted are in a political and social position to persecute.

d. The gospel provides no justification for injustice.

e. To some extent, the editor makes "the Jews" a symbol for uncommitted Christians. Note, especially, 8:30-31.

f. Sometimes, the term "Jews" in the gospel only means the leaders of the Jewish people or even only the inhabitants of Judea. In the original Greek, the word, "*Ioudaioi*," means both Judeans (people in southern Israel) and Jews (people who follow a religion). In 7:1 "*Ioudaioi*" should be translated as "Judeans."

g. Anti-Semitism was widespread in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

h. John's Gospel presupposes a period when the "Jews" are a different religion than Christians and, therefore, does not give us a reliable picture of the relationship of Christians to (other) Jews during the time of Jesus and the earliest church. Notice that John's Gospel itself records that during the lifetime of Jesus many "Jews" believed in Jesus.

i. The Judaism that John's Gospel attacks is, of course, not the same as the Judaism that exists in our own time two thousand years later.

II. A second major theme that reaches its climax in chapters 10-12 is the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles and the coming of Christ's hour.

A. The spread of the gospel to the Gentiles.

1. This theme is already implied in the prologue (1:12) and elsewhere in the gospel's opening chapters (e.g., 3:15-16), and then in chapter 4, Jesus converts Samaritans. Nevertheless, the theme reaches its climax in 10-12 (10:16, 12:19, 32), especially with the coming of the "Greeks" to see Jesus and with Jesus's announcement of his hour (12:20-23). These "Greeks" appear to be adherents of Judaism, but even so they symbolize the Gentile world. Note that the Acts of the Apostles also records that Christianity spread first to the Samaritans and then to the Greeks. As elsewhere, John projects subsequent events back into Jesus's lifetime.

2. John apparently looks forward to the conversion of members of different ethnic groups but seems to assume that the bulk of humanity will reject Christ.

3. Presumably this perspective reflects the experience of the Johannine community.

4. Excursus on John's theology of the world.

a. John's presentation of the "world" is disturbing to many

modern Christians, because John regards the world as evil, almost irremediably so (e.g., 15:18-25). Jesus declines even to pray for it (17:9).

b. In part this negative attitude toward the world is the result of persecution and missionary failure (16:2-3).

c. Still, John's theology of the world reflects his conviction that the only link to God is Jesus and John's awareness that the world rejected Jesus and often rejects the Christian message.

d. We also should admit that the "world" (i.e., the realms of politics, economics, institutional religion) often seems to be irremediably evil.

e. Moreover, John insists that God loves the world (3:16), that Jesus came to save it (e.g., 4:42), and that Christians challenge it.

f. Hence, the world has the potential to follow Jesus, and occasionally in John's Gospel we even read that the world does (e.g., 12:19).

g. Christians are to be in the world, but not of it (17:16). I think this is profound.

h. For John the "world" is only the human and spiritual forces that are separated from God. John's Gospel has little to say about matter and does not regard it as evil.

B. The theme of Christ's "hour" is foreshadowed earlier, but dramatically shifts in chapter 12.

1. Previously, the gospel has insisted that the hour has not come (e.g., 2:4, 8:20).

2. In chapter 12 we get the first of several notices that the hour has come (12:23, 13:1, 17:1).

3. Christ's hour is, of course, the crucifixion followed by the resurrection.

4. Paradoxically, the crucifixion is the hour of his "glory." Note how John alters the tradition of the agony in the garden. In John Jesus does not ask to be spared (12:27-28, cf. Mark 14:32-41). The passion is the hour of glory for several reasons:

a. Christ's death is his free choice (e.g., 10:18).

b. It demonstrates his love for the Father (14:31).

c. It demonstrates his (and the Father's) love for the world (3:16).

d. Of course, it also demonstrates the wickedness of the "world" (cf. 15:18-25).

e. It draws all people to himself and overcomes Satan (12:31-33).

f. It enables him to return to the Father and the exalted state he had before the incarnation (17:5).

Assignment: Read John 13-20. Study John 18-19, and read the sections in

Sinclair that deal with it.

Introduction to the Next Five Sections

- I. (review) Jesus's "hour" divides the Gospel of John into two halves. This "hour" is the hour in which Jesus is "lifted up" (note the double meaning of suspended from the cross and exalted) and is the crucifixion followed by the resurrection.
- II. As this division suggests, the heart of the gospel is the second half (roughly ch. 13 on). Note the solemn introductions (12:20-24, 13:1).
- III. The second half of the gospel itself consists of two halves.
 - A. The last discourses (& foot washing), chapters 13-17
 - B. The passion and resurrection, chapters 18-20.
 - C. As we have seen, chapter 21 is an appendix added by the editor to summarize the stages of the Christian life.
- IV. Basically, the discourses are a commentary on the significance of the Passion and resurrection.
 - A. Act and commentary (sign and discourse) are typical of the gospel as a whole.
 - B. The Farewell Discourses look forward to the crucifixion (e.g., 15:13).
 - C. The discourses also look forward to the resurrection and the subsequent state of affairs, including such things as the coming of the Spirit (e.g., 14:25-26) and the persecution of the community (16:2-3).
 - D. The discourses then put all this in spiritual perspective. Note, for example, how the discourses give theological reassurance over the persecution which the Johannine community was experiencing. According to the discourses there is no need to be alarmed because
 1. Jesus prophesied these troubles (16:4).
 2. The world hates the community because the world hated Jesus (15:18-21).
 3. The Holy Spirit will reassure the believers that it is the world which is wrong (16:8-11).
- V. Because the last discourses are a commentary on the crucifixion and resurrection, we will first deal with John's accounts of the passion and resurrection; then we will return to the discourses.

John's Account of the Passion

Discussion: What do you think was the disciples' understanding of the crucifixion when it happened? How did that understanding change subsequently?

- I. Unlike most of the gospel, John's account of the passion (chs. 18-19) has extensive synoptic parallels.
- II. Despite the overlap, there may not actually be any direct dependence (note the lack of verbal agreement).

