

## PREACHING THE SEVEN SIGNS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

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**ABSTRACT:** Caring for God's flock involves different ministries; but preaching and teaching will play a major part. This call to be a teacher in a local church, is a glorious calling, defined as „a noble task” (1 Timothy 3v1). Yet such preaching, while always biblical, has to be made interesting. One approach will be to seek to exegete different books of the Bible or to deliver a series of sermons on a particular theme. This article focuses upon the second approach and relates particularly on a main theme from the Gospel of John, namely how John has highlighted the seven signs which can be identified in the first half of his Gospel. The author is seeking to bring his readers to the conviction or to deepen a conviction already held that Jesus really was the Christ who was to come, the Son of God sent by the Father, revealing Him, dying for us as a substitute.

**KEY WORDS:** preaching, authorship, the signs of John's Gospel, the readership, coming to faith.

The call to be a teacher in a local church, is a crucial calling. As we noted, Paul defines it as „a noble task” (1 Timothy 3v1)<sup>2</sup>, and Peter reminds us that if we have faithfully shepherded God's flock, „When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5v4). It is clear therefore, that while caring for God's flock will involve different ministries, preaching and teaching will play a major part. Some „Shepherds and teachers” (Ephesians 4v11) will stay with a particular

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations are taken from the ESV translation.

fellowship of God's people for many years.<sup>3</sup> Their task will then be to faithfully teach the foundational truths, which members of a congregation need to be established in. But they must teach them in a way that is relevant and interesting. This will no doubt involve exegeting the books of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> A second approach will be to choose a particular relevant theme which will give them a series of sermons covering a few months. In this present article the aim will be to follow the second method i.e., a thematic treatment of Scripture. We focus upon the Seven Signs which are highlighted by the apostle John in his Gospel. There are riches to be found here which can enlighten and bless any flock of God's people.

First, we ought to set out the classical argument which was made for John's authorship by Westcott.<sup>5</sup> The case he made has never been completely answered.

(1) The writer was a Jew

He was familiar with Jewish beliefs, customs and attitudes. The work gives evidence of Hebraic style, vocabulary and thought.

(2) A Jew of Palestine

In John we find very precise local knowledge, e.g., 3v23; 5v2; 11v18; 19v20.

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3 Some examples of long pastorates are: Geoff Thomas, pastor in Aberystwyth for 48 years. John Piper served the same church for 32 years, John Macarthur, 43 years and has not yet retired. In history, some 18th century Particular Baptists served long pastorates: John Gill in London (51 years); John Rippon (63 years); Charles Simeon, Cambridge, (over 50 years); William Jay in Bath (62 years). Martyn Lloyd-Jones was at Westminster Chapel for 30 years and Spurgeon pastored the same church for 38 years.

4 Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones taught the Epistle to the Romans for twelve years in Westminster Chapel, London, from October 1955 to March 1968. He preached 366 sermons each message lasting for 50 minutes.

5 B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes*, 2 Vols. (London: John Murray, 1908), v-xxv.

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There is accurate knowledge of the Temple and its ritual - chapters 7 and 8.

OT quotations are based on the original Hebrew.

The author knows Jerusalem before it was destroyed in 70 CE.

Archaeology has since confirmed John's accuracy.

(3) The author is an eyewitness

One finds minute details of person (6v7; 13v23f; 18v10) time (2v1; 19v14; 20v26) number (2v6; 6v19; 21v11) place (3v23; 18v1) manner (13v1-20) plus other small details (6v9; 12v3; 20v7).

(4) The author was an apostle

He has intimate knowledge of Jesus (2v24; 11v33; 13v1) and of his disciples (2v17; 4v27; 13v28).

(5) Author was the apostle John

John the apostle is not mentioned in this Gospel and John the Baptist is spoken of only as „John” while the other Gospels call him „John the Baptist.” The author is also „the disciple whom Jesus loved” (13v23; 19v26; 20v2; 21v7, 20).

(6) Those who circulated the Gospel accepted the author's claim to be an eyewitness (1v14; 19v35; 21v24).

John does remind us that Jesus performed many signs throughout His public ministry (John 20v30). He has chosen to focus upon seven of these particularly.

(1) 2.v1-11. Changing water into wine at Cana.

(2) 4v46-54. Healing the royal official's son at Cana.

(3) 5v1-15. Restoring the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda.

(4) 6v1-15. Multiplication of the loaves in Galilee.

(5) 6v16-21. Walking upon the sea of Galilee.

(6) 9v 1-12. Healing the blind man in Jerusalem.

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(7) 11v1-44. Raising Lazarus from the dead.<sup>6</sup>

We should note that scholars have suggested that these seven signs can be taken as forming part of the structure of the whole message of John's Gospel. Brown<sup>7</sup> outlines the Fourth Gospel in the following way.

1v1-18 THE PROLOGUE.

He proposes that here we have an early Christian hymn adapted from Johannine circles to serve as an overture to the gospel narrative of the career of the incarnate word.

1v19-12v50 THE BOOK OF SIGNS

The public ministry of Jesus where in sign and word He shows Himself to His own people as the revelation of the Father, only to be rejected.

