

# 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 Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

Max Turner

---

## Atonement and the Death of Jesus in John—Some Questions to Bultmann and Forestell

---

*It was A. M. Hunter who commented: 'Certainly Paul is more at home in the category of reconciliation, as John is in that of revelation', and then proceeded to qualify this verdict rather strongly. But the view that John's theology of the work of Christ actually excludes atonement and sacrifice continues to be strongly represented in the work of R. Bultmann and more recently of J. T. Forestell. Dr Turner, who is presently on leave from his post in London Bible College to teach in the University of Aberdeen, subjects this prevailing view to careful examination.*

Amongst the many provocative aspects of Arland Hultgren's new and major study of New Testament soteriology is his gently polemical reaffirmation of an older critical view that, for John, salvation consists merely in *receiving the revelation Jesus mediates*<sup>1</sup>—and consequently, the notion that salvation rests primarily in an objective act of atonement for sin, wrought by God in Christ at the cross, has little place in John's theological thinking. The position, of course, is Bultmann's, though Hultgren clearly accepts Forestell's major modification of it (and introduces some of his own). There is little sign, however, that Hultgren thinks their *description* of John's soteriology is either controversial or in need of defence. For him, Bultmann and Forestell are secure; their position may need tinkering with here and there, but otherwise there is little need to challenge it.

Now when a critical position becomes so established that writers are tempted to take it for granted, it is time to re-examine it. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether Bultmann and Forestell provide as coherent an account of John's soteriology as is supposed. We shall begin, in part I, with a description of

---

<sup>1</sup> *Christ and His Benefits: Christology and Redemption in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1988), ch. 8.

Bultmann's position; in part II we shall examine Forestell's modification of it; and in part III we shall offer a response.

But before we proceed, we must briefly address the question of the writings that may be considered evidence for 'John's' view. For methodological reasons we must resist the temptation to use the Apocalypse as a direct source for 'John's' view—for too many scholars reject the possibility that the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse came from the same immediate circle, let alone the same hand, and whether we agree with them or not is really immaterial. It would simply be counterproductive to base a critique of Bultmann and Forestell primarily on evidence drawn from writings *they* do not consider to reflect 'John'.

Similarly, we must beware of building too quickly from the Johannine epistles. The position that one writer, 'John' wrote both the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles is much easier to support, and in our view it is very probable<sup>2</sup>—but it is still strongly disputed (by *inter alios* Dodd, Schnackenburg, and Brown), so once again we must be cautious before attempting to use the epistles to solve the disputes about the meaning of the Fourth Gospel. However, as most (including Bultmann<sup>3</sup> and Forestell) accept that the epistles were at very least written by someone close to the writer of the Fourth Gospel, we shall be able to use the epistles in a reserved way for evidence of a secondary if not of a primary nature.

### I Bultmann's Position

It was Bultmann who made the controversial affirmation that '*The thought of Jesus' death as an atonement for sin has no place in John*'.<sup>4</sup> Essentially his case may be stated in seven propositions:

- (1). For John, the plight of man is alienation from God expressed in terms of unbelief, darkness and ignorance of God.
- (2). What man needs is not an appeasing sacrifice; but a Revealer, Light, and Knowledge of God.
- (3). Jesus provides these things—not through the cross, but

<sup>2</sup> For a brief summary of the arguments see e.g. I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1978), 32–42.

<sup>3</sup> Bultmann's analysis of Johannine theology in his *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM 1955, Vol. 2), part 3, treats the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles as *equally* representative of 'John's' thought, even while allowing that the Epistles *may* be from John's 'school' rather than from his own hand (so p. 3).

<sup>4</sup> Bultmann, *Theology* (Vol. 2), 54, (our emphasis).

through the entirety of his ministry from incarnation to glorification; the cross is simply a final act of obedience, and the stepping stone to glory.

(4). The one 'work' Jesus has come to do is to *reveal*. This work is accomplished in 'works' which consist of (a) signs and (b) the words of Jesus (8:28; 14:10; 15:22-24) that interpret the signs, and go beyond them.

(5). It is Jesus' *revelatory teaching* that cleanses and renews the disciples: 'You are all made clean by the word I have spoken to you' (15:3; cf. 13:10; 17:17). His words *are* an experience of Spirit and 'life' (6:62); continuing in them *frees* men from bondage (8:31-34), and the disciples are 'sanctified' or 'consecrated' through the word Jesus has spoken (17:17).

(6). Nowhere does John claim Jesus' death provides an atoning sacrifice—though such understanding has occasionally mistakenly been read into what John says (1:29; 3:16; 17:9 etc.), and it has further been added by an ecclesiastical glossator at 1 John 1:7; 2:2 and 4:10).

(7). Even if (6). prove wrong, and John has occasionally presented Jesus' death in traditional terms as an atoning sacrifice, *it would still be a foreign element in his work*<sup>5</sup>—it would not cohere with the writer's own soteriology as emerges clearly from the bulk of the Gospel.

