

## **Can John's Gospel Be Read Sacramentally?**

Charles St-Onge, May 7, 2001

What is the connection between the Gospel of John and the sacraments, however many, of the Christian church? There is in fact a deeper question underlying this one, and that is whether Jesus himself had a sacramental future in mind for his church following his departure. What did Jesus himself envision beyond the cross and his own resurrection? What was the shape of the future beyond Calvary that the Christ saw for the world, and especially for his followers? Only in light of these deeper questions can one begin to address the issue of a "sacramental reading" of any of the gospels, never mind the gospel of John.

If Jesus did not see a future for the world beyond his own earthly mission, and believed that his death would bring about the final apocalypse, he would not have seen the need for a church, and certainly not the need for a presence in that church, sacramental or otherwise. No less a Christian than Albert Schweitzer held that Jesus did in fact expect the imminent end of the world, and that Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross was proof that he had expected God's deliverance sooner, rather than later.<sup>1</sup> If this was the case, Jesus' teaching would have been entirely focused on the present, on the immediate establishment of the kingdom of God, and would have had little focus on the future. Any interpretation of Christ's words as foreshadowment of the church's sacraments would then most certainly be a reading that was not intended by the speaker.

Conversely, if Jesus did have a vision for a life "beyond the cross" in this "visible" cosmos, he would likely have communicated to his disciples the shape that life would have. One would then expect that Jesus would have taught his disciples how they should behave toward one another, what their relationship would be vis a vis the world, and what relationship his followers would have with himself. Certainly if Jesus intended to be present in some form to his "church", he would have spoken about this during his earthly ministry. It would seem exceedingly odd for Jesus to have waited until "the last minute", as it were, to come up with the details of how he would relate to his future followers.

The Gospel of John is of particular interest on this point. John's Gospel has little "ethical" teaching, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's Gospel. It speaks little of the "church", per se. In fact only Matthew's Gospel mentions the church explicitly, by name. What John's Gospel does

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<sup>1</sup> Grenz, Stanley and Roger Olson. *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology*. (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1992) p.89

emphasize is Jesus' teaching about *himself*. Jesus is "the vine", "the truth", "the resurrection", "the good shepherd", and "the bread of life." John alone calls attention to these seven "εγω ειμι" sayings of Jesus. The emphasis for John is not on the ethics of Jesus' followers or even Jesus' own ethics, but Jesus' ontological being as the one who is the very presentation of the Father, who says only his words and does only his work (John 5:19, 14:24). If Jesus at any time speaks of his ontological presence in the midst of his people on the other side of the cross, he would most likely be expected to in John's Gospel. And if he intended a time of continued eschatological expectation after his death and resurrection, the supposition that he spoke of a presence, for example a sacramental presence, among his people before the actual inauguration of such presence would not be unrealistic.

This leads us to the two chief questions to be addressed in assessing any possible "sacramental" reading of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of John. The first is the question of what Jesus foresaw, if anything, beyond the work of the cross. Here it will be helpful to consider Jesus' own interpretation of the cross as recorded by John, Jesus' final discourse with his disciples before his passion, and the "time has coming / time has now come" sayings of Jesus.

There are several places in the Gospel of John where Jesus' interprets his work on the cross. In John's Gospel Jesus does not talk about the cross directly, but rather uses the phrase "lifted up." This phrase is interpreted as referring to the crucifixion in John 12:32-33, "But I (Jesus), when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die." The first occurrence of this expression comes in Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus. In this discourse, Jesus speaks of his being "lifted up" as Moses lifted up the dead snake on a pole in the desert, that people might look on it and live. In fact, John 3:14-16 could be translated:

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, in this way the Son of man must be lifted up in order that everyone believing might have in him life eternal, for in this way God loved the world."<sup>2</sup>

This certainly seems to suggest a need to *see* the Son of man "lifted up", which presupposes that some will come to belief after, or at least during, the crucifixion. In Jesus discourse with the Jews in John 8, he says, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be." (John 8:28). The crucifixion will change people's minds, and reveal things that were hidden

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<sup>2</sup> Gundry, Robert and Russel Howell. "Sense and Syntax of John 3:14-17". *Novum Testamentum*. (Volume 41, 1999) p.39

before. The idea that Jesus seems to be communicating is not that the cross will *end* everything, but that it will indeed *change* everything.