13v1-20v31. THE BOOK OF GLORY.

To those who accept Him (His own spiritually, His disciples) Jesus shows His glory by returning to the Father in the „hour” of His crucifixion, resurrection and the ascension. Fully glorified, He communicates the Spirit of life.

21v1-25 THE EPILOGUE.

One or two comments will be appropriate. With regard to the Prologue, Milne<sup>8</sup> writes of the Prologue as a „prevision” of the Gospel as a whole, others as an overture to an opera. These links mean that it is unlikely that the Prologue was composed by someone other than John. Clearly, there is a major break in the Gospel at ch.12, see v37-43 - a summary statement of Jesus' public ministry and its effect on the people. Again, 12v44-50 are the last words Jesus directed to the people in general. 13v1f brings us a

<sup>6</sup> We can note that 6v1-15; 16-21 have Synoptic parallels; 4v46-54 is claimed to have Synoptic parallels; 5v1-15; 9v1-12; 11v1-44 are Synoptic type miracles; 2v1-11 is unique to John.

<sup>7</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John; Introduction, Translation and Notes*, 2 Vols., (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966-71), cxxxix.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Milne, (1993), *The Message of John*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 29.

shift of emphasis with Jesus now turning to „his own” (13v1), the disciples whom He loves and who have come to believe in Him. The spirit of these two divisions is summed up in 1v11-12. The „book of signs” largely contain Jesus' miracles referred to as signs and discourses which interpret the signs. The second division has all through it the theme of Jesus' return to the Father which involves the glorification of Jesus.

Beasley-Murray<sup>9</sup> is attracted to Brown's division and sees it as helpful. He explains however, that we must remember in the passage which explains the purpose of the book, 20v30-31, the *whole* book is viewed as a book of signs. This remains true even if as some suggest that 20v30-31 originally related to a collection of signs Jesus performed. „The evangelist has chosen to set the statement at the climatic point in his account of the passion and resurrection of Jesus, with the intention, presumably, of including the 'lifting up' of the Son of Man as the ultimate sign of the Christ for man.”

Beasley-Murray also asks us to note that the structure of sign and discourse in chs. 2-12 is interlaced with another prime theme in John, that should be noted, namely, that Israel's faith embodied in the feasts John refers to in the Gospel finds its fulfillment in Him. See ch6, the exposition of the two signs of the multiplication of the loaves and the walking on the water combining the theme of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Passover. Also, there are overtones from the healing of the blind man where Jesus claims to be „the light of the world” in the mention of the feast of the Dedication of the Temple. Therefore, for Beasley-Murray, we must be careful that any analysis of the gospel should not detract from other emphases which the author intends to make in his majestic work.

Gary M. Burge<sup>10</sup> describes the two natural divisions as: Jesus' Public Ministry and Jesus' Personal Glorification. Regarding the Book of Signs, Burge considers that the short units that form this section are topically

9 G.R. Beasley-Murray, (1999) Sec. ed., *John*, Word Books, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1999), xc.

10 G. M. Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 75.

arranged. From ch.2-4 Jesus works miracles on institutions in Judaism and from ch.5-10 He appears at a series of Jewish festivals that are named. In all these institutions and festivals, Jesus replaces the Jewish symbol with messianic abundance (water becomes living water; manna – living bread). Burge considers that in spite of the historical or chronological character of the Gospel, John is telling us more about Jesus' messianic impact on Judaism than about sequences of events.

### **Signs in the Old Testament**

Scholars have explained that in the Old Testament a „sign” is used of events demonstrating the truth of God's word through a prophet (Ex 3v12; 1 Sam 10v19) and therefore as authenticating God's prophet (Ex 4v1-9). It is used of events heralding the realization of eschatological expectations, (Is 7v10-16). Therefore, among the prophets in particular a sign is no mere illustration, but a symbolic anticipation or showing forth of a greater reality of which the σημεῖον is nevertheless itself a part (e.g. Is 8v18; 66v19; Ezek 4v3).

### **Signs in the Synoptics**

„Signs” in the Synoptics usually refers to events at the end of the age (e.g. Mk 13v4-22), or the term can refer to the demands made of Jesus by the people or the Pharisees (Mk 8v11-12). Faith is generally seen as a prerequisite for Jesus to perform a miracle (Mk 2v5). Miracles are generally associated as signs of the coming of the kingdom of God, particularly those involving exorcisms, healings (Is 35:5-6; Mk 1v39; 3v14-15; 6v12-13; Luke 11v20). The Synoptics emphasize the role of disciples as miracle workers (Mk 3v14-15; 6v7,12-15), pointing to the coming of the kingdom in Jesus.

### **Signs in the Fourth Gospel**

There are certain distinctives when it comes to signs in the Gospel of John.

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1. There is that absence of Synoptic linking of miracles with the coming of the kingdom of God.
2. We note that there are no miracles involving exorcisms.
3. The language or vocabulary in John is distinctive. In the Synoptics we have δυνάμεις used of „deeds of power”; in John we find σημεῖα „signs” also ἔργα „works.” Works include signs but are not limited to signs (Jn 14v10; 17v4). Finally,
4. Signs and believing. Signs have a role in belief where their significance is recognized (2v11). But seeing them only as works of power raises questions about the source of that power.