- III. John's account contains much that is probably historical.
- A. The basic sequence of events is similar to the one in the synoptics and is probably accurate.
 - B. In addition, John's account even has details that appear to be more reliable than synoptic parallels (especially, that Jesus was crucified on the day before Passover and not on Passover itself).
 - C. There is debate among scholars about the relative responsibility of the Jews and the Romans for the death of Jesus. At least three possibilities are historically plausible and can be defended from John's Gospel itself.
 - 1. The Romans willingly executed Jesus because they feared that he would attempt to become the "King of the Jews" (19:19).
 - 2. The high priests forced the Roman government to execute Jesus, because they were offended by his attack on the temple and feared that he would lead a revolt which would result in the destruction of the nation (11:47-50).
 - 3. The populace of Jerusalem forced the Roman governor to execute Jesus, because the populace preferred a violent revolutionary to a pacifist (18:40). N.T. Wright has made a strong case that Jesus's protest in the temple was an attack on violent patriotism. God's house was to be for all the nations (Mark 11:17). However, in John's Gospel the crowd may only be the high priests and their supporters, not the general populace, and John seems to regard Jesus's demonstration in the temple courtyard only as a protest against the commercialization of the temple (2:16).
 - 4. I believe there is a measure of truth in all these positions, but think that the last is perhaps the most important. The only historically plausible explanation of why the Roman governor released Barabbas, a convicted revolutionary, during the trial of Jesus is that the governor was desperate to placate a nationalistic crowd who was about to riot.
- IV. John's anti-Semitism probably distorts the historical record by making the "Jews" almost solely responsible for Jesus's death, whereas historically it is clear that the Romans actually executed him. Blaming the Jews rather than the Romans was politically expedient but in subsequent church history encouraged anti-Semitism.
- V. Theological concerns dominate John's account of Jesus's passion.
- A. Historical details are recalled primarily because of their theological significance (e.g., 19:24, 34-37).
 - B. Theology shapes much of the narrative flow (e.g., of the trial before Pilate which leads to Pilate proclaiming that Jesus is king).
 - C. Certain things are historically incredible and can only be understood symbolically (e.g., the use of hyssop in 19:29; cf. Exodus 12:21-27).
- VI. Consequently, chapters 18-19 are a good example of an inspired interpretation of the past intended to evoke faith.
- VII. (review) Before recounting the Passion, John has repeatedly looked forward to it and given a theological perspective to interpret it. Specifically, we know that

it is Christ's "hour" of glory in which he will

- A. Die by his free choice (10:18)
- B. Demonstrate his love for the Father (14:31) and for the world (3:16)
- C. Demonstrate the wickedness of the world (cf. 15:18-25)
- D. Overthrow the power of Satan and draw all people to himself (12:31-32).
- E. Return to the Father and heavenly glory (17:5).

VIII. Because of this extensive preview, John is able in the actual narrative to keep explicit theological commentary to a minimum and let the account speak for itself.

IX. The narrative stresses the following:

- A. Jesus's death is voluntary and providential.
 - 1. No one else has any control over the course of events. Note, especially, the impossibility of arresting Jesus without his consent (18:3-11) and the inability of Pilate to obtain his release (19:10-16).
 - 2. Jesus foresees all that is to happen and brings it to pass (e.g., 18:4).
 - 3. The events repeatedly fulfill scripture (e.g., 19:23-24).
- B. The world condemns Jesus, because he is not of this world (i.e., he did not come from this world and does not share its perspectives [18:36-38]).
- C. At the crucifixion Jesus reigns as king over all, and the world inadvertently proclaims his lordship (note, especially, 19:19-22).
- D. Jesus continues to care for his own (18:7-9, 19:26-27).
- E. Jesus's death exposes people for who they really are. Notice Peter's weakness, Pilate's impotence, and the irony of Jewish leaders proclaiming that Caesar is their only king. John wrote the gospel after a Jewish revolt against Rome had been crushed and, as a result, it was even more clear that the Jews had no king but Caesar (D. Moody Smith).
- F. Jesus's death challenges his followers to take his place in this world (e.g., 18:21).

X. Some exegetical comments on the words from the cross. The ancient world in general and the Bible in particular held that a person's last words were especially significant.

- A. "Woman, behold your son"; "son behold your mother" (19:26-27). Here Jesus is challenging the two people to whom he has been closest to love one another as he has loved them and take his place in this world now that he is returning to the Father. They meet the challenge, since the BD takes Mary into his own home. Hence, we have a narrative illustration of the theme of the disciples doing Jesus's work after his death, as well as an illustration of the highest stage of the spiritual life.
- B. "I thirst" (19:28).
 - 1. Jesus speaks to fulfill scripture (Psalm 69, especially, vs. 21); this psalm is frequently cited in the New Testament (e.g., Jn. 2:17). First century Jews and Christians thought that much more of the Old Testament was prophetic than critical scholars do today. Nevertheless, the use of the psalm is legitimate here; the psalm is

about the persecuted righteous person, and Jesus is the supreme example of such a one.

2. Just as Jesus must die so others may have life, he must thirst so that the living water may be given. Almost immediately after Jesus says, "I thirst," he hands over the Spirit and then blood and water flow out of his side (cf. 7:37-39).

3. The sour wine is put on hyssop, and, as mentioned above, here the hyssop is clearly symbolic, since it could not have been functional. Probably we have a reference to the hyssop used to put the blood on the doorposts at the Exodus to turn away death (see Exodus 12, especially, vss. 21-23).

C. "It is finished" (19:30). This means both that it is over and is accomplished. Note that immediately after saying this, Jesus hands on the Spirit.

XI. Chapters 18-19 are the supreme example of how the Spirit led the evangelist and his community into all truth.

A. We have a basically accurate recounting of historical events.

B. Yet, the Holy Spirit subsequently caused the disciples to conclude that the ultimate meaning of those events was the opposite of the seeming meaning at the time. The cross which looked like defeat was in inspired retrospect God's total victory.

XII. (time permitting) Additional exegetical comments on chapters 18-19.
Assignment: Study John 20 and the sections in Sinclair that deal with it.

John's Treatment of the Resurrection

I. The resurrection narratives have literary problems.

A. The story of the coming of Mary Magdalene to the tomb and that of the coming of Peter and the BD do not fit together well. We never learn how Mary gets back to the tomb after going to Peter and the BD.

B. The end of the appearance to Mary Magdalene (20:17-18) ought to preclude subsequent resurrection appearances.

C. So should the end of the following appearance to the disciples (20:21-23); and the end of the appearance to the disciples including Thomas (20:28-31).

II. These problems may be the result of literary and social history, especially the work of the editor.

A. Probably before the intervention of the editor Mary Magdalene got Peter and the two of them returned to the tomb together. The editor replaced Mary with the BD and thus created the problem of how Mary returned to the tomb.

B. The editor added chapter 21, creating the problem that the climax of chapter 20 is not the end of the book.

C. Notice the careful balancing between Peter and the Beloved disciple in the edited story of the two coming to the tomb. The two men are

associated in the closest possible way; yet the BD comes off better. Both men run to the tomb, but the BD gets there first. Peter is the first to enter the tomb, but the BD enters and believes.