An expression in John's Gospel that leads one to suspect Jesus of having a bifurcated eschatology is his frequent use of "a time is coming...and has now come." This expression occurs several times in the Gospel, but only twice in a pair, in John 4 and John 5. In John 4 Jesus is speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well about the new worship he and the Father are inaugurating. In John 4:21 Jesus says, "Believe me, woman, *a time is coming* when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." He then says in John 4:23, "Yet *a time is coming and has now come* when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks." The first verse suggests something yet to come, while the second is something that is now already happening. John 4:23 refers to the very conversation the Samaritan woman is having with Jesus. Creator and creation confer openly with one another, with God providing streams of living water for his lost creature's redemption and restoration. The first verse, however, is "not yet"; it is to come. It is quite possibly a foreshadowing of the church in which Christ will make his presence known after his crucifixion and resurrection.

In John 5:25 Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, *a time is coming and has now come* when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live." But in John 5:28, he says, "*a time is coming* when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out." The first verse suggests a spiritual resurrection: the awakening of those who were dead to everlasting life in Christ. This resurrection is already occurring in Christ's preaching. The second, however, has not "yet come"; that is, the final resurrection of the dead. This will only happen on the last day when Christ returns to reign triumphantly. The believer's everlasting life in Christ begins here and now, according to John 5:25. Life is "possible for men here and now, but to be realized in its fullness beyond the grave."<sup>3</sup>

In John 6:54 Jesus says to the crowd in Capernaum "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up *at the last day*." Martha repeats similar words back to Jesus in John 11:24, speaking of how Lazarus will "rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus speaks to the unbelievers in the Jerusalem crowd, saying that his own words "will condemn him *at the last day*." All of these verses point to Jesus' belief that there would indeed be an eschatological day that is not coterminous with his own death and resurrection.

Jesus, therefore, did not see his death and the resurrection as the final consummation of all things. There would be a historical day beyond the resurrection. Would that day, however, be any different than the ones before? If not, then how exactly would it be different? Does John's Gospel, which places so much emphasis on the  $\text{LOGO}$ - becoming flesh and "tenting" among us, not record Jesus' own testimony as to how things would be different? Would the incarnate one simply remove himself from the world, watching from a distance until the "last day" arrives?

Clearly, the answer must be no – John must have recorded some of Jesus' teaching as to how his presence would effect itself among his people. If Jesus understood that there would be a time of the church between his death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things, it makes sense that he would have related that time to himself. He would have answered the question, "Who am I in relation to my people after I have 'gone'?" This is where the question of the "sacramentality" of John comes into play. Will Jesus continue to be present to his people incarnationally and mediately, or will he be present only in some spiritual and perhaps immediate sense?

Two sacraments have been recognized, from the earliest days of the church, as powerful signs of the presence of the Trinity in the midst of God's people. The first is baptism, the chief rite of the early church, through which people were brought out of the darkness of sin into the light of Christ. In baptism, people were joined to Christ's death and resurrection, spiritually resurrected to new life here and now and awaiting with anticipation the new life to come. The second is the Eucharist, the bread and the wine understood to be the body and blood of Christ shed for the forgiveness of sins. The recognition of the centrality of these two sacraments was almost universal across the whole church from the very beginning. If John's Gospel is not an aberration, but stands in continuity with the continued teaching of the church, then it would be utterly surprising to find that neither sacrament is mentioned in his account of Jesus' life.