There is a complex relationship between signs and believing in John. Some see the signs and believe (2v11; 4v54). Some see the signs and continue in unbelief (9v13ff). Some see the signs and believe, but their belief seems suspect (2v23-25). In John 12v37-38, we have a summary statement of the response of many on seeing the signs, „Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.” They would believe that a miracle had been done; but they did not discern the meaning of the sign. Again, 4v48 reflects the Synoptic criticism of the people for demanding a sign before they will believe. Finally, 20v29 refers to most people - they have not seen Jesus, but they believe.

Inasmuch as the signs convey the truth about Jesus' work and identity, the recognition of this links signs and believing - but that recognition is not inevitable once a sign has been witnessed. Moreover, the whole of Jesus ministry reveals the Father and demands a response - not just the signs.

We can conclude then by accepting that the above listing of the signs is usually seen as a scheme of seven signs, concluding with the resurrection of Lazarus. Others link the feeding of the 5000 and the walking on the water(ch.6) as one sign. They then suggest the 7th is the resurrection of Christ.

How can we define signs then? A sign is a manifestation, through the person of Jesus, that God is at work in the world. Or, to put it another

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way, the sign is intended to show Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (20v30-31) – or, as we will note again later, that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus; it is a matter of identification and belief that Jesus in from God. We should be brought to the place where Thomas was brought to, „Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:28). Kreitzer<sup>11</sup> gives a helpful definition:

„semeion” is used to signify an event which manifests the glory of God, the presence of God in our midst... „Semeion” is much more weighty (in theological terms) than the term „miracle”.... The point of the „semeion” is not so much about the miraculous event itself, but about the tremendous theological truth to which the „semeion” itself points, the insight into the nature of God that it reveals... It is meant to direct our attention to the truth underlying the „miracle” itself, to the insight about God brought about by the „miracle” which is performed.

We can add that we must not lose sight that the signs were performed by Jesus and therefore, point to who He is. He is „the only God” (John 1v18) Himself.

### **Preaching the Significance of the Seven Signs in John.**

We will take each of the seven signs as they appear in the text of the Gospel.

#### **John 1v1-11, Turning the water into wine.**

This is a sign (v11) and is therefore intended to show Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (20v30-31). While some of the signs are followed by extended discourses which explain their significance (e.g., Jn 6) here no explanation is offered. Yet the fact that this sign is the first recorded by John suggests that it has an important role within the Gospel as a whole.

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11 L. J. Kreitzer, *The Gospel according to John*, (Oxford: Regent's Study Guides, 1996), 6.



We can highlight some keys to our interpretation. Wine is an eschatological symbol (Am 9v13; Hos 14v7; Joel 2v21-24; 3v18; Jer 31v5,12; see also the religious books 2Bar 29.5; 1Enoch 10.19). Yahweh is his people's bridegroom (Is 54v4-6; 62v4-5; Hos 2v19). Though this incident is unique to John these themes also occur in the Synoptics. The Kingdom of God is presented as a wedding feast (Mt 22v1-14; 25v1-13); the new wine as a description of Jesus' relation to Judaism (Mk 2v18-22 par); the disciples as guests at a wedding feast (Mk 2v18-22 par).

Using these guidelines to control the interpretation of the sign we can say that in this event Jesus is identified as the one who inaugurates the messianic era fulfilling the eschatological promise of God. We see Jesus' replacement, or fulfillment of the old order of Judaism (the 6 jars for purification) with the new order of the wine of the kingdom of God, a theme brought out more clearly in the Synoptics.

Writing about ch.2v1-4v54, Dodd<sup>12</sup> claims, „These three chapters present the replacement of the old purifications by the wine of the kingdom of God, the old temple by the new in the risen Lord, an exposition of new birth for old creation, a contrast between the water of Jacob's well and the living water from Christ, the worship of Jerusalem and Gerizim with worship in Spirit and in truth.” As Carson<sup>13</sup> has stated „these chapters are organised to convey what Paul says in 2 Cor.5v17: „the old has gone, the new has come.”

The wine Jesus supplies is unqualifiedly superior, as must everything be that is tied to the coming of the kingdom of God Jesus is introducing. It has been suggested that we could link the changing of the water into wine to the Nicodemus discourse of regeneration, being born of the Spirit (3v1-7) Here we have the testimony to the divine power of Jesus in bringing a new spiritual birth that prepares one to enter the kingdom of heaven (3v5-7).

12 C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 297.

13 D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 166.

Yet we should note that the blessing of new birth is tied to the „hour” of Jesus. In response to His mother’s comment, „they have no wine,” in v4 Jesus says, „O woman, what does this have to do with me?” This is an unusual form of address, (see also 19v26). While it is not suggesting deep affection it does not convey hostility or distance either. (See also 4v21; 20v13). The idea behind the phrase Jesus uses seems to be „What do you and I have in common?” (see „why do you involve me?” NIV) Scholars interpret this as Jesus asserting that His actions are determined solely by the will of the Father (5v30; 8v29). Neither his mother nor His brothers (7v6) can determine what He will do. He adds, „My hour has not yet come.” This concept of „hour” is a key word in John. The hour of Jesus refers to His death on the cross and exaltation (7v30; 8v20 - His hour has not yet come; 12v23,27; 13v1; 17v1 - the hour is in immediate prospect). The new wine of the kingdom of God or spiritual regeneration is thus linked to Jesus’ death as a substitute for others.