The heart of Bultmann's case, then, is that the genuinely Johannine soteriology has no place for an atoning sacrifice; far less needs one. Salvation is by *revelation*, yielding new birth in knowledge of God. To understand Bultmann's point one needs to read the whole of his exposition of John's theology,<sup>6</sup> not merely his section on the cross.<sup>7</sup> But we shall not linger longer with Bultmann. While his is the genuinely creative position, it is, nevertheless, a position that has been corrected, refined and extended by the work of J. T. Forestell. And it is to this we turn in some detail.

## II J. T. Forestell's *The Word of the Cross*

The subtitle of the work—Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel—clearly indicates Forestell's dependence on Bultmann; and this is further evidenced in the corollary, stated as the aim

<sup>5</sup> *Theology* (Vol. 2), 54.

<sup>6</sup> *Theology* (Vol. 2), 15-92.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-59.

of the work: viz. 'to show that the properly Johannine theology of salvation does not consider the death of Jesus to be a vicarious and expiatory sacrifice for sin'.<sup>8</sup> Throughout his work, Forestell concentrates especially on those sections of John which he considers to be most clearly redactional, and on emphases which are repeated, and so he can argue the themes discovered are central to John's theology. The following five sections loosely paraphrase the argument of the chapters of his thesis.

### 1. Is Redemptive Revelation Central to John's Theology?

Forestell's first chapter seeks to establish the Bultmannian thesis that redemptive revelation is the *central* theme of Johannine theology. The stage onto which this revelation emerges is 'the world'; a world characterized by alienation from God, 'darkness' (8:12; 12:35, 46; 3:19), 'blindness' (9:39-41), and 'falsehood' (promoted by the father of lies (the devil: 8:44f.), who rules this world (12:31; 14:40; 16:11)), all expressed in deeds of darkness (3:19f.) and in ignorance (i.e. failure to *know God*). This whole mode of existence is described as 'sin', and to remain in it is to die (8:21), indeed it is already to be in death (5:24).

In the narrative proper man's *ignorance* comes to focus in the Baptist's that 'One stands amongst you whom you do not know' (1:26). But the significance of this ignorance concerning Jesus only becomes clear in the development of themes which follows. Jesus' identity (the major theme of the whole Gospel (see 20:30f.)) will be disclosed, at least to the reader, in Jesus' own claims and in his signs. Thus the reader will discover Jesus is able to offer the best wine, which has been kept to the last (2:1-11) and living water that will quench all thirst and bring the drinker eternal life (4:13f.). More especially Jesus is, and provides, the true bread men need to eat (6:35); the light without which they remain in darkness (8:12; 9:5); the resurrection without which they are in death (11:25f.); the truth without which they are in sin, falsehood and death (8:21-36; 14:6), and so forth. Not to 'know' Jesus, then, is to fail to know his benefits.

But *how* can Jesus be the source of these things? To ask that question takes us to the heart of the characteristically Johannine christology. He is the source of these things because of his relation to the Father. John emphasizes Jesus as the Son of Man who

---

<sup>8</sup> J. T. Forestell, *The Word of the Cross: Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: PBI 1974), 2 (our emphasis).

(uniquely) *descends* from heaven (3:13) and reascends 'where he was before' (6:26) through being 'lifted up' (3:13-14). The consequence, as Hultgren puts it, is that 'As Son of Man Jesus is the one who has shared an intimacy with the Father prior to his descent to earth and is therefore able to reveal the Father'.<sup>9</sup> A similar message is announced in the *Logos* christology of the Prologue, and it is in 'the Son' Christology, (distinctively emphasized in John) too. The Son is 'sent' by the Father (cf. 3:17; 5:23) and will 'depart' and 'return' to the Father (13:1; 14:12 etc.).

The import of this distinctive christology focus is that *Jesus uniquely reveals the Father*, as is underscored by the repeated theme of Jesus' unity with the Father (10:30, 38; 14:8-11), and by the striking affirmations that, for example, 'the Jews' (i.e. unbelievers) do not know him, even if they think they do, because they do not know the Father who sent him (7:27f); and conversely, and more dramatically, they don't know *Jesus* (8:19), who alone can reveal him (1:18). The significance of ignorance concerning Jesus is now clear; it entails corresponding ignorance of God. And all this means Jesus is sent, or given, not *to die* (as in Paul), but to become the Revealer, *and thereby* the Saviour of men:<sup>10</sup> cf. John 17:3 'This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'.

By what *means* does the Johannine Jesus impart Life, Living Water, Heavenly Bread, the truth that sets free, and so forth? Forestell argues it is principally through *revelatory signs and/or interpretive discourse*. His unity with God means the words Jesus speaks are God's words (3:34; 7:16; 8:28; 14:10 etc.); they are 'heavenly things' brought to men precisely by the one who alone has descended from heaven (3:12f., 31-36); and it is these words that save. 'In all the *egô eimi* affirmations . . . considered, the metaphors used converge on the notion of life *with at least a primary allusion to the reception of the word of God*'.<sup>11</sup> Forestell's picture of what this revelation comprises is not as flat as Bultmann's (for Bultmann, Jesus effectively only reveals that he is the Revealer; for Forestell, the revelation is the apocalyptic disclosure of salvation *in Jesus*<sup>12</sup>), but their emphasis is otherwise similar; they each regard John's concept of revelation as having a primary redemptive significance and as being of central importance to him.

