

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Salvation by Knowledge.

A STUDY OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL.

I.

IN the Fourth Gospel knowledge is given an importance it has nowhere else in the New Testament. Frequently it is implied that salvation or eternal life comes through knowledge. The reply of Jesus to Pilate, "To this end have I been born . . . that I should bear witness unto the truth" (xviii. 37) sets forth the purpose of the Incarnation as being Revelation. This agrees with the description of Jesus as the "Truth," and the "Light of the World." From viii. 32, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," it appears that Truth alone suffices to liberate from sin. The words below: "If therefore the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed," attribute the same activity to the Son as to the Truth, implying that the work of the Son is to make known the Truth. The words of Philip in xiv. 8, "Show us the Father and it sufficeth us," represent the Revelation of God as meeting the deepest human need. It is explicitly declared in xvii. 3 that eternal life consists in the knowledge of God: "And this is life eternal, that they should know Thee, the only true God, and Him whom Thou didst send, Jesus Christ." In several passages the teaching of Jesus brings Salvation (cf. vi. 63, xv. 3, xvii. 17, 26). The purpose of the Gospel is declared in xx. 31, "These are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in His name." Belief here rests principally upon knowledge of Christ's miracles.

Agreeable to this emphasis upon knowledge is the constant repetition of words stressing the importance of Revelation. Such words are "light," "know," "declare," "bear witness," "see," and "manifest." The new teaching about the Holy Spirit agrees with this emphasis. Here, and nowhere else in the New Testament, He is called the "Spirit of Truth." The description of His operations agrees with this title. He brings to remembrance the sayings of Christ (xiv. 26), bears witness to Christ (xv. 26), and will guide into all the truth (xvi. 13). His work in the world is to convict it (xvi. 8-14).

The Prologue sets forth the point of view from which the writer presents the whole subsequent narrative. Its interpreta-

tion, therefore, is important; but it involves questions upon which scholars are not agreed. Chief among these is whether "The Word" is to be regarded as expressing Greek or Hebrew religion. If it is Greek it represents Christ as the Divine Reason made explicit. If it is Hebrew it represents the presence and activity of God in Christ in the world. The influence of Greek thought upon this Gospel is undeniable. The Platonic doctrine of "Forms" influences much of its symbolic and allegorical teaching. The Platonic Dialogue was the favourite mode whereby Plato recorded and amplified the teaching of Socrates. Much of Christ's teaching is here given in the form of Dialogue. The enemies of Christ during His earthly ministry are referred to several times as "the Jews." This suggests that its author, though he may have been a Jew by birth, was more in sympathy with Hellenistic thought than with current Judaism, and that he was writing for Gentile readers. On the other hand, recent research has shown that Hebrew teaching probably exercised great influence upon the writer. The Hebrew conception of the Divine Wisdom may be the background of "The Word." If it is, there is significance in the fact that, of all the forms of mediation which Jewish theology then postulated, the writer chose the one which more than any other emphasised the Revelation of God as of supreme importance.

Probably there is in this conception of the "Word" a synthesis of Greek and Hebrew thought. As its meaning is uncertain it seems reasonable to interpret it in the light of the explicit teaching of the Gospel set out above. This clearly represents Christ's saving work as being accomplished by His Revelation of God.

II.

There are, however, a number of passages in the gospel which seem inconsistent with this exclusive emphasis. It is clearly taught that more than knowledge is needed for salvation, as will now be shown.

(a) Participation in the Sacraments appears to be essential for salvation, according to the usual interpretation of two passages. These are (1) iii. 5, "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God," which is understood to refer to baptism, and (2) vi. 26-59, where a reference to the Eucharist is found.

(b) The demand of Jesus recorded in the Synoptics that His disciples should "follow" Him is echoed in xii. 26. Here the context indicates that conformity to Christ's spirit of self-sacrifice is required. The obligation to follow His example of humility is inculcated by the story of the washing of the disciples'

feet (xiii. 15, 17). Obedience to Christ's commandments is demanded (xv. 10, 12). It is therefore made clear that there are moral conditions which must be fulfilled if salvation is to be experienced.

(c) The distinctive feature of the Gospel is its emphasis upon spiritual experience. It is this which gives it a unique place in the thought and life of the Church. This "mysticism" permeates the whole book and it is only necessary to refer to a few examples such as: the necessity for the New Birth (iii. 3, 5) and of cleansing by Christ (xiii. 8); the gift of the living water (iv. 10, 14) and of the Bread of Life (vi. 27); Christ's abiding with His disciples (xiii. 23) and in them (xv. 4) and their abiding in God and in Christ (xvii. 21). These passages represent the relationship of Christ and His disciples as being far more intimate than that merely of a teacher and his pupils.