III. In the canonical gospel the resurrection narratives basically make sense if we view the resurrection as a transcendent event which we perceive through sign and altered relationship.

A. The resurrection is primarily a transcendent happening which involves Jesus's return to the Father's glory (e.g., 17:5) and the giving of the Spirit (20:22-23).

B. Yet, it is also an event which leaves observable traces in history (e.g., the grave clothes which the gospel describes in detail; 20:6-7).

C. Consequently, physical evidence and eyewitness testimony attest it.

D. And we also have access to the resurrection through the inner experience of our relation to God in Christ.

E. Hence, the resurrection narratives involve both seeing and perceiving in a complex interaction (note, especially, the appearance to Thomas and the following conclusion; 20:24-31).

IV. The resurrection narratives in chapter 20 describe the spiritual transition from relating to Jesus in his material, earthly state to relating to him in his risen one. Let us examine two stories in detail.

A. The Beloved Disciple coming to faith (20:3-9).

1. By adopting Mary, the BD has already begun to fulfill Jesus's command to love as he loved (19:26-27).

2. After the BD enters the tomb, he sees and believes (20:8-9). Through sign and love he comes to faith. Note that he does so without knowing the Old Testament prophecy or seeing Jesus.

3. The BD's example challenges the reader to believe without seeing (cf. 20:29).

4. Yet, since the BD saw both the empty tomb and the grave clothes, he also continues to play the indispensable role of an apostolic witness. Our faith depends on his.

B. Mary Magdalene meets Jesus (20:1-2, 11-18). Note: By comparing this account with Luke 24:1-12, we can see that John retains the basic content of earlier tradition but adjusts many details to make theological points.

1. When the story opens, Mary is in (both physical and spiritual) darkness and assumes that the body has been stolen and runs to Peter and the BD.

2. When she gets back to the tomb the question she needs to answer is, "Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Evidently, she seeks only the fleshly Jesus. In John's Gospel Jesus repeatedly asks, "Whom [or "what"] do you seek?" (1:38; 18:4,7; 20:15), and how characters answer the question helps determine what they find.

3. Because Mary Magdalene is seeking only the fleshly Jesus, she does not perceive the signs or recognize Jesus in his new form. She wants to cling to the corpse of Jesus (20:15).

4. But Jesus like the good shepherd (10:1-4) calls his own by name, and she turns (i.e., is converted) and perceives. She calls him "teacher," because he is teaching her.
5. "Do not touch me." Jesus in effect tells her that she must now relate to him spiritually, not physically.
6. She can now accept that he is ascending and proclaim this. As a witness to the resurrection whom Jesus commissions to preach, she is an apostle, according to the original Christian definition of the word.
7. She now shares in Jesus's relationship with the Father and is one of God's friends. "My Father and your Father, my God and your God" (20:17).
8. Through her Jesus invites other disciples to share in the same relationship. For the first time he refers to them as his "brothers" and sisters (20:17).

V. Chapter 20 brings the reader into a closer and closer contact with the risen Jesus (cf. Francis Moloney).

- A. At first we only see that the stone has been removed (20:1).
- B. Then we see the linen that had been wrapped around Jesus's body (20:5).
- C. Then we enter the tomb and see the napkin which had been wrapped around his head (20:6-8).
- D. Then we see Jesus himself, but Jesus explicitly refuses to let himself be touched (20:14-17).
- E. Then Jesus shows us his hands and his side (i.e., his wounds; 20:19-20).
- F. Finally, Jesus invites Thomas to put his fingers into these wounds (20:24-27).

VI. The conclusion of chapter 20 makes it clear that the resurrection is the definitive "sign" (physical miracle) which somehow coheres with and confirms the others.

VII. (review) In John's Gospel as a whole "signs" have two different functions

- A. They lead to initial conversion or at least strengthen initial faith (e.g., 1:47-51, 2:1-11). Hence, the gospel insists that ultimately one must go beyond a faith based primarily on signs (e.g., 3:1-3).
- B. They point to deeper spiritual truths about Jesus. E.g., the multiplication of the loaves points to Jesus as the true life-giving bread (ch. 6).

VIII. In keeping with the first function, the gospel records the physical evidence of the resurrection and the eyewitness testimony and challenges the spiritually immature to believe.

IX. In keeping with the second function of signs, the gospel's presentation of the resurrection challenges the mature to come to a deeper, more "spiritual" relationship with Jesus.

X. I believe the resurrection narratives in John should be read on three different levels.

- A. As a description of the initial events.
 - B. As a challenge to a historical community whose witnesses to the resurrection are dying or dead. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe!" (20:29).
 - C. As a continuing challenge to make the transition to a higher level of spiritual perception.
- XI. As the previous lectures in this course have tried to demonstrate, the rest of the gospel must also be read on the same three levels.
- XII. The challenge to make the transition from relating only to the fleshly Jesus to relating to the risen Lord is particularly relevant to the contemporary world. Today many people outside the church and even within it want to focus exclusively on the historical Jesus.
- XIII. (time permitting) Additional exegetical comments on chapter 20.
Assignment: Study John 13-17 and the sections in Sinclair that deal with it.
- XIV. (time permitting) Paintings of Jesus challenging Thomas to touch the wounds of the crucifixion.

The Handing Over of the Spirit

- Discussion: What is the Holy Spirit, and why is the Spirit important in Christianity? When we use the words "spirit" or "spiritual," what do we mean?
- I. "Spirit" is not an easy term to define, but, at the most basic level the "spirit" is an intangible presence. Someone can be physically absent but "spiritually" present.
 - II. In biblical languages "spirit" is literally "wind" or "breath." John 3:8 plays on the literal and figurative meaning of the word.
 - III. With the rise of feminism in the contemporary world, it has become increasingly clear that in the Bible the Spirit serves as a feminine image for the divine and, consequently, in English should be referred to as "She."
 - A. The Hebrew word for "Spirit" (*Ruah*) is feminine.
 - B. In the Bible the Spirit is linked with divine wisdom which is clearly personified as a wondrous woman.
 - C. The symbols for the Spirit tend to be archetypically feminine (Donald Gelpi). Note, especially, water and dove, both of which represent the Spirit in John's Gospel.
 - D. To be sure, in Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for "Spirit" (*Pneuma*) is neuter, but in English "it" implies subhuman.
 - E. It was only when "Spirit" was rendered in Latin (*Spiritus*; "breath") that we got "he."

Note: Classical Christian theology taught (rightly, in my opinion) that sex is only part of the created order and does not exist in God. Nevertheless, humans need symbols for the divine, and these will often have sex, since sexual identity is so fundamental to who we are.
 - IV. In the Old Testament God's "Spirit" is especially the transforming divine energy which he bestows on selected individuals.