<sup>9</sup> *Christ*, 147.

<sup>10</sup> Bultmann, *Theology* (Vol. 2), 52-55.

<sup>11</sup> Forestell, *Word*, 35 (our emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 42ff.

## 2. What Place Has the Cross In All This?

Bultmann's point had been simple: if people can be saved by revelation, they do not need atonement. The death of Jesus had no sacrificial meaning for John, and the focus of redemption for him is the whole period from incarnation to glorification (in ascension achieved *through* the cross), not Golgotha itself.

Here Forestell makes his original contribution primarily by way of correction of Bultmann. He insists Jesus' death, in John, is not merely the way *to* glory, nor is his death (which he actively embraces) simply a continuation of his role as Revealer:<sup>13</sup> it is nothing less than the principal focus of the revelation of God's love for men. This is the substance of Forestell's second chapter. The argument is roughly as follows:

*First*, at three key places Jesus is described as the Son of Man 'lifted up' or 'raised up' (*hypsôthênai*): the background is Daniel 7's picture of the exaltation of the Son of Man.

(a). 3:14f. 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life'.

(b). 8:28-29 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that *I am*, and that I do nothing on my own authority . . .'

(c). 12:32 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to me'.

Forestell is aware that some have taken the verb to mean no more than 'to crucify' (on the grounds that *zēqap* = 'to raise' with, amongst its senses, 'to raise on a stake', i.e. to crucify), and others have taken it to mean Jesus' *ascension* (not death at all; or, at most, including his death as the first part of the process (so Bultmann))—but the latter position falls foul of 12:33: here clearly it is Jesus' *crucifixion* that is the referent of the curious language of the lifting up of the Son of Man from the earth, for this is explained, 'This he said to show by what death he was to die'. But that it should just mean 'to crucify' is not adequate either in view of (a). the qualifying expression 'from the earth' at 12:32; (b). the Son of Man imagery, (c). what is said to be accomplished: namely, that through this 'lifting up' 'you will come to know that *I am*' (8:28) and 'I will draw all men to me' (12:32).

John, it would seem, has made the lifting up of Jesus on the cross the visible sign to men on earth of his 'ascension' or

---

<sup>13</sup> So Bultmann, *Theology* (Vol. 2), 53.

'glorification' (and indeed the initial part of this process). This language of 'lifting up' and 'glorification', in 12:23-36, may draw on the septuagint of Isaiah 52:13 (*kai hypsôthêsetai kai doxasthêsetai sphodra*), but it is not the humiliation of the Servant, nor the *atonement* significance of death that the evangelist highlights.

*Second*, everything in the Gospel moves towards *the hour* of Jesus' *glorification*; indeed, Jesus' revelation cannot be effective before it (7:38f.). But while Jesus' exaltation to pre-incarnation 'glory' is one referent of 'to glorify' (see esp. 17:5), and part of the content of Jesus' 'hour' (compare 12:23, 28 with 17:1, 4f.), the real focus of *the hour* is the crucifixion. Thus in John's equivalent to the Gethsemane prayer, in 12:27, we hear 'What shall I say, "Father, save me from this hour"? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour'. So when Jesus immediately beforehand says 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified' he is talking about his *crucifixion* (12:23), and this is further confirmed in 12:24, '... unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it lives, it bears much fruit'.

This paradoxical insistence that Jesus' death is his glorification cannot be explained purely in terms of death providing *access* to glory (as (almost) Bultmann), nor even (as Bultmann was to nuance it) that 'John has subsumed the death of Jesus under his idea of the Revelation'.<sup>14</sup> John has made it the principal focus of that Revelation.

*Third*, there is the question of *what* is revealed at the cross. What does this death reveal that makes the cross so significant? It reveals the Good Shepherd's willingness to 'lay down his life for (*hyper*) the sheep' (10:15). But this, Forestell hastily argues, is not cultic, sacrificial, expiatory language as the parallels in 13:37 (Peter says 'I shall lay down my life for you') and 15:31 confirm: the willingness to die *for* another, even *in the place of another*, does not necessarily make that death cultic. Nor does the fact that Jesus dies in accordance with God's will (10:18; 14:31) make the death cultic, an expiation for sin. Indeed, nowhere in the Old Testament is a man said to die 'as a substitute for' (*hyper*) another, and such is actually forbidden by Deuteronomy 24:16 where crime is concerned. So a cultic, expiatory sense of 'I lay down my life for the sheep' would not suggest itself.<sup>15</sup> The point in 10:15 (and *mutatis mutandis* in

<sup>14</sup> *Theology* (Vol. 2), 53.

<sup>15</sup> Though Forestell is aware that in hellenistic Judaism, the deaths of the martyrs were interpreted as propitiatory sacrifice: see e.g. 4 Maccabees 6:28f.



John 6:51, 'The "bread" which I give for the world is my flesh') is that 'Jesus' death is a revelation to men that God loves them with the self-devotion of the good shepherd'.<sup>16</sup> The cross is therefore the supreme moment of God's self-revelation in Jesus.