This Gospel appears then to represent knowledge, the sacraments, morality and spiritual experience as all essential to salvation. It would seem, therefore, that "Salvation by Knowledge" is an inadequate description of the teaching of the Gospel. Are all the four elements of equal importance or can one of them be regarded as primary and the rest as in some sense derivative? The presence of these apparently irreconcilable elements seems to favour some theory of composite authorship or editorial activity. Many such theories have been put forward; but the lack of agreement among scholars with reference to them, and the subjectivity of their methods makes this a precarious mode of explanation. Probably editorial activity was comparatively small and has not seriously affected the main teaching of the original work. Its writer, though probably he utilised a variety of sources, written and oral, has woven them into a homogeneous whole, setting forth throughout his own interpretation of Christianity. Fragments inconsistent with this point of view can be detected; but they are comparatively few and unimportant.

III.

Clement of Alexandria reports a "tradition derived from the early presbyters" to the effect that "Last of all, John perceiving that the bodily [or external] facts had been set forth in the [other] Gospels, at the instance of his disciples and with the inspiration of the Spirit, composed a spiritual [pneumatikon] Gospel." Whatever historical foundation there may be for this tradition it admirably sets forth the purpose of the Gospel, which above all portrays the profoundest spiritual experiences of the presence and power of the Living Christ in the lives of His followers.

This dominant emphasis gives the clue to the meaning of the whole work. From this point of view the three other elements will now be considered.

(1) The fact that a reference to the Sacraments seems to be confined to two sections is significant; for this writer constantly repeats his leading ideas. In neither passage is the reference explicit and definite. In the first (iii. 5) it is confined to three words, "and of water." Prof. K. Lake argues that these words are an interpolation inserted to bring the passage into harmony with later ecclesiastical doctrine and practice. As, however, no ancient Greek manuscript is without them, his arguments, though weighty, must be regarded as inconclusive. The words may not have any reference to baptism. The passage might be translated, "Except a man be born of water and breath, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." In accordance with the symbolism everywhere found in this Gospel, "water" may then represent the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit, as "breath" represents His revivifying activity. The two aspects of the New Birth—deliverance from the old life and the bestowal of new life—are then depicted, as in Paul's figure of death and resurrection. This interpretation of "water" is confirmed by the explicit comparison of the Holy Spirit to water in vii. 38, 39. Most expositors, both ancient and modern, appear to interpret the discourse on the Bread of Life in chapter vi. 26-66, as having reference to the Eucharist. Nevertheless, this interpretation can be challenged on several grounds, which will now be set forth.

(a) The fact that the discourse was delivered before the institution of the Eucharist makes it extremely unlikely that it refers to this. The tradition attributing the institution to the Last Supper is as well authenticated as any Christian tradition, and cannot be challenged by this one Gospel written long after the others. If Jesus spoke these words in reference to the Eucharist before He instituted the rite He gave teaching which He knew none of His hearers could possibly understand, and which would offend their reason and moral sense; for the clue to its meaning was hidden from the most earnest and spiritual of them. This seems to represent Jesus as needlessly causing them to stumble. The teaching in parables in the Synoptics, though it might perplex many, would not offend the reason and conscience of any. The interpretation of the parables was possible to all who exercised their spiritual faculties and were in harmony with God's will. The comprehension of this teaching in John vi. was impossible until the clue was given later at the Last Supper. Only a small proportion of those who heard it in Galilee were present then, so the actual result was to perplex and alienate far more than it enlightened. It is incredible that Jesus, who so sternly denounced

those who placed a stumbling-block in the way of others, should have so acted. This difficulty is felt by many who support the Sacramentarian interpretation. An attempt to evade it is made by attributing a chronological error to the author and placing the discourse at the time of the institution. If the author could err so flagrantly, it seems impossible to rely on his historicity in any instance and it is difficult to believe he had recourse to the evidence of an eye-witness. More serious than the impugning of the chronological accuracy of the writer is the impression this theory gives of his misunderstanding of the character of Jesus. If he could represent Him as acting in such a way can he have had any real insight into His character?