And yet this is precisely what seems to be the case in the minds of some scholars. John's is a gospel concerned only with Jesus' presence on earth and our participation in his life spiritually, but not in anyway physically<sup>4</sup>. Scholars with this interpretation might rely on Jesus' distinction between "earthly" things and "heavenly" things (John 3:12), worshipping the Father "in spirit" (John 4:24), and

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<sup>3</sup> Dodd, C.H. *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1968) p.151

recognizing that the flesh profits nothing, but the spirit gives life (John 6:63) to make their point. But this seems to be missing the argument Jesus is making. If by earthly and fleshly Jesus means simply “physical”, why would John put so much emphasis on the incarnation of Jesus in his prologue? Why would Jesus heal the blind man in John 9 with mud and saliva, instead of “spiritually”? Why feed the five thousand with bread, knowing this will only be misinterpreted? And why raise Lazarus from the dead, when this would only emphasize the “physical” world at the expense of the “spiritual”?

The clearer interpretation seems to be that Jesus is giving new meaning to certain physical things, through which he will be mediately present to his people after his ascension to the Father. When Jesus speaks to Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the Capernaum crowds about the difference between earthly and spiritual things, he is referring to the greater reality present in the physical, not the rejection of the physical in favor of the spiritual. It is in the teachings about second birth through water and spirit (Nicodemus) and his flesh and blood for the life of the world (Capernaum) that Jesus encounters opposition and misunderstanding. The misunderstanding comes from his hearers wanting to take Jesus’ words as purely physical or “earthly.” Nicodemus asks Jesus how one can be born “a second time”, misunderstanding Jesus’ words about being “born from above” (John 3:3). The crowds ask Jesus how he can give his flesh to eat and his blood to drink, not perceiving that Jesus is no mere man, and that divinity and creation are intersecting in Christ is a new and unique way. Both times Christ must ask his listeners to think not of mere fleshly, earthly, and physical things, but of how God (the spiritual) will be present and working new realities through those physical things.

The question remains as to why there are, strictly speaking, no sacramental institutional narratives in the Gospel of John. There are, for example, no words of institution found in the description of the “last supper” in John 13-17. There is no command to “go and baptize” at the end of John. One could argue that John 3 and John 6 in some sense represent an “institution” of the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, respectively, but this seems unlikely. There is another possibility. If Jesus did indeed foresee these two chief sacraments, one of initiation and one of presence for the forgiveness of sins, as the media of his continued presence in his church, he might have taught this in advance of their actual institution. It seems incredibly unlikely that Jesus would leave such an important matter as his continued presence in the midst of his church “until the last minute.” It seems more likely that he would have catechized his followers in advance, preparing them for what was to come. If he did

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<sup>4</sup> Ridderbos, Herman. *The Gospel of John*. John Vriend (trans.) (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997) p.127

indeed do this, it is natural that John would record fragments of this teaching, since it is his gospel that is most clearly focused on who Jesus *is*.

John 3 and John 6 may indeed be read as some of the catechetical instruction Christ gave to his followers before his passion and resurrection. Because his final work was not yet complete, his teaching of course met with incredulity. Like his description of his own body as the new temple, only after his final work will the disciples, now apostles, understand the true meaning of his words. Only then will they truly understand being “born from above”, and how they are to gnaw on Christ’s flesh and drink his blood for eternal life, because the spirit will have taught them “all things” (John 14:26).

Whether or not John’s gospel is sacramental is clearly dependent on what Jesus saw as the future beyond his death and resurrection. If there was to be a time of continued expectation and fulfillment, then the gospel which was so focused on Christ’s very being must also have taught how he would be present in the “time of the church.” It would not be implausible to assume that the Christ who had taken on flesh would also be present to his church in some tangible way. If these assumptions hold true, it is not unreasonable to read passages such as John 3 and John 6 as sacramental homilies or catechesis. These records of Jesus’ catechesis prepared his followers for the ways in which the disciples would find him after he had “ascended to the Father”, and where we would continue to be able to find him until he comes again.

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