- V. In Paul, the Spirit seems to be especially the mind of God which believers can share (Donald Gelpi; 1 Cor. 2:10-11).
- VI. A theme in the opening chapters of John is that Jesus has received the Spirit from the Father and is, therefore, the one who has the Spirit (e.g., 1:32, 3:34-35).
- VII. As the one who has the Spirit, Jesus is the one through whom the Spirit will come to the world (e.g., 7:38-39).
- VIII. The Spirit cannot come until Jesus himself dies and returns to the Father (e.g., 7:38-39, 16:7). There seem to be two reasons why:
- A. The disciples will not be ready to receive the Spirit until Christ dies for them (cf. 14:17).
 - B. The Spirit is the replacement for Jesus (14:15-16).
- IX. Some comments on the word "*paraclete*" which the last discourses use to label the Spirit. The word is rare in Greek but is related to a common verb. The basic meaning is "a person who is summoned to give aid;" hence, "helper" in the widest sense. "Consoler," "exhorter," "adviser," "intercessor," "advocate," are all possible translations but fail to convey that breadth of the Greek. Here I will simply use "paraclete."
- X. As the replacement for Jesus, the Paraclete has the following characteristics:
- A. The Spirit reminds the disciples of all that Jesus has told them (14:26).
 - B. The Paraclete also interprets Jesus's words (and life) and leads the disciples into all truth (16:12-13).
 - C. Accordingly, the Paraclete glorifies Jesus (16:14).
 - D. The Paraclete even mediates the personal indwelling of Jesus and the Father in the church and each believer (14:17-20). Two things are to be noted about the relationship of Jesus to the Spirit in John's Gospel:
 1. Contrary to subsequent trinitarian theology, John stresses not the difference but their similarity. The Spirit is another "paraclete" (14:16).
 2. The presence of Jesus after his resurrection is a mediated one, and the mediation is complex involving both memory and indwelling, both canon and living witnesses. I think all this is profound.
 - E. The Spirit allows Christians to be Jesus in this world (20:21-22) both by helping us to bear witness (15:26-27) and giving us the power to bind and loose (20:23).
 - F. The Father sends the Spirit in the Son's name (14:26), and the Son sends the Spirit from the Father (15:26). (Because of the unity of the Father and the Son, the double presentation of the sending is not necessarily a contradiction.)
- XI. In John's Gospel we have two narratives of the giving of the Spirit.
- A. At the moment of Christ's death: "'It is finished,' and bowing his head, he handed over the Spirit" (19:30). Notice the pun; and note that in Greek "handing over the Spirit" is not a normal way of saying "died."
 - B. The giving of the Spirit to the disciples on Easter night (20:19-22).
- XII. The presence of two narratives about the giving of the Spirit may be due to editing.

XIII. In the canonical gospel these two accounts make it clear that the Holy Spirit's coming is associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus and that the Spirit allows disciples to make the transition from Jesus being with them in the flesh to being with them in a new way.

XIV. In John's overall presentation of the Spirit there is a balance between

- A. Tradition (The Paraclete interprets Jesus's past words and deeds.)
- B. Inspired innovation (The Paraclete leads the disciples into all truth.)
- C. Community (The Spirit is given to the church as a whole.)
- D. Individuality (The Spirit dwells in the believer.)

XV. This balance may have been a response to some one-sided view at the time.

XVI. Nevertheless, it remains relevant.

XVII. I am especially impressed by the insistence that the Spirit points to Jesus and mediates his indwelling in the believer.

XVIII. The theme of replacement in John's Gospel.

- A. A theme throughout the fourth gospel is that Jesus replaces the observances of Judaism.
- B. This theme is worked out in terms of John's cycle of Jewish festivals, for example, Tabernacles in chapters 7-8.
 - 1. While the temple in Jerusalem stood, the ceremonies for Tabernacles included water and light.
 - 2. In John's Gospel Jesus goes to Jerusalem to celebrate Tabernacles (7:2-10).
 - 3. While there, Jesus offers "living water" (7:37-38) and proclaims that he is the "light of the world" (8:12, 9:5).
- C. The theme of replacement reaches its climax in the final Passover. Having replaced the temple and the bread at previous Passovers (2:13, 19-21; 6:4, e.g., 6:35) Jesus now replaces the Passover lamb (1:29, 19:36; cf. Exodus 12:46).
- D. The theme of replacement may be addressed to Jewish Christians who
 - 1. Could not make the pilgrimages to the temple, since the building no longer existed when the evangelist wrote.
 - 2. Could not participate in the synagogue liturgies, since the synagogues had expelled Christians.
- E. The theme says that through Jesus Christians possess the realities to which Jewish observances point.
- F. Nevertheless, the theme of replacement has a wider application for it suggests that Jesus fulfills all true religion.

Assignment: Reread John 13-17.

The Final Stage of Christian Growth: Taking Jesus's Place in This World

Discussion: What is the ultimate spiritual experience, and how can we get to it?

I. It seems probable that the final editor made a number of important additions in chapters 13-20. Note that these additions may have been taken at least in part from other writings of the Beloved Disciple.

- A. 13:12-17; the interpretation of the foot washing as an example of how the disciples should behave seems to conflict with the symbolism of some being clean and not others. Note that "afterward" in verse 7 cannot refer to verses 12-17. Verses 20 and 34-35 may also have come from the editor.
 - B. Chapters 15-17; originally the last discourses must have ended with the words, "Rise let us go from here" (14:31).
 - C. The passages about the Beloved Disciple; for a justification, see above.
- II. Of these possible additions, the one that seems both most certain and most important to the editor is 19:26-28a.
- A. It is most certain because in the previous verse we have a list of the people standing by the cross and the Beloved Disciple is not included. Surely, the explanation is that the editor simply inserted verses 26-27.
 - B. It is most important because immediately thereafter we read, "After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now already accomplished . . ." The previous verses accomplish all that finally needed to be done. The editor also added this phrase, since, as we learn in the next half verse, Jesus still has to fulfill another scripture!
- III. When we look at what the editor probably added and at the material he kept, we can see that the final stage of the Christian's spiritual life is becoming Jesus for one another in this world.
- A. This is what Jesus challenges the Beloved Disciple and Mary to do in 19:26-27, a challenge which they meet. The Beloved Disciple is to be Mary's son *in place of Jesus*. *And the BD then takes Mary into his own home*.
 - B. In the secondary (editorial) explanation of the foot washing Jesus says that the disciples must imitate him by washing one another's feet (13:14-16) and then insists that whoever receives his disciples receives him (13:20).
 - C. In chapters 15-16, which probably were inserted by the final editor even if the Beloved Disciple wrote them, Jesus insists that his followers are no longer servants but his friends (15:14-15).
 - D. Notice, particularly, 13:33-35. Since Jesus is going away, the disciples must love one another as he loved them and be a sign to all people. The disciples must be Christ for one another and the world.
- IV. The gospel makes it clear that the primary way that we reach the ultimate state of being Christ for one another is by loving each other as Christ loved us. This love includes both
- A. Being prepared to suffer and die for one another as Christ did when he died on the cross (15:12-14).
 - B. Humbly serving one another as Christ did when he washed feet.
- V. We can only do all this if we first accept God's love for us as expressed in Christ. John insists that apart from Christ we can do nothing (15:1-6). Hence, Christ can claim that to love is a new commandment.
- A. We must accept that Christ out of love has died for us (13:8). Note that Peter gets into trouble because he tries to lay down his own life prematurely (13:36-38). Christ's love saves us primarily by revealing how