(b) Another objection to the Eucharistic interpretation is that it involves sacramentarianism of an extreme type. If the words, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have not life in yourselves." (vi. 53) refer to the Eucharist, then they represent the observance of this rite as absolutely essential to salvation. When the Gospel was written Christians were suffering persecution. Many converts would be martyred before their period as catechumens was accomplished. Some of these would by their very fidelity to Christ be deprived of the opportunity of ever receiving the Sacrament. If the above words refer to this rite they represent Jesus as teaching that such martyrs would be deprived of the reward of their sacrifice. This interpretation also means that members of the Society of Friends and of the Salvation Army and a multitude of other sincere Christians who do not observe the Sacrament are thereby excluded from Salvation. Facts of experience prove that members of these communions possess and express in their lives the Life Eternal in rich measure. This interpretation, therefore, exposes the Gospel to the charge of error on the very matter which it above all emphasises—the universal experience of Christian believers.

If the words in vi. 58, "he that eateth this bread shall live for ever," and vi. 54 refer to participation in the Eucharist, they set forth a non-moral view of religion which appears quasi-magical. For nowhere in the discourse are moral conditions specified—the mere act of eating and drinking brings eternal life, independently of the attitude of the participant. The writer would never run the risk of such a ruinous error being made. Paul, knowing the danger of crude sacramentarianism, safeguarded his teaching by a stern warning that those who partook unworthily would bring judgment upon themselves. The author of the Gospel would have done likewise if he had had the Eucharist in view here. When he wrote, the Mystery religions were probably the most influential of living pagan religions in the

Hellenistic world. A feature of some of these cults was a sacramental meal at which immortality was thought to be mediated by feeding upon the Deity. As the Gospel was written for Hellenistic readers its author would not appear to give any countenance to such errors.

(c) It is unlikely that he would omit all reference to the Institution of the Eucharist if he regarded its observance as essential to salvation. The Gospel would then need to be supplemented by one of the other Gospels or by tradition. The work as it stands would be unintelligible, as it contains nothing to explain the Sacramentarian significance of this discourse. If the Gospel was intended merely to supplement other sources of information it would not repeat so much of what the Synoptics contain. Where it omits incidents which they record, a dogmatic reason can frequently be detected and one may be present here. The substitution of the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, and the exhortation based upon it, may indicate that to the author's mind the true Sacrament of Communion with Christ was imitating His Spirit rather than any ritual ceremony. As many of the most practical and deeply spiritual Christians find the most intimate communion with Christ independently of the Sacraments and, in consequence, attach little importance to these, so it may have been in the case of the author of this Gospel. The reason why from early times and until now the Sacramental interpretation has been accepted almost universally is that the ritual and ceremonial elements in religion always appeal to most people more strongly than the mystical. The theories and practice of the Mystery religions exercised a powerful influence on the development of Christian doctrine after the close of the first century A.D. This Gospel was published probably about 100 A.D. The Sacraments soon became the leading features of the worship of the Church and so affected the interpretation of this discourse.

If the Sacramental interpretation is rejected how is the discourse to be explained? It is a dramatic and symbolic representation of the process of salvation—the act of believing, and the spiritual experience which is its outcome. In verse 40 we read: "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone that beholdeth the Son, and believeth on Him, should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day." With this should be compared verse 54: "He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day." Here the same effects are attributed to eating and drinking as to vision and faith. This indicates that they are alternative expressions for the same spiritual activity. Eating the flesh is a dramatic and symbolic way of describing the act of faith whereby the quickening power of God's revelation in the Incarnate

Son is appropriated. Drinking His blood means assimilating by faith the redemptive efficacy of His Death. This use of eating as a figure for appropriating the contents of a divine Revelation has parallels in Ezekiel iii. 1, 3, Jeremiah xv. 16, and Revelation x. 9, 10. As the last of these would probably be familiar to the original readers of the Gospel it would afford a clue to the meaning of the words. (Revelation was written earlier than the Gospel and in the same neighbourhood.) The figure of eating and drinking to represent believing in Christ is used to emphasise the important fact that saving faith is not merely holding an opinion but also an act of the will laying hold of the Life in Christ. Several times in the discourse there occurs with slight modifications Christ's promise, "I will raise him up at the last day" (verses 39, 40, 44, 54). The repetition of these words emphasises the fact that it is the direct action of Christ, not any mechanical efficacy of the Sacrament, that brings eternal life. The explanation of the discourse is suggested in verse 63, "The *words* that I have spoken unto you are spirit and are life." Here Christ's teaching is declared to be the Divine Reality (cf. iv. 24) which imparts life to those who believe. In this way Jesus becomes the Bread of Life to them. It may be objected against this interpretation that those who listened to the discourse would find it almost as unintelligible if this was its meaning as if it referred to the Eucharist. This is not so, however. Christ's reiterated insistence on the need for and sufficiency of believing, and the familiarity of many of his hearers with the passages in the prophets referred to, would render it possible for the sincere and spiritual-minded to comprehend His meaning. That many were perplexed is in agreement with what the Synoptics tell us of the effect of Christ's parables. His disciples did not always understand them, although Jesus implied that they ought to have been able to. This discourse, like the Synoptic parables, was designed to stimulate and test the spiritual capacity of Christ's hearers; but this is very different from Christ giving teaching which none of them could possibly make any meaning of.