In v6, the „six stone water jars” were jars which did not attract uncleanness and were therefore appropriate vessels for water used for the Jewish rites of purification. They would be used for the ritual washing of the hands or of utensils (see Mk 7v3-4). But the symbol will be more general - all rituals of purification (see 3v25). As Carson<sup>14</sup> explains, „The water represents the old order of Jewish law and custom, which Jesus was to replace with something better.” The large capacity of the jars and their being filled to the brim signifies the fullness of the new work that Jesus does and the salvation He provides.

The reference in v11 to „the first of his signs” can be linked to 4v54, the second sign. These signs reveal who Jesus is. He „manifested his glory.” The sign itself does not display the glory but the disciples perceived Jesus’ glory in this incident. „His disciples believed in him.” The manifestation of the glory of Jesus behind the sign resulted in a response of faith in the disciples. Signs are related to faith but not in a simple cause and effect way, as we noted earlier. While some can see the signs and do not believe(11v47); others display a kind of belief but it is inadequate.

<sup>14</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 173.

quate(6v2,26,28f); here we have the emphasis that true disciples believe in who He really is.

### **John 4v46-54 Healing of the Official's Son.**

Jesus has returned to the region of Galilee, where the Galileans enthusiastically welcomed Him, because they had witnessed all the mighty works He had done in Jerusalem. The reality was that they were welcoming Jesus as a miracle-worker, but do not recognize Him for who He really is; the Messiah, the Son of God Himself. A Jewish nobleman from Capernaum, who, upon learning that Jesus was in Cana, undertook the twenty-mile trip to that city to persistently urge Jesus to accompany him back to his home to heal his desperately ill son. Jesus comments concerning them all. „Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe,” (4v48). They welcomed Him because He was able to do mighty works that fascinated them and were of personal benefit to them. They failed to appreciate that these works were „signs” (4v54) intended to be seen as those which identified Jesus as Son of God and Messiah and that all should trust in Him and His Word.

The nobleman still appeals for the Lord's help before his son dies. Rather than accompanying the man to his home and there personally healing his son, Jesus simply speaks the word, „Go; your son will live.” John records that the nobleman believed the word of Jesus, started out for home to be met with the good news that his son had been healed at the very hour of Jesus spoken word. „He himself believed, and all his household,” (4v53). The whole incident becomes a challenge for us, as Guthrie<sup>15</sup> explains, to have faith in Jesus' word of power, without reliance on any external attestations. „Such a faith is deeper than that of the disciples' faith in ii. 11, which was based on what they themselves had seen.”

All we need is the word of the Son of God. Earlier, Samaritans had come out from their town to hear Him because of the testimony of the

<sup>15</sup> Donald Guthrie, „The Importance of Signs in the Fourth Gospel,” *Vox Evangelica* 5 (1967): 74-75.

woman who had met Him at the well. John records, „And many more believed because of his word.” They then said, „It is no longer because of what you have said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world” (4v41-42). As He affirmed in John 5v24, „Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death unto life.” That word heard in faith, „the voice of the Son of God,” also brings life now from spiritual death, i.e., „those who hear will live” and one day, resurrection, (5v25;28).

### **John 5 v1-18. Jesus gives life(heals) on the Sabbath, a sign of His equality with God?**

The word *σημεῖα* is not specifically used. The focus appears to be not so much on the faith or belief of the disabled man but upon those who saw the miracle or saw him walking but failed to respond in faith. In fact, John tells us, „the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the sabbath” (5v16). Jesus makes an astounding statement, „My Father is working until now, and I am working.” The rabbis accepted that God still „worked” on the sabbath; He gave life, for children were born; also people died. The Jews recognized that in Jesus’ claim to be working, giving life (healing) on the Sabbath He was calling God „his own Father, making himself equal with God” (5v18). Jesus also could continue to speak of the fact that „The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son” (5v22). What a sign! Jesus gives life and calls all to judgment. Jesus is the mediator of life and judgment – here therefore are His eschatological tasks.

### **John 6v1-15; 25-65 Jesus feeds 5000 and is the bread of life.**

This is the one miracle, apart from the resurrection, which is recorded in all four Gospels. It is presented as the fourth sign (6v14). There are three ways it has been understood:

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- As the boy's five barley loaves and two fish were distributed by the disciples, the selfish were persuaded to share. The miracle took place in people's hearts.

- This was a sacramental meal = each took only a small piece.

- something happened which must be understood as a nature miracle.

Again, this sign reveals who Jesus really is – He has power to actually create.

Beasley-Murray<sup>16</sup> has explained what is the significance of this sign.