great God's love is and how wicked the world is and how great our love can become through Jesus.

B. We must also accept that Christ's will is to bring us to eternal glory (17:24).

C. To accept the full power of Christ's self-sacrificing love, we must recognize who he is, namely God's eternal Son (e.g., 13:1-4).

D. Excursus: John's implicit criticisms of Christologies that say that Jesus was merely a good human being:

1. Such Christologies leave open the possibility that his death might be involuntary and not express self-sacrificing love. The gospel insists that Jesus knows and freely chooses his approaching death (e.g, 10:17-18).

2. In such Christologies Jesus's love is not God's, and what difference does it make now if some dead person loved us? What can it even mean to say that someone who died before we were born loved us?

3. Of course, such Christologies conflict with the miracles and the resurrection, since a supremely good human being would not be able to work such wonders and would not rise from the dead.

E. Once we accept God's love for us in Christ, we must love Jesus and, therefore, God.

F. This love enables us to love others as Jesus loved them.

G. A few dimensions of what the gospel means by "love."

1. For John "love" is usually a verb; it is something done. We may note in passing that in John "faith" is always a verb. Faith is something which we do, not something which we have.

2. Love is dwelling in each other and becoming one.

3. It is acts of self-sacrifice like washing someone's feet or laying down our lives.

4. Love leads to joy (e.g., 15:11).

VI. Once we love one another as Christ loved us, then we enter into a new mystical relationship to Christ and the Father and other people in the Spirit.

A. We should hesitate to define John's vision of the ultimate spiritual state in detail because it is beyond what we have experienced, and our ability to imagine it is limited.

B. Nevertheless, here are some dimensions of the experience:

1. Through love we achieve total unity both with God in Christ and with one another.

- a. This unity is the same perfect unity that the Father has with the Son (17:21).

- b. We are caught up in the relationship between the divine persons. The Father gives us to the Son who dies for us in obedience to the Father (e.g., 17:6).

- c. The unity of ourselves with God and with one another are mutually dependent.

- d. The perfect unity does not mean absorption and the loss

of identity. The metaphor is mutual indwelling, and the unity is achieved and maintained by love. Hence, John's mysticism differs from the Buddhist.

2. With this unity come life, peace, and joy, and this life, peace, and joy are infinitely more satisfying and lasting than physical life and worldly happiness (14:27).
3. With this unity also comes direct, complete knowledge of God and of his eternal plan in Christ. We perceive the unseen God and know the goodness and truth of his revelation through Jesus. We also know Jesus's unity with the Father (14:19-20).
4. Thanks to our unity with Christ, we know that we will have eternal life, because his will for us is to see his eternal glory as it is (17:24).
5. Thanks to our unity with God and each other, we incarnate the glory of God and are an invitation and challenge to the world (e.g., 17:21). Note that for John our love for one another is our primary missionary statement.
6. Thanks to our unity and mission, we can ask for whatever we need to do God's work, and he will give it to us (15:7. Here John has adapted traditional material from Jesus [cf. Matthew 7:7]).
7. Hence, we take Jesus's place in this world. Indeed, we may do even greater works than he did (14:12).
8. Although John does not give us many details, he seems to presuppose a process of divinization, begun in this life and completed in the last day. We are to be no longer Jesus's servants but his friends (15:15) and can rightly be described as "gods" (10:34-35).

VII. Some implications of this distant goal for us now.

- A. It nourishes hope. There is infinitely more than what we experience now.
- B. It is a continuing challenge to growth.
- C. It points us toward a particular path, including
 1. A spirituality in which love of God and neighbor grow together.
 2. A missionary attitude that our love for God and one another is our primary evangelistic statement.
 3. Mutual indwelling as the model for love. This avoids being patronizing or sentimental.
 4. The assurance that our salvation is the gift which the "persons" of God give to one another.
- D. It should make us hesitant to dismiss John's Christology (which is the foundation for subsequent orthodox Christology). The Christology came out of an experience.

Assignment: Begin studying for the final examination.

The Editor's Answer to How We Can Know John's Gospel Is True (summary and

review)

- I. When the Beloved Disciple wrote the original gospel, perhaps most of his community had difficulty with his insistence that Jesus was God infleshed.
 - A. Secret Christians who remained in the synagogues were reluctant to confess Christ's divinity because such confession would lead to expulsion from the Jewish community.
 - B. Some of the Beloved Disciple's community probably thought that the Son of God was too exalted to have a fleshly body.
 - C. Presumably people also realized that the historical evidence did not necessitate the conclusion that Jesus was God infleshed.
- II. After the BD's death, there was even more reason to question the conclusion that Jesus was God infleshed.
 - A. Apparently, there were no more living eyewitnesses who could vouch for this conclusion.
 - B. The other gospels were becoming known, and they differed from that of the BD in fundamental respects.
- III. One way the editor responded to the problem of credibility was to preserve the BD's work and emphasize its authority as the testimony of an eyewitness. Note that the editor included the BD in various crucial scenes in the gospel and that the BD appears most extensively in chapter 21 which the editor added.
- IV. However, I believe that the fundamental way the editor responded was to structure the gospel so we would be led from conversion to a state in which we would be Christ for one another.
- V. This structuring invites the reader to come to an ever more certain faith and shows how to take the next step and what one can expect to learn at each step.
- VI. To achieve an initial faith one must
 - A. Listen to the testimony of another person about Jesus
 - B. Be prepared to come and see (including seeing the community in which Jesus's Spirit dwells).
 - C. If we do, then Jesus will tell us something about ourselves and will give us some secret sign.
 - D. With this, real faith can begin. However, we may become too enthusiastic.
- VII. To take the next step, we must receive the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.
 - A. Such reception will necessitate making a public confession of our new faith.
 - B. We will also have to accept the humbling fact that we must receive the spiritual through material observances. This acceptance will help us realize how elementary our faith is.
 - C. Thanks to the materiality of the sacraments we will know that God can sanctify matter and that Jesus had a real body.
 - D. With the sacraments will come the assurance of final resurrection.
 - E. We will also be able to revere Jesus as the one who has given us the sacraments and is present in them.