But, *fourth*, it must be re-emphasized this death is not conceived in cultic or expiatory terms. Contrary to the commentators, Jesus' words in 17:19 ('For their sake I consecrate (*hagiazein*) myself . . .') do not transform his self-giving death into an expiatory one—as the rest of the verse ('. . . that they *also* may be consecrated in truth') indicates; indeed 17:19 may not refer specifically to Jesus' death at all (so Barrett). Jesus' consecration of himself is his life-long commitment to obey God's will (compare 10:34–36), including the death which reveals God's love and simultaneously affords that return to the Father which enables the gift of Life.

Nor, claims Forestell, may we read a theology of atonement into Caiaphas' cynical words about one man dying instead of (*hyper*) the nation (11:50–52)—in so far as John regards the words as prophetic, he may mean no more than that Jesus' death will draw all men to him (12:32), and so mediate life to them. Nor, again, is there any firm evidence in the Passion Narrative that John saw Jesus as the Passover Lamb. If the hour of execution (19:14) happens to be that of the slaying of the Passover animals, John does not specifically state that to be the case. And the reference to Jesus' bones not being broken is closer to Psalms 34:21, than to Exodus 12:46, and so has nothing to do with the command to eat the Passover Lamb leaving its bones whole. The promise of the psalm is that God will protect the pious from violence, and John sees the failure to break Jesus' legs as a sign of divine protection over Jesus and simultaneously a promise of the resurrection.<sup>17</sup> Even if John had the Passover Lamb in mind, that would not suggest Jesus' crucifixion was perceived to be an *atonement* death; for the Passover Lamb was not necessarily viewed as a sin offering. Rather it would suggest a more general theme: e.g., 'The new passover is Jesus' passage from this world to

<sup>16</sup> *Word*, 76 (our emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> This explanation will barely satisfy. Contrary to Forestell, John 19:36 is closer to Exodus 12:46 *kai ostoun ou suntripsete ap' autou* than it is to Psalm 34:21 *kyrios phulassei panta ta osta autôn, hen ex autôn ou suntribêsetai*. Forestell claims the passive is decisively in favour of Psalm 34; but one would more readily claim the singular spoke decisively in favour of Exodus 12—as does the rest of the wording. And one must wonder whether it would not be *unbearable* irony to apply Psalm 34 to someone who had suffered execution by crucifixion, merely because he was saved the post mortem ignominy of having his legs broken!

the Father whereby he saves man from slavery to the prince of this world of darkness'.<sup>18</sup>

The cross, then, is central to John, *as revelation*; not as an objective event of atonement. This is confirmed by John's answer to the next two questions, which roughly correspond to Forestell's third and fourth chapters.

### 3. *What is John's Theology of Salvation?*

Here Forestell does not move substantially beyond Bultmann's thesis. John points to no single objective event of salvation other than the revelation of the Father in the Son which creates the possibility of salvation. Jesus' words, imbued with Spirit, reveal the Father, and so have the power to bring 'eternal life' (6:63, 68; 4:24); the eschatological revelation of God's glory experienced in the present. But the Revealer's signs and words only mediate life where they are met with faith. Hence the repeated summons to believe; indeed, the Gospel itself is written to promote this very end—that kind of belief in Jesus which brings 'life' (20:30f.). Revelation *by* Jesus and the believer's faith *in* him are the twin poles of the Johannine ellipse of salvation. No more is needed; and the death of Jesus is simply the climax of the revelation of God's love; that which has most power to draw men from unbelief into faith (12:32f.).

This 'faith' is not to be confused with dogma. What makes Jesus' words revelatory is not the mere propositional content, but this combined with the life-giving quality they derive from being 'from above', that is, from being *spirit* (cf. 6:63).<sup>19</sup> Faith, is thus communion in divine eschatological 'life' *now* (i.e. in the period of the church: for Forestell, while the incarnate Logos is already the source of life, this life cannot be dispensed to men until Jesus is glorified by way of the cross<sup>20</sup>). Those who 'remain in' Jesus' word (i.e. believe and

---

<sup>18</sup> *Word*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> According to Forestell, we should not confuse this with 'the Holy Spirit'; the notion that Jesus' death affords the gift of the Holy Spirit in renewal of life, and thus as mediator of eternal life, does not belong to the early version of John's thought, but is the influence of him (at Ephesus) of Lucan and Pauline thought. It is from them alone he gets the idea of the gift of the Spirit as that which grants life, and perpetuates the presence of Christ. Cf. *Word* 134–139. The earliest version of 20:22 will merely have spoken of Jesus mediating new life by his *word* to the disciples (*Word* 98–101), and similarly the living water offered the Samaritan woman will have been wisdom, while the interpretation of the gift of water in 7:37f. as the gift of the Spirit is regarded as 'patently secondary' (cf. *Word* 27–30).