The feeding miracle is presented by the Evangelist as a sign of the gift by Jesus of the bread of life, through which a man may live and not die. The context within the chapter gives depth to this presentation. It is Passover season, with its associations of sacrifice, redemption, cultic meal and eschatological deliverance. The people are looking for the manna with the Messiah and the kingdom of God. Jesus, unlike Moses, gives the true bread from heaven, for with him comes the kingdom, and through him will come resurrection in the last day,

It is important to link the bread of life discourse with the feeding of the 5000. The significance of the sign is thus unfolded. Jesus has crossed over the sea to Capernaum and the crowd follow Him (6v22-24). When they found Him, Jesus speaks to them of the need to seek not the material bread, like the loaves of which they had eaten, but „the food that endures to eternal life” which He can give to them (6v26-27). He is the „bread of God” which came down from heaven, „the bread of life.” Jesus continues, „whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” He is the source of the eternal life which all need and coming to Him and believing in Him is the way to receive that life.

We can maintain that the later verses need to be interpreted in light of this earlier teaching. When the Jews grumbled about His claim to have come down from heaven and speak of Jesus as „the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know,” Jesus informs them that this truth about

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16 Beasley-Murray, *John*, 98.

Him needs to be revealed to them by God (6v43-45). Then He proclaims, „I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Note not just verses 48-51 but His strong teaching when the Jews balk at His words, „Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (6v53-54).

These verses have led to much discussion and sharp division among scholars. They have become caught up in the whole argument concerning John’s view of the sacraments. We should note these facts first of all. In the Gospel, John the Baptist baptizes (1v25 etc.); Jesus’ disciples baptize (4v1-2). John the Baptist witnesses the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus (1v29-34 cf. Mk 1v9-11 par.) but the baptism of Jesus which provides the context for this event in the Synoptics is not recorded by John. In addition, there is no great commission and command to baptize in John. Again, there is a strong focus on the Upper Room and the final meal, but no institution of the Lord’s Supper (contra the Synoptics and Paul). The history of the interpretation of this data in the context of John’s Gospel as a whole has varied widely.

There were scholars who adopted an Ultra Sacramental approach as Cullmann<sup>17</sup> who saw the teaching of the Fourth Gospel as symbolic rather than explicit. This is reflected in its sacramental teaching, where every reference to water is a reference to baptism (2v1-11; 3v5; 4v7-15; 5v2-9; 7v37-39; 9v7,11; 13v1-16; 19v34); all references to bread/ meal/ wine/ blood are references to the Eucharist (2v1-11; 6v1-14, 51-58; 15v1-11; 19v34). He advocated that through this symbolic treatment the Fourth Gospel showed that the Christian life, including its sacramental worship, was rooted and grounded in the life and ministry of Jesus. So the Gospel is through and through sacramental and John demonstrates that the sacraments have a rich and central place in any coherent and strong faith.

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17 O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*; Studies in Biblical Theology, (London: SCM Press, 1953). See especially chapter 2.

The problem of this approach is the danger of eisegesis. Simply because a text can be interpreted symbolically as a reference to the sacraments it does not follow that it should be so interpreted.

Aware of this danger, Brown<sup>18</sup> tried to develop criteria by which to establish the presence of sacramental meaning in a text. He applied an External test. If a text was not interpreted sacramentally in the early church it should not be so interpreted now. Again, he has an Internal test. This was more a matter of exercising judgement than anything concrete. So John 9 has a sacramental reference because of the twin emphases on the man being blind from birth and on the healing power of the water. On this basis Brown saw 3 and 6 as explicit references and 2, 7, 9, 15 etc. as more symbolic. For Brown<sup>19</sup> 19v34 „shows symbolically that both of these sacraments, baptismal water and eucharistic blood, have the source of their existence and power in the death of Jesus.” He saw John's use of symbolism tied in with his whole approach in sharing the gospel and it provided a link between the life available through the church and that available through Christ.

On the other hand, there were scholars who considered John as Anti-sacramental. They affirmed that John had no interest in the sacraments, but was more concerned that the faith of the individual be real and was not interested in formal religion with any kind of magical view of the sacraments. But what are we to make of 3v22? If John was anti-sacramental would he have recorded this? Jesus baptizing, or at least sanctioning baptism, at the same time as that of John's baptism? See also 4v 1-2.

Such an approach could be seen in Bultmann,<sup>20</sup> who affirmed that all attempts at symbolic interpretation was eisegesis. In the Fourth Gospel the emphasis is on faith in the revealer - Jesus. As such the Gospel was hostile to sacramentalism. Bultmann accepted that 3. 6 and 19 were sacramental but claimed they had been added in by the Ecclesiastical Redactor!