- VIII. To enter the following stage, we must become committed disciples.
- A. To become committed, we must recognize that despite our growth so far, we are still enslaved to sin and still do not really know the truth about Jesus.
 - B. We must also be prepared to suffer rejection from the same world that rejected him.
 - C. When we become committed disciples, we will have an inner experience of Jesus which will enable us to begin to know that he is God.
- IX. One possible final step is to die for Jesus. If we do, we join him in heaven and directly experience his divine glory.
- X. An alternative--and, perhaps even better--final step is to become Christ for other people and thereby take his place in this world.
- A. To do this, we must love others as he loved us. Such love includes laying down our lives for one another and humbly serving each other.
 - B. When we show such love, the Father and the Son dwell within us through the Spirit.
 - C. As a result, we know them with the same certainty that we know ourselves.
 - D. Consequently, we have a sure knowledge of Christ's divinity and of God's plan to save us through the incarnation.
 - E. We also participate fully in God's love and joy, and in some sense we become divine ourselves.

Assignment: Study for the final.

Women in John's Gospel and the Role of Women in the Church Today

Discussion: What roles do/can women play in your religious community? What roles do you think they should play?

- I. Sometimes contemporary developments invite us to pose new questions of ancient documents.
- II. One of the most important contemporary developments in the church is the movement to ordain women.
- III. The traditional theology that women cannot be ordained depends largely on the idea that Jesus ordained the twelve apostles, all of whom were males, and this "ordination" provides the normative pattern for subsequent ordinations. The doctrine of apostolic succession teaches that there is a dynastic succession from the twelve to the bishops of the present.
- IV. There are historical problems with these claims.
 - A. While it is certainly true that the twelve were all males, it is not clear that Jesus was "ordaining" them, since their role did not correspond to that of subsequent church leaders.
 - 1. The twelve symbolized the twelve tribes of the new Israel that Jesus was calling into existence (Matthew 19:28).
 - 2. Consequently, their number was fixed, and they had no successors. The only exception is that the church did choose a

replacement for Judas after he betrayed Jesus (Acts 1:24-26).

3. The twelve had to be males because they corresponded to the twelve sons of Jacob who were the traditional founders of the twelve tribes. The Bible records that Jacob did have a daughter, Dinah, but she was not a tribal head.

B. The church claimed that bishops were the successors to the twelve, but this claim is dubious.

1. The bishops were not symbolic heads of the tribes of Israel, and, therefore, had a different role.

2. There is no evidence that in the first decades of church history the twelve were choosing the leaders of Christian communities.

C. The New Testament texts show that in the very early church there were many "apostles" (e.g., Paul) who were not members of the twelve and at least a few of these apostles were women. Note: The word "apostle" literally means someone who is sent out.

1. Paul's Letters make it clear that originally an "apostle" was someone to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection and gave a commission to preach the "good news." Of course, Paul was such a person (e.g., Galatians 1:1).

2. Various New Testament documents record that Jesus appeared to women and told them to proclaim his resurrection (e.g., Matthew 28:9-10).

3. A woman could be called an "apostle" (Romans 16:7; Junia is a woman's name).

D. It was only slightly later (perhaps beginning with Luke) that the term "apostle" began to be restricted to the twelve.

E. It should be noted that I have no problem with the "doctrine" of apostolic succession provided that we see it as a *symbolic* affirmation of the church's commitment to preserve faithfully the Christian tradition which ultimately goes back to the first followers of Jesus.

V. The church later excluded women from official leadership primarily to accommodate the mores of the outside world (both Gentile and Jewish). The church was under great pressure to become respectable, since the larger culture was increasingly suspicious of Christianity and was beginning to persecute it.

VI. At least five women play important roles in John's Gospel.

A. The mother of Jesus (2:1-12, 19:25-27)

B. The woman at the well (4:1-42)

C. Mary and Martha of Bethany (11:1-44, 12:1-7)

D. Mary Magdalene (19:25; 20:1-18).

VII. A striking pattern that emerges in these passages is that the women either proclaim the good news or are one step ahead of Peter (and the 12) or both. Note that whereas some men in John's Gospel (e.g., Judas, Caiaphas) play negative roles, all the women play positive ones. Even the high priest's maid asks for the truth, whereas Peter denies it (18:16-17).

A. The gospel associates Mary with the faithful Beloved Disciple.

1. Like the BD the "mother of Jesus" does not have a name in this

- gospel. Her only identify comes from her relationship with Jesus.
2. Like the BD she stands at the foot of the cross after Peter has denied being a disciple of Jesus.
 3. Together Mary and the BD illustrate the highest stage of Christian living, becoming Jesus for others and thereby replacing Jesus in this world. The BD is now Mary's son.
 4. Like the Beloved Disciple (who wrote the gospel) Mary tells people to do whatever Jesus says (2:5).
- B. The gospel makes the woman at the well a primordial missionary.
1. She is the first non-Jewish character in the gospel, and her conversion foreshadows the coming of the gospel to the whole world (4:42).
 2. She testifies to the other villagers about Jesus and invites them to come and see for themselves. As a result, many believe in him (4:39).
 3. Jesus tells his disciples that they are harvesting what this woman has sown (4:35-38).
- C. Mary and Martha have a special relationship to Jesus and confess him in dramatic ways.
1. The gospel explicitly states that Jesus loved them (11:5; cf. Jesus's love for the BD).
 2. Martha declares that Jesus is the Messiah (11:26-27), and Mary publicly anoints Jesus (12:3-8).
- D. Mary Magdalene is the first person to whom Jesus appears after his resurrection, and Jesus instructs her to tell the other disciples that he is ascending to the father, and she passes on the message. Hence, she is an "apostle" in the original sense of the word (see above).

VIII. Because of this material about women, many modern scholars (e.g., Raymond Brown) insist that John's Gospel justifies ordaining women and giving them equal access to leadership positions in the church. I agree.

Assignment: Study for the final.

John's Gospel and the Historical Jesus

I. At the end of a course on John's Gospel one is perhaps left with two overall impressions:

- A. John is a book of extraordinary beauty and profundity.
- B. John is an outrageous and extremely narrow work.