<sup>20</sup> *Word*, 119.

obey the revelatory teaching, especially in the command to love) are promised they remain in him and he in them (15:1–14; cf. 14:23 etc); and to remain in the revelatory word is simultaneously to know the truth which makes a man free (8:13f.). After cross-fertilization of John's Word-theology with Luke's and Paul's Spirit-theology, John came to present the Paraclete as the one who perpetuates the presence of Christ (who mediates life) through the witness of the disciples, and the revelatory work of Christ in their hearts.

In sum, Jesus is the revelation of the saving word of God. Men appropriate this saving word by faith in Christ (word, works and person). The fruit of this faith is 'life, a communion of knowledge and love between the believer on the one hand, and the Father and the Son on the other. . . . [a] communion [which] . . . awaits a future fulfilment with Christ in the glory of the Father'.<sup>21</sup> Where is there need for, let alone sign of, an objective salvation by propitiatory or expiatory atonement?

#### 4. *How Does John Believe Sin is Dealt with?*

According to Forestell, we must first note that in John *forgiveness of sins*' appears only at 20:23, and here he suspects tampering by a later hand.

'Apart from 1:29 the mission of Jesus . . . is not presented as a mission against sin, but as the revelation of the Father and the gift of eternal life. *Sin is destroyed in John by the very gift of eternal life.* Because of the peculiar Johannine understanding of sin it cannot be adequately dealt with by the concept of forgiveness. Forgiveness supposes a juridical notion of sin as a debt which God in his mercy remits. *Sin in John connotes a way of life in opposition to God and to Christ.*'<sup>22</sup>

For John, 'to have sin' is the opposite of 'to have life'; and while John has not collapsed all sin into one, unbelief, they are closely related. In 3:20 it is asserted, 'Everyone who does evil, hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed'. Such people are 'from below' and belong to 'the world' (8:23) that hates Christ and his disciples (15:18); a world that belongs to the devil (12:31), who is the father of falsehood, and the power behind the murderous intent against Jesus (8:42–44). In contrast, believers are 'born from above' (3:3; 3:31); those who

---

<sup>21</sup> *Word*, 146.

<sup>22</sup> *Word*, 149 (our italics).

follow Jesus walk in light, not darkness, and they have life (8:12; 12:46). They know the Father, while those who reject Jesus, show thereby they do not know the Father either (7:28). The disciple knows the truth which sets him free (8:33), while the unbeliever is enslaved in falsehood and sin (8:44). The division of mankind thus hinges on whether they will accept Jesus as the Revealer; accordingly Jesus can assert 'You will die in your sins unless you believe I am' (8:24)—while those who believe are assured they have already passed out of judgement and death into life (5:24).

Sin is a whole spiritual state of alienation from God, with the sort of life that expresses it. But it is resolved by *knowing God*, through the revelation of the Revealer. Accordingly, for John, *purification* is effected by *the revelatory word* of Jesus (13:10; 15:3); and the disciples are 'consecrated' by the truth he imparts to them (17:17–19). Within this whole picture John 20:23 is simply a foreign body; an unassimilated tradition expressed also in Matthew 18:18.<sup>23</sup>

That leaves only Jn. 1:29 to deal with. It is on the grounds of this affirmation that Jesus is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world' that many read sacrificial and expiatory notions into John. Here Forestell eventually accepts Jesus is portrayed as the Passover Lamb, and (despite his argument at the end of Ch. 2) the possibility that in first century Judaism the Lamb was regarded as an expiatory sacrifice.<sup>24</sup> He accepts too, that if *airein* means 'to take upon oneself' the imagery is propitiatory and alludes to the role of the Servant in Isaiah 53:4, 11, 12, but he argues that it could equally mean 'to take away', 'to remove', and in respect of sin this would mean 'expiate': i.e. God graciously provides the lamb by which the sin of the world is 'removed'. In this instance, Forestell emphasizes, the elimination of sin could be seen as a gratuitous covenant-renewing act of God, without necessarily being attached to any onerous work of vicarious satisfaction or penal substitution<sup>25</sup>—for (he maintains) the sacrificial system in Judaism was *not* conceived in the latter terms at all. And if *airein* is taken in this second sense, the language could point to the cultic expiation of sin by blood rites instituted by God, and performed by priests, rather than to the Servant of Yahweh.

His own explanation, however, does not exclusively pursue the

<sup>23</sup> *Word*, 157.

<sup>24</sup> *Word* 162, n. 61.

<sup>25</sup> *Word*, 161.

latter possibility. Forestell is happy to suggest it may even have been John himself who fused the ideas of the paschal lamb, the Isaianic Servant, and the sacrifices for sin—albeit first in a eucharistic setting, before he subsequently put it on the Baptist's lips as a messianic confession. But his new creation did not quite retain the force of the original elements. Jesus was indeed the paschal lamb of the new exodus, and the Servant of God, but that does not mean John thought of the Servant's death as a vicarious atonement. Rather John's wording of the affirmation focuses Jesus instead as the Lamb God provides for the removal of sin. That is, Jesus accomplishes the Servant's task because his blood shed in his death on the cross is the divinely appointed means of cleansing from sin, and of creating communion of life between men and God. *'The emphasis . . . is not upon the atoning work of the Servant of Yahweh in offering his life, but upon the initiative of God in providing man with an effective means of entering into communion with him'*.<sup>26</sup> The effective means in question is of course—for Forestell—not Jesus' death as an act of penal substitution, but that death *as the supreme revelation of God's love*—*'This manifestation of divine love destroys the power of the devil in the world and rescues mankind from Satan's thralldom of hatred, lying, murder and self-glorification'*.<sup>27</sup>