18 Brown, *John*, 1. CXI-CXIV; 380-82..

19 Brown, *John*, 1. .CXIV.

20 R. Bultmann, *John*, 234-237

Dunn<sup>21</sup> is broadly sympathetic to the view that the Fourth Gospel is non-sacramental and, in one sense, anti-sacramental. „John wants to place no emphasis on the two sacraments, but rather to draw attention away from them.”<sup>22</sup> So, if 3v5 is interpreted as a reference to baptism, the point is that baptism of itself is not sufficient - it is spiritual birth that is essential. In his view, 6v51-58 takes up language associated with the Lord's Supper but uses it metaphorically for believing in Jesus. The passage also makes strong anti-docetic claims (cf. 51-56 munch/flesh for eat/bread). While using sacramental language, v62-63 function as a protest against sacramental literalism i.e., „a protest against the view that the life of which John so often speaks is mediated through the eating and drinking of sacramental elements.”<sup>23</sup> So John „does not adopt an anti-sacramental stance properly speaking, nor does he turn his back on the sacraments ... But John's gospel must be read in part at least as a protest against a (presumably) increasing sacramental literalism.”<sup>24</sup>

It could be claimed that while in John there appears to be no clear polemic against the sacraments, the omissions concerning the baptism of Jesus, and that of the Lord's Supper are pointers to the fact that John is highlighting the danger of any increasing sacramentalism. This would be to take the church, or his particular readers away from faith as the way to eternal life.

When it comes to John 6, our present passage, the direction of the teaching concerning eating the flesh/drinking the blood of the Son of God does not focus upon the eucharist. It can be maintained that v48-51 and v53-54, quoted above, need not be seen as statements of sacramental theology – when we take the historical setting seriously. Note the parallel of v40 and v54. Eating flesh and drinking blood produce the same result as looking to the Son and believing i.e., the former is a metaphor of the

21 J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the NT: An Inquiry Into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 150-171.

22 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the NT*, 169.

23 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the NT*, 171.

24 Dunn *Unity and Diversity in the NT*, 171.



latter. This is quite common in John. There are many occasions where metaphorical language is found i.e., Lamb of God (John 1v29, 36); angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (John 1v51); „destroy this temple” (John 2v19). Again, Jesus gives „living water” and those who drink will never thirst again in John 4v10-14, and invites „if any man thirst let him come unto me and drink” in John 7v38-39. Jesus is „the door” in John 10v7-10 and „the way, the truth and the life” in John 14v6. Here in John 6, in comparison to the manna eaten in the wilderness, Jesus is „the bread of life,” to whom they were to come and in whom they were to believe (John 6:35).

We need to recognize that v53-54 if eucharistic, suggest participation in the Eucharist is absolutely necessary to eternal life. But this goes against the whole emphasis of the Gospel (and the New Testament). Note the increasing intensity in the development of the single theme of believing in Jesus as the way to eternal life (v35, 40, 50-51, 53-54). The reference to Jesus' „flesh” and His „blood” should be interpreted as references to His atoning death for „the life of the world” (6v51), and to „eat” is the believing appropriation of His death to the individual i.e., trusting in Him and what He has accomplished for us. Christian readers may have seen some allusion to the Lord's Supper in this passage, but that does not make the passage sacramental. Rather, we can say, that at the Lord's table, as Paul has taught us, we can „proclaim the Lord's death,” (1 Cor 11v26), i.e., reaffirm in the presence of God, that Jesus who died for us, not the bread and wine, is our trust alone for salvation. „Flesh” is not commonly used with reference to the sacrament – we would expect „body.” It is better to understand it, as we have pointed out, as the appropriation of Christ. In v53 both „eat” and „drink” are in the aorist tense, pointing to a once-for-all action. This is not in any sense applicable to the sacrament. Flesh and blood in separation point to His death and should be interpreted in the light of v47, „Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.”

To sum up, here we do not have John giving a eucharistic interpretation to the Markan account of the feeding of the 5,000. At the end we see that the theme of faith is important – contrast the response of the crowd

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in v41-42, 52, with their unbelief, with that of the faith of the disciples, v68-69 – faith in His death for us is the key. Also, how do you „come” to bread and „believe” in bread? The emphasis in the whole chapter is the need to believe in Jesus, not partake of the sacrament. Note the metaphorical use again in 7v38-39 of believing and drinking.

Also, remember the mixing of metaphors – v47 believing yields eternal life; v50-51 eating the bread yields eternal life. It is not that two things are necessary for eternal life – believing in Jesus and eating the sacrament. The fact is that this section binds together as identical both statements; believing is one way of expressing this and the eating is the act of appropriating Christ, making Him our personal trust. Jesus is not speaking of believing and eating.

With v51c we are coming to the conclusion of Jesus’ discourse in v43-51 where He highlights His redemptive death – the way in which the bread will give life is in the bread „giving himself,” in death. All that follows when the Jews dispute about what He said, and His insistence that they must „eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood” otherwise they will have no life in them is not about the sacraments but is Christology – in v56-57 there is a change back to the first person personal pronoun, „my flesh” ... „my blood” ... „feeds on me.” It is appropriating to themselves what He has done for them when His blood was shed. As was suggested, the whole section may be a response to a time when there was a move to accept that the Christian eucharistic rite could secure by itself eternal life for the one who receives it. The emphasis is all upon believing in His death for the world and receiving eternal life by the Holy Spirit – the Son of man ascends and bestows this, (6v62). The chapter concludes by affirming that it is by believing his words that the Spirit and eternal life are imparted, (6v66-70). Therefore, John 6 is NOT about the eucharist; John 6 is BECAUSE of the misconception of what the eucharist could do for us. The feeding of the 5000 is a remarkable sign which brings to us a remarkable revelation of Christ as the bread of life. Believing in Him who

gave His flesh in death for us (cf. Rom 8v3), brings to us the assurance of eternal life.