II. One is also left with two crucial questions:

- A. How compatible are the gospel's Christological claims with the claims that the historical Jesus and his earliest followers made about him, and to what extent does the book's worth depend on this compatibility?
- B. To what extent can we accept John's exclusive claims to religious truth (e.g., "no one comes to the Father but by me [Jesus];" 14:6) and also accept the claims of other religions?

III. Naturally, there are various possible responses to these questions, and these responses generally reflect the larger convictions of the responder. Here are two extremes with their strengths and weaknesses.

A. A "fundamentalist" position

1. John's Gospel is a completely accurate record of what Jesus actually said and did. If it were not, God's Word would be untrustworthy, and Christians would have to abandon the Bible.
2. Because John's Gospel is completely accurate, non-Christians cannot have eternal life.

B. Strengths and weaknesses of the fundamentalist position.

1. The strength is that the fundamentalists do take John's claims seriously.
2. Weaknesses
 - a. Because of all the tensions within the gospel and between John and the synoptics, it is very unlikely that John is always an accurate account of what literally took place.
 - b. It seems extremely narrow to exclude non-Christians from eternal life and extremely contrary to God's love for the world (which John's Gospel itself proclaims).
 - c. Many non-Christians experience the love of God and practice the self-sacrificing love for others that John's Gospel proclaims are the primary signs of knowing Jesus.
 - d. Many non-Christians (especially, Hindus, I think) like John's Gospel, except for its exclusiveness (see below).
 - e. The only religion that the Evangelist and Editor knew other than Judaism and Christianity was the Paganism of the Roman Empire, and this Paganism was not a high religion.
 - 1). Greco-Roman religion was only mythological, i.e., it relied on stories and traditions, without critiquing them.
 - 2). Greco-Roman religion was not concerned with ethics. The primary concern of religion was to placate the gods so they would support the power structure and not cause problems.
 - 3). The philosophers were attempting to elevate religion, but their attempts had not reformed religion as a whole. Soon after the composition of the John's Gospel the church would begin using Greek Philosophy to present Christianity!
 - f. The Evangelist and the Editor looked at other religion through the hostile lens of the Hebrew Scriptures which condemn the religions of surrounding cultures.
 - g. John's Gospel insists that those who are innocently ignorant of the truth of Christianity are not under judgment (9:41, 15:22-24).
 - h. And since John's Gospel emphasizes that the world learns

about the truth of Christianity through the love which Christians show (13:35), the church is often responsible for people not perceiving the truth of Christianity!

- C. A "secular humanist" position.
 - 1. John's Gospel is untrue to the historical Jesus.
 - 2. All that is valuable in John (e.g., the need for human beings to love one another) is contained in other religions and philosophies. Hence, though the gospel is (at least in part) valuable, it does not give us a better way to find God.
- D. Strengths and weaknesses of the humanist position.
 - 1. The strengths
 - a. It recognizes the tension between John's account and what happened historically.
 - b. It recognizes the positive features of world religion.
 - 2. The weaknesses
 - a. It does not take the gospel's central claims seriously, and it is not clear that we can regard the gospel as still valuable if we dismiss its central claims.
 - b. Many people—even tolerant and well informed ones--have found John's Gospel to be the best spiritual path for themselves personally. Note, especially, that John's central claim that in Jesus God had a human life does allow other humans to relate to God in an additional way.

IV. It seems only fair at the end of our discussion of John that the instructor give at least his answer to the important questions raised above. I will deal with the first in this section and the second in the next.

V. How compatible are the gospel's Christological claims with the claims that the historical Jesus and his earliest followers made about him, and to what extent does the book's worth depend on this compatibility?

A. I believe that the worth of the book depends on the truth of its claim that Jesus was the incarnation of God, but not on the historical question of who Jesus thought he was, let alone, who others thought he was when Jesus was alive.

- 1. If the claim that Jesus is God infleshed is false, the book is essentially false, because this is the gospel's central claim which it stridently maintains.
- 2. However, the self-consciousness of Jesus or the claims of his earliest disciples are not crucial.
 - a. John emphasizes that in some sense Jesus did not bear witness to himself (e.g., 5:31). Note that we should take this as a statement about the *historical* Jesus, since the Jesus of John's Gospel does bear witness to himself.
 - b. Even in John's Gospel, it is only at the resurrection that any of Jesus's disciples proclaim that he is divine (20:28).
 - c. The gospel repeatedly stresses that it was still later that the disciples understood the full implications of Jesus's

earthly ministry (2:22, 12:16).

d. The gospel even provides clues as to how this later understanding arose (note, especially, 5:16-18, 13:20).

e. The gospel also insists that we discover the truth only through God's gift (e.g., 6:44).

B. Still, one must somehow be able to ground the transcendent Christological claim in history, because the gospel also claims to be an interpretation of the historical Jesus.

VI. I believe we can sustain the historical plausibility of the basic transcendent claim.

A. One reconstruction of the historical rise of early Christological claims.

1. Jesus may not have made explicit claims about himself, except perhaps by saying he was "the human being" ("Son of Humanity").

2. Instead, he proclaimed that the kingdom of God (the New Israel) was coming and said that this coming would be the decisive event in history.

3. The kingdom involved the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel and the breaking down of the barriers between God and human beings and between one human being and another. I believe Jesus expected that with the coming of the kingdom the Gentiles would unite with the chosen people.

4. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom in his own words and deeds and claimed that how one responded to him determined whether one entered the kingdom.

5. Hence, Jesus's actions implied that he was the Messiah, and perhaps he occasionally said that he was.

6. As the kingdom's inaugurator Jesus knew God intimately and exercised God's authority directly. Note that this authority included interpreting God's will and working miracles.

7. He then passed on that intimacy and authority to others.

8. Jesus also believed that his own life was a pattern for others to imitate.

9. Therefore, Jesus was the new human being, the son of humanity.

10. Jesus expected some future event that would end the old world, inaugurate a glorious new one, and vindicate his message.

11. He trained his followers to perceive.

12. Then in the resurrection the disciples met Jesus as one who exercised the transcendent power of God and who was divine. Note that meeting the risen Jesus was not like meeting Jairus's daughter or Lazarus after their raisings.