In short, Forestell virtually claims that John uses the language of 1:29 merely as a *cultic metaphor* to describe the way the Johannine Jesus overcomes sin in the world by revealing the word of God, principally in his demonstration of the love of God at the cross. John 1:29 is simply to be read in terms of the theology of the cross discerned elsewhere in John: 'one isolated and disputed text is not sufficient to overthrow a point of view which otherwise pervades the entire gospel'.<sup>28</sup>

##### 5. How Does All This Relate to 1 John?

Forestell considers the Johannine epistles were probably written by a disciple of the evangelist, and final editor of the Gospel.<sup>29</sup> In language and concept the writer is very close to 'John'.

Like John, he stresses the relation of the revelation in Jesus to reception of eternal life in the present (1 John 1:1-3; 4:9f. 5:13);

<sup>26</sup> *Word*, 165 (our emphasis).

<sup>27</sup> *Word*, 166 (our emphasis).

<sup>28</sup> *Word*, 194.

<sup>29</sup> *Word*, 195.

God is light (1:5), Jesus mediates the true light (2:8); and believers walk in the light and have fellowship with God on that basis (1:3, 7; 2:8f.). Jesus was sent into the world to save it (1 John 4:9) which he did especially by revealing God's love in laying down his life for our benefit (1 Jn. 3:16); and it is this which makes Jesus a *hilasmos* for our sins (4:10; i.e. we are drawn out of the realm of sin by the knowledge of God's love revealed in Jesus?). The death of Christ completes his revelation, and so is necessary for the saving revelation (against the opponents; 5:6). To have the Son who is the Revealer is to have life (5:12).

As in *John*, there is the same stress on faith as departing the realm of lies and receiving the life-giving revelation of the Father in the Son (1 John 2:22-24); indeed this faith is victory over 'the world' (5:4f.; cf. 4:4f.) and 'the evil one' (2:14). The 'faith' envisaged is not dogma, but being 'born of God', having 'his seed' in us (i.e. the word of God revealed in Jesus), and so having 'life' and fellowship with God. The whole redemptive model is based in Jeremiah 31:33f., where salvation is by interior knowledge of God.

A slightly different emphasis from that of '*John*', however, is felt at a number of minor points (e.g. the teaching on the Spirit as *chrisma* shows the writer has not yet acclimatized to the introduction of the Paraclete notion in the Fourth Gospel); and most significantly, for our purposes, in the following assertions:

- 1:7 The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us of all sin
- 1:9 He will forgive our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness
- 2:2 He is the expiation (*hilasmos*) for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world
- 2:12 Your sins are forgiven on account of his name
- 4:10 He loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation (?) for our sins.

But these are to be explained in terms of the writer's pastoral concern for those anxious about post-baptismal sin. The alternative 'remedy' for their anxiety on offer is a flight to the very antinomian gnosticism the writer seeks to oppose. The writer must insist that the indwelling word of God is 'a principle of sinlessness, but not automatic impeccability';<sup>30</sup> but that in turn leads to the necessity to explain how these sins are dealt with, hence the verses in question.

But how are the verses in question to be understood? What do they mean? 1 John 2:12 offers no problem; it is to be interpreted in

---

<sup>30</sup> *Word*, 186.

the light of its parallel within the chiasmus—2:14—‘because you know the Father’ (187); so it means something like ‘because of profession of *faith in Christ*’.<sup>31</sup> 1 John 1:7b, which is clearly related to the sins of those already Christians, is taken as a reference to the *eucharistic* ‘blood’ (not Golgotha) understood as a cultic sign of the life-giving love and forgiveness of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is only 1 John 2:1 and 4:10 that *must* refer to Golgotha, and even then they do not require that John thought in terms of penal substitution or vicarious atonement. These verses may refer either (a) to Christ’s martyr-death as expiation (as in 4 Macc. 6:28ff, but without any sense of ‘propitiation’, and extended *beyond* Israel), (b) to the revelation of divine pardon for sins (if *hilasmos* approximates e.g. *sêlîhâ* as in Psalms 130:4 and Daniel 9:9 (Θ)), or (c) to Christ’s death as like the levitical expiatory sacrifices for inadvertent sin (without any onerous vicarious character). In view of the cultic language in John 1:29, Forestell adopts the last, but it is apparent he still wishes to interpret it primarily as a metaphor for the revelation of God’s love at the cross which takes one out of the realm of sin altogether—that serves as a sign of God’s willingness to forgive individual sins. That the language of 1 John 2:2 might be intended to denote an objective sacrificial atonement is only conceded as a possibility that cannot entirely be excluded, but which in any case is not a major element in the ‘properly’ Johannine theology of salvation.<sup>32</sup>