### **John 6v16-21 Jesus walks on the water.**

This sign comes between the fourth sign and its discourse. As for its message, Carson<sup>25</sup> suggests that discerning readers may see significance in Jesus' words ἐγὼ ἐμὶ, „I Am,” as He comes to them in the storm, walking upon the water. Again he points out that the sea stands for chaos and disorder and it is God who controls it and stills it. We can say that for John, Jesus also comes to his disciples in distress in the storm in a second Exodus (cf. Ps 77v16,19, which speaks of God coming in a powerful theophany to the aid of His people at the time of the Exodus). One should note Ps 107v29-30, „He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.” Jesus is shown as the Lord of nature, a self-revelation of Him to His disciples. In Old Testament texts God was seen as Lord and controller of the natural world, the God who stills the stormy waters (Ps 65v7; 89v9; Nahum 1v3). So, we have here in the stilling of the storm Jesus assuming the authority that in the Old Testament is exercised solely by God. We can see a parallel here between the situation of the disciples on the lake and the Church in the midst of persecution (a ship was a very early symbol of the Church in Christian art). Therefore, disciples must have no fear because Jesus with all His power is and will be with His believing people. He is all-sufficient for all that is to come.

### **John 9v1-12 Jesus is the Light of the world.**

This chapter continues the theme of Jesus as the Light of the World (John 8v12; John 9v5). When the Light shone, some received spiritual sight, as this blind man received physical and spiritual sight. However, the Light blinded others (John 9v39-41). It is noteworthy that there are more miracles of the giving of sight to the blind recorded of Jesus than healings in

<sup>25</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 275-276.

any other category (see Matthew 9v27-31; Matthew 12v22-23; Matthew 15v30-31; Matthew 21v14; Mark 8v22-26; Mark 10v46-52; Luke 7v21-22). In the Old Testament the giving of sight to the blind is associated with God Himself, (Exodus 4v11; Psalms 146v8). It is also a messianic activity (Isaiah 29v18; Isaiah 35v5; Isaiah 42v7). In the New Testament Jesus fulfills these prophecies, revealing His divinity as God's own Messiah – certainly here in this sign.

Jesus is in Jerusalem (John 8v59), with the events unfolding in or near the temple. John emphasizes that the man had been blind from birth to prove his helpless condition and to compare him with those who were spiritually blind from birth (cf. John 9v39-41; 2 Corinthians 4v4; Ephesians 2v1-3). As we noted, the Synoptics record several instances in which blind people received their sight, but this is the only case of this happening to a man who was born blind. All these events in this section of John's Gospel here should be taken together with the coming of the Feast of Dedication, which was also called The Festival of Lights. In John 10v22-23 we read, „At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in colonnade of Solomon.” Note also the wider context. John 10v22–42 concludes the festival cycle mentioned in John 5v1–10v42. First, Sabbath (5v9), Passover (6v4), Tabernacles (7v1-53; 8v1–10v21), and Dedication (10v22–42). John is highlighting the fact that Jesus fulfills these great Jewish celebrations and how each feast reveals more fully His person and work. The signs reveal who He really is.

Going back to the year 165 BCE when the Jews in Judea were under the rule of the Greek kings of Damascus, Antiochus Epiphanes defiled the Temple, by setting up an altar to Zeus and sacrificing a pig on the altar. The Maccabees led by four Jewish brothers fought for three years until they overcame their oppressors and cleansed again the temple. This is remembered in Hanukkah, called the Feast of Dedication, or the Festival of Lights. When the Temple was being rededicated, there was only enough oil left to burn the eternal flame for one day. Miraculously, during the temple's cleansing, the flame burned for eight days until the

new sacred oil was ready. The flame was the sign of God being present with them in all their restorative work. This is celebrated by the lighting of the Hanukkah Menorah as part of eight consecutive nights of celebration.

Hanukkah is traditionally a family celebration with the lighting of the menorah in the home, one candle per night. The city also is illuminated by light installations, transforming it into a city of light. But they have missed the true light. Like the supernatural presence of God expressed through the eternal flame burning for the Maccabees, Jesus claims here that He is „the light of the world” (John 9v5). Early in his Gospel, John also witnesses to Jesus is the light in John 1v8-9. The sign is in Him giving sight to the man born blind. God is present among them in Jesus, but they do not see it. „Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind’” (9v39). The Pharisees are blind since they have rejected the light (9v40-41).