B. I think that John's Gospel is true to the Christological history sketched above.

1. John insists that in some sense Jesus did not bear witness to himself.

2. In John, however, Jesus is the one who knows God and mediates God's presence.

3. Jesus gives his disciples power to do even greater works than he himself has done.
4. Jesus also invites his disciples to imitate his behavior ("love one another as I have loved you").
5. During his life on earth, Jesus looks forward to a coming event (the "hour") in which God's power and presence will appear in a new and definitive way.
6. In John's Gospel it is at the resurrection that the disciples recognize that Jesus is divine.
7. The primary step that John takes is realizing that fellowship with Jesus is, consequently, fellowship with God and that becoming like Jesus is becoming divine. Through the divinity of Jesus, the disciples can become "gods" (10:34-35).

Discussion: Do you think that John's interpretation of Jesus is true to the Jesus of history?

Assignment: Study for final.

The Truth of John's Gospel and World Religion

The question of whether John's Gospel and the claims of other religions can both be true is huge and daunting. But, at least, an initial attempt is reasonable. We start with your attempt, and then I will outline mine.

Discussion: Can you affirm that John's Gospel is true and also that there is great truth in non-Christian religions? If so, how?

I. In my opinion, for John's Gospel to be true, it must at least mediate a deeper experience of God than non-Christian religions do.

A. One can regard John's more extreme statements about alternative religious perspectives (e.g., all others are thieves and bandits [10:8]) as hyperbole, especially since John accepts the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament).

B. Nevertheless, at the very least, the gospel emphatically claims that Jesus gives much greater access to God than anything else does. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).

C. In my opinion this exclusive claim is so central to the Gospel of John, that even saying that John's Gospel presents a valid spiritual path, but other paths are equally valid, amounts to saying that John's Gospel is basically false.

II. I believe that part of this deeper experience of God results from the fact that the incarnate God of John's Gospel voluntarily shares human suffering more completely than the divinities of other religions do, and, therefore, inspires greater love from us. Note too that people who rely on John's Gospel cannot claim that God asks more of humans than he asks of himself.

III. I believe that this deeper experience of God also involves combining the best

features of the two great strands of high religion.

A. One strand holds that the Absolute is identical with the true self and the true world, and that the seeming distinction between the Absolute and everyday reality is an illusion.

B. The other strand holds that Absolute differs fundamentally from the self and the world.

1. The Absolute is eternal, almighty, morally perfect.

2. The self and the world are transitory, weak, and distorted by sin.

IV. Probably both strands can be found in every major religion (e.g., mainstream Islam drastically distinguishes between God and humans, but the Islamic Sufis do not).

V. Nevertheless, to oversimplify, the major religions that originated in the Middle East tend to belong to the strand which distinguishes between the Absolute and the self and the world, whereas the religions that originated in India tend to identify the Absolute with the self and the world. The religions that originated in China are divided.

A. There are three great schools of high religion:

1. The school that arose out of the ancient Middle East and includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

2. The school that arose out of ancient India and includes Hinduism and Buddhism.

3. The school that arose out of ancient China and includes Confucianism and Taoism.

B. Perhaps the biggest difference between or, in the case of China, within these great schools of high religion is their differing understandings of the relationship between the ultimate and this world.

1. The Middle Eastern religions have thought of the ultimate, i.e., God, as primarily transcendent and held that He makes himself known by revealing himself in history.

2. The religions of India have thought of the ultimate as immanent in the self and that it is discovered by looking within (meditation).

3. In China Confucianism with its emphasis on personal and social ethics is closer to Middle Eastern religion, whereas Taoism with its emphasis on the presence of the Tao in all things and the importance of non-action is closer to the religions of India.

VI. The great strength of Middle Eastern religion is that it recognizes the autonomy of the world, and, therefore, can accept matter and history as real and sin as serious and demand social reform.

A. The material world is real and basically good, because God created it.

B. History is meaningful, because God reveals himself through it.

C. Sin is willful disobedience to God and produces injustice.

D. Hence, these religions inspire social action. Salvation is promoted through conscious efforts to do away with structural and communal evils. These religions lead to such things as technological progress, social reform, and liberation theology.

VII. The great weakness of Middle Eastern religion is that through it humans

have only limited access to God and his inner life.

- A. The divine is transcendent and is known primarily through a revelation to someone else (Moses, Muhammed).
 - B. There is an infinite gap between humans and God which cannot be fully bridged.
 - C. Consequently, eternal life is either non-existent (some strands of Judaism) or limited in terms of communion (orthodox Islam).
 - D. As a result, the religions of the West are always in danger of only advocating ethical conduct in history and losing the transcendent altogether. Note that this danger is increasingly realized in the post-Christian West, and that Communism/Marxism was basically Christianity without God.
- VIII. The great strength of the religions of India is that they never lose focus on the ultimate.
- IX. The reason that Indian religion always retains this focus is that humans can fully attain the ultimate because it is immanent in themselves.
- A. According to Hinduism, we already are divine and need only realize this fact.
 - B. According to Buddhism, our essential nature is Buddha nature, and we can become superior to the (mortal) gods.
- X. The weakness of Indian religion is that everyday reality cannot be fully affirmed, because the ultimate is found by the individual looking inward and the seeming difference between the everyday world and the Absolute is untrue. Hence, everyday reality is, at best, only apparent and, at worst, "illusion."
- A. History is not of great importance and is cyclical.
 - B. The material world is relatively unimportant.
 - C. There is no sin, only ignorance. Indeed, there is no injustice. What appears to be undeserved suffering is actually merited suffering due to mistakes in previous reincarnations. In Taoism what appears to be evil is actually good when seen from a larger perspective.
 - D. The real spiritual problem is attachment (desire).
 - E. Consequently, there is less drive to reform society.
- XI. I believe John's Gospel combines the best features of Middle Eastern and Indian religion.
- A. History and the material world are taken seriously. John's Gospel is basically a biography and emphasizes the importance of physical sacraments.
 - B. Sin is taken very seriously. Certainly there is grave injustice (16:2).
 - C. Yet there is total access to the ultimate.
 - 1. There is union with the divine.
 - 2. There is a strong sense of eternal life in full communion with God.
 - 3. Humans can actually become divine.
- XII. John can produce this combination thanks to the incarnation and the crucifixion/resurrection.
- A. There is a barrier between God and the universe which human beings

cannot cross by their own efforts.

B. God crosses the barrier by becoming a human being and then raising that human being.

1. Through the incarnation of the eternal Word, God reveals to us who he is.
2. The incarnate Word suffers and dies, just as other human beings do.
3. Thanks to the resurrection, the Word now dwells with the Father in heaven.
4. And sends to us his Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

C. Accordingly, through the incarnation (and only through it) we can enter fully into the life of the divine.

D. As we enter into the life of the divine, we take Jesus's place in this world by reaching out in love to others.

Discussion: What is most valuable to you in Johannine thought?

Assignment: Study for final.