*Conclusion?* Forestell concludes T. Müller<sup>33</sup> was right to criticize Bultmann’s view that the death of Jesus has no salvific meaning for John, but wrong to give it the character of a vicarious expiation for sin. ‘The dominant understanding of Christ’s work in John is the revelation of the glory of God through his Word. This work embraces the entire ministry of Jesus including the cross and is effective for the salvation of men through faith . . . It has been our contention, however, that the cross of Christ in John is evaluated precisely in terms of revelation in harmony with the theology of the entire gospel, rather than in terms of a vicarious and expiatory sacrifice for sin. Revelation and the sacrifice of the cross are not two parallel or complementary theologies of salvation in John. On the contrary, the evangelist understands the cross as the culminating act of a revel-

---

<sup>31</sup> *Word*, 187 (our emphasis).

<sup>32</sup> *Word*, 195. If a sacrificial meaning is to be allowed at all it must be recognized, ‘It is peripheral, secondary, and occasioned by the pastoral problem of the sins of Christians’.

<sup>33</sup> T. Müller, *Das Heilsgeschehen Im Johannesevangelium* (Zurich 1961).

atory process in which God manifests himself to men and bestows upon them his own divine life'.<sup>34</sup>

### III Response

We must of course be grateful to both Bultmann and Forestell for elucidating the redemptive significance of revelation in the Fourth Gospel. And our main question to Bultmann's position—has he not left the 'hour' of Jesus' Passion unexplained?—has so effectively been pressed by Forestell that we may limit our questions to his own modifications of Bultmann's position. We are grateful to him for offering a massive corrective to Bultmann's tendency to play down the theological significance of the cross in John: Forestell has shown that it is of central and revelatory significance. And we must recognize too that Forestell has offered many fine individual exegetical insights that we have not had the space to elucidate. But at the following points we must take issue with him.

*First, Forestell's antithesis between salvation by revelation, and salvation by sacrificial atonement fails to do justice to the New Testament evidence in general, and to 1 John in particular.* We may accept Forestell's thesis that John has highlighted the cross as the supreme revelation of God's love, but why does he feel forced to disagree with F. M. Braun's position that 'salvation by faith in the Word and salvation by the sacrifice of the Lamb (or by the blood) are two stages in the process of salvation or that both together constitute a complex and coherent doctrine'?<sup>35</sup> *According to Forestell, the one view excludes the other.* For John, 'to know God as love through faith in Jesus Christ is itself salvific because this knowledge, which is eternal life, delivers from sin and becomes in the believer a power of rebirth (1:12) and of renewal which is victorious over the murder, lying and self-exaltation of the world (16:33; 1 John 5:4–5)'.<sup>36</sup> *But Forestell has in no way demonstrated the two views are exclusive:*

(A). There seems to be no *necessary* logical or theological problem in asserting *both* that the death of Jesus was an atoning sacrifice, and yet that its saving benefits (which included a reconciliation to and fellowship with God which transform life) are *at least for the present* received by faith in the *kerygma*. Indeed, as even Hultgren

<sup>34</sup> *Word*, 191.

<sup>35</sup> *Jean le Théologien* III.1 (Paris 1966), 172); cited by Forestell, *Word*, 197f.

<sup>36</sup> *Word*, 198.



may be prepared to admit, that is the position at least of the majority (if not all) of the New Testament writings.<sup>37</sup>

(B). Clearly the writer of 1 John regards the two views as 'coherent' or 'complementary' or he would hardly have brought them together. Forestell is embarrassed here. His first option is to dissolve the apparent tension by interpreting 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 in line with his more general view of John's soteriology. He appears to wish to reinterpret these as cultic metaphors for the cross as a costly revelation of God's love which removes sin in the sense that it blows away the enveloping clouds of unbelief, darkness and inauthentic existence. But (as Forestell senses) this will not work at 2:2. There the framework of thought is that a man's sins somehow threaten his continuing fellowship with God, and they need *forgiveness*. In this situation, Jesus has to act as the sinner's *advocate*, and what he pleads—i.e. to God; not to the sinner—is his expiatory death. The whole conceptual (as well as the linguistic) framework of the immediate context requires that *hilasmos* (sacrifice of atonement?) denote an *objective* atonement that *both* expiates sin and propitiates God.<sup>38</sup> An understanding of the cross as a subjectively reconciling revelation of God's love is simply not relevant to John's discourse here. Bultmann offers Forestell a way of escaping the problem, simply by exercising the parts of 1 John which spoke of Jesus' death as expiatory as ecclesiastical glosses; but at these particular points