Consider the earlier witness in the Gospel to Jesus as the light. Writing on John the Baptist John affirms in 1v8-9, „He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” John’s role, was divinely ordained but was not an end in itself. His witness focused all its emphasis on Jesus. The negative formulation prepared the way for the positive statement of v9. Is it possible that John knew about the existence of followers of the Baptist who have not yet become Christians. Scholars propose the possibility of the existence of a Baptist sect, (cf. Acts 19v1-7). The same emphasis on the inferiority of the Baptist to Jesus can be found in v20f, 35f, 3v25. John identifies Jesus, as „the true light.” Note „true” both meaning authentic as opposed to false and ultimate as opposed to provisional. This light „gives light to everyone” which will either mean illumines/gives knowledge (see Eph 1v18) or to bring to the light (see 1Cor 4v5). When men come into the light the result is judgment, division, (see 3v19-21; 8v12; 9v39-41). This light „was coming into the world” as ESV.<sup>26</sup> Note again reference to

26 Is it „lightens everyman coming into the world” as NIV fn. also KJV and NKJV? The meaning then will be spiritual illumination to every man. Is this every

the light in John 12v36, 46. We can say that in chapter 9 the sign which brought first physical (9v7) and then spiritual sight, (9v35-39) pointed to who Jesus really was.

### **John 11v1-44 Jesus is the resurrection and the life.**

In this and the previous sign the evangelist does not use here the procedure of recounting first the sign and then the explanation. In ch9 the lesson of the story (9v5) is placed before the narrative which embodies it; here the significance is stated (11v25-26) in the very heart of the narrative. Note how 11v26 actually speaks of life *before* death! The raising of Lazarus is the sign authenticating the truth of these statements. Here in the last of the signs of Jesus presented by John, he is bringing to a climax all that preceded it and also is pointing forward to Jesus' own death and resurrection (11v45-54). In His death Jesus will also fulfill the Passover symbolism of the unblemished lamb.

The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered in council and discussed the many signs Jesus had performed. If His ministry continues, „everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” Caiaphas, the high priest gave the determination, „It is better that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” So the end of the story of Lazarus is the death of Jesus Himself, (see also the earlier hints in v8,16). We must realize that it is the crucified and risen Lord who is the Resurrection and the Life. For Beasley-Murray<sup>27</sup> therefore, v4 in a sense is the title to the story and the key to its meaning - the glorifying action of God in Christ which brings about the actualizing of the truth of 11v25-26.

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saved man? Or spiritual understanding of the gospel to which not all respond? The light of reason and understanding which all possess? It may however be specific as RSV, ESV and NKJV f. „the true light which, coming into the world, gives light to every man.” The reference will be to the incarnation. In support, from this verse onwards the main focus seems to be on Jesus' ministry.

27 Beasley-Murray, *John*, 188.

In finishing with a broader perspective, consider one of the fundamental purposes of John's Gospel where Carson<sup>28</sup> revived the earlier theory that John was written to evangelize Jews and proselytes. He points out that scholars will often base their decision whether the Gospel has an evangelistic or edificatory purpose on the textual variant in John 20v31.<sup>29</sup> This is not sufficient evidence, since it can easily be shown that the expression „that you may believe” are used in the Gospel for both initial faith and continuing in faith. Carson claims that the purpose clause ought to be read „that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus” i.e. it is a question of identity. The combination of biblical quotations and also allusions to the Old Testament are evidence that it was written to a biblically-literate readership who had some competence in these matters i.e., Diaspora Jews and proselytes. In addition, one should notice the emphasis on the individual coming to faith, and responding properly to God's self-disclosure in Jesus.<sup>30</sup> In response to the question why we should have the inclusion of ch14-17 in an evangelistic document, he explains that good evangelistic literature not only explains why and how one should become a Christian but what it means to be a Christian.

It can be maintained that John has highlighted seven signs in the first half of his Gospel to bring his readers to the conviction or to deepen a conviction already held that Jesus really was the Christ who was to come, the Son of God sent by the Father, revealing Him, dying for us as a substitute.<sup>31</sup> As we have suggested, biblically-literate readership would not miss

28 D. A. Carson, „The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20v30-31 Reconsidered,” JBL 108, (1987), 639-51.

29 The word „believe” has a textual variant. Either present subjunctive, „keep on believing”, or aorist subjunctive, „believe” (once). The first in fact is used in what is considered to be the best and oldest MSS. So, many scholars accept that it was written for those who have already believed, so that they might keep on believing.

30 Carson, „The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” 91f.

31 In John's Gospel Jesus is presented as Passover offering - He dies on the day of preparation, the day on which the animal to be offered was slaughtered (see also 19v14). In v29 the reference to hyssop reflects the Passover festival (Ex

the significance of these signs. In preaching through the Gospel of John, we also should not miss the richness of their message.

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12v22). The quotation in v36 is likely a reference to Ex 12v46 and Num 9v12. It could also reflect Ps 34v20 – God’s care for the righteous man. However, in view of the prevalence of Passover themes the former is more likely. The nature of the Passover offering within Judaism at this time is disputed. Was it viewed as a sacrifice for sin, as an expiatory sacrifice? Tom Holland, *Contours of Pauline Theology*, (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), refers to Ezk 45v21-25 through which the early church would attach an expiatory significance to the death of Christ who was the eschatological Paschal victim. But he maintains that this was also true within Judaism. John the Baptist could refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1v29). There is no suggestion that his hearers had to have this allusion explained. The atoning significance of the eschatological Passover was already present in the mind of Judaism. He died for us.



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