To sum up this discussion of the teaching of the Gospel with reference to the Sacraments, it is denied that there is a single passage where a reference to either Sacrament need be postulated.

(2) The moral teaching of the Gospel must now be considered. There are few specific ethical precepts. Instead we find fundamental moral principles insisted upon. Such qualities would be the natural and inevitable outcome of living in Union with Christ. Their presence alone would demonstrate the reality of this Union. In this case the spiritual experience is primary and productive of moral character.

(3) There remains, then, to consider the relationship between

Knowledge and Spiritual Experience in mediating Salvation. Frequently in the Gospel spiritual experience is connected with the teaching of Christ (*e.g.*, vi. 63, 68, viii. 32, xv. 3, xvii. 17, xvii. 26). The last of these passages is especially important: "I made known unto them Thy name and will make it known, that the love wherewith Thou lovedst me may be in them and I in them." Here the Divine Indwelling which brings Salvation is mediated by knowledge.

This shows in what sense the title "Salvation by Knowledge" adequately sets forth the message of the Gospel. Salvation comes through Union with Christ. Belief in Him as the Christ, the Revealer of God, is the way to Union with Him. This belief depends upon a knowledge of His words and deeds as these are illuminated by the Spirit of Truth. Knowledge as "intellectual" or factual leads to the "Knowledge" of Personal Communion which brings Salvation, and is itself Salvation. It is this type of knowledge—what we should call "mystical experience," which is declared to be eternal life in xvii. 3. "And this is life eternal, that they should know Thee the only true God, and Him whom Thou didst send, Jesus Christ."

IV.

APPENDIX.

THE GOSPEL'S UNIQUE VALUE IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN THOUGHT.

One of the most influential schools of modern religious thought bases religious faith upon experience and reconstructs Christian doctrine from this standpoint. There is a danger of subjectivism and excessive individualism in this method. The evidence and content of modern experience need to be supplemented by a historical foundation. Faith must be rooted in historic happenings. Its strength and fulness depends upon the synthesis and reconciliation of the two elements of history and experience.

This Gospel has a unique value now because it provides such a synthesis as no other book in the New Testament does. It is in harmony with the modern approach; for it sets forth the religion of spiritual experience, as has been shown above. Its message is, however, firmly rooted in the historic facts of the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, which it makes the foundation of faith. Can we, in view of the present position of critical scholarship in reference to the Gospel, claim that it is a historic record? Its canons of historical accuracy may not

conform to ours; but it is not necessary that they should in order that we may maintain that the account it gives of the life and teaching of Jesus is sufficiently accurate to form the basis of religious faith. Although the problem of its authorship seems far from a solution that will command the consent of a majority of critical scholars, there has emerged, as a result of the discussions concerning it, ample evidence that its author had recourse to primitive and authentic traditions of the life of Jesus, including, in all probability, the record of an eye-witness of part of His ministry. He shows by the comments he makes upon certain sayings and incidents that he did not feel at liberty to modify freely his sources in the interests of edification. For some of these comments seem inappropriate, and if he was freely composing he would surely have found some more suitable expression for his ideas.

In the Gospel, then, we have a genuine portrait of the life of Jesus sufficiently accurate to form the basis of our faith. What the Gospel does for us is to interpret the significance of this Life for our personal religious experience. Its message of "Salvation by Knowledge" needs to be emphasised now: the Christian faith which saves us rests upon a knowledge of Christ's Life, Death and Resurrection, forming the basis of a faith that unites us to Him and so gives us personal "knowledge" of His Grace and Glory in our own experience.

T. C. WARRINER.

LIBERTY was a theme studied and a prize fought for, 1638-1667. So Prof. Haller has republished at New York nineteen pamphlets written in that period. One is by the Lord Brooke who attended the worship of Separatists in Southwark, and defended them in Parliament. Another, more familiar to us, is by Roger Williams. A third, by Richard Overton, applies the doctrine in politics, and shows how the Levellers aimed at equality in Church and State; every man his own king, priest, and prophet; Parliament responsible to the people. Baptists were two centuries ahead of average thinking.