<sup>37</sup> *Christ, passim*. Hultgren eliminates only Matthew, Luke-Acts and (perhaps) 'John' from this—all three, in our view, on inadequate grounds. I am fully aware that Hultgren argues that Paul and Mark (and to a lesser extent the other writings, but excluding the three) regard Jesus' atonement as an object event accomplished for all mankind *irrespective* of faith (i.e. all, or virtually all, shall be saved), but he would nevertheless agree that the benefits of that are at present enjoyed only *through* faith. We consider Hultgren's universalistic reading of the New Testament perhaps 'believable' (far short of 'probable'), but need not enter into detailed argument on the issue for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *Epistles*, 218–223, while giving an excellent account of the linguistics of *hilasmos* . . . *peri tôn hamartión*, and while quite rightly emphasizing the objective nature of the event envisaged as sacrifice of atonement cleansing away sin, appears nevertheless to miss the significance of the need of Jesus to act as an advocate, and the consequently *propitiatory* force of the passage. Better here are I. H. Marshall, *Epistles*, 117–120, and S. S. Smalley, 1, 2, 3 *John* (Waco: Word, 1984) 38–40. It may also be noted that Brown, who earlier commends Forestell's view of John's theology of salvation and the cross (*Epistles* 79), does not appear to realize that he virtually reverses Forestell's emphases in his own discussion of 1 John 1:7 and 2:2.

none of his proposed glosses has proved convincing,<sup>39</sup> and Forestell was wise not to accept the offer.

Forestell's second line of defence is to insist that if an objective sacrificial meaning cannot be excluded, then it is still 'peripheral', 'secondary' to the theology proper, and merely occasioned by pastoral needs. Perhaps—though one may suspect that with respect to the *Epistle* such verdicts are more strongly pled than argued—but the fact remains that the writer is unlikely to adduce (even for pastoral reasons!) a sacrificial theology of the cross which he regards as 'incoherent' and 'incompatible' with his theology of redemptive revelation. The difficulty is patently Forestell's, not John's. And it is not shared by others who are more than willing to affirm the Johannine emphasis on redemptive revelation. Thus Hultgren, who strongly emphasizes the differences between redemption seen as *accomplished* by Christ (at the cross) and that seen as *mediated* by Christ in revelation (the pattern he attributes to John), does not perceive the combination of the types in 1 John as in any way *necessarily* 'incoherent' or 'contradictory'.

*Second, we could argue that a combination of the two views (the cross as an objective atoning event and as such the high point of redemptive revelation) provides a more coherent explanation of the place of the cross in John than Forestell's position does. While agreeing with Forestell that John has especially focused the cross as the supreme revelation of God's love, we must ask three closely related questions:*

(A). In Forestell's exegesis *how* is Jesus' death truly '*for (hyper) us*' at all? Part of Forestell's answer is that Jesus' death becomes the way to exaltation, and hence to the position from which he can redeem by revelation; the 'lifting up' on the cross is even a *sign* of that exaltation. But in this he hardly goes beyond Bultmann, and falls far short of explaining why it is the *death* of Jesus that is so strongly emphasized as the crux of the revelation, rather than the resurrection-exaltation itself (12:32f.). Of course, Forestell wishes to assert the cross is also the climax of God's revelation of his love, and that this is revealed in Jesus' giving his life 'for us'. But that only prompts the next two questions.

(B). If the cross is merely a revelation of God's love, and not a sacrifice of atonement, *why is it that salvation, for John (on Forestell's understanding), can only be bestowed after the cross?*

---

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (London: Chapman, 1983) *ad loc.*

After all, Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, had been offering saving revelation throughout the ministry. And the cross, on Forestell's view, may be the supreme moment of revelation of God's love, but it is only *primus inter pares* of such moments. Why should the revelation *there* be so decisive, and the rest ineffective?

His answer cannot be that it is only through the exaltation that Jesus can provide the Spirit, and so life, for we must remember that Forestell effectively precludes such a position. For, on the one hand he argues that the notion of Jesus' exaltation providing the gift of the Spirit as the source of life, and of Jesus' continuing presence, is a late (albeit Johannine) addition to John's word-theology, and not truly integrated with it, and, on the other hand, he affirms that John emphasizes the activity of the revelatory word as Spirit *within* Jesus' ministry (3:34; 4:23; 6:63 etc.). The view Forestell opposes (namely that Jesus must effect objective redemption for sins at the cross before there can be redemption mediated by revelation and received subjectively in faith) could at least explain *why*, for John, Jesus' redemptive revelation can only become effective *after* the 'glorification'. Just such a framework of understanding would also fit naturally with the common Jewish tradition that the Spirit of prophecy would only return to Israel when Israel had first been cleansed of sin,<sup>40</sup> and also with Paul's teaching, perhaps dependent upon it, that Jesus had first to become a curse in our place *so that* the gift of the Spirit could be received (Gal. 3:13f.).

(C). The sharpest question must remain, if the cross does not accomplish something objectively for us, *how* is it Jesus' giving of his life 'for us'; and *how* is it a revelation of *God's love for us*? Forestell is aware of Schweizer's criticism of Bultmann's view 'that if we ignore the vicarious character of Jesus' suffering and death we shall be reducing the death of Christ to a merely romantic love, a tragic denouement, or at best an example of obedience',<sup>41</sup> but he does not provide any answer except in terms of that death as the first stage of exaltation.

If the point is only that the manner of death (being 'lifted up') is a *sign* of the exaltation, and that the *latter* (understood as that return to the Father which reveals Jesus' unity with him) is what shows God's love for men, then the revelatory value of Golgotha itself is minimal indeed, and, as we have said, hardly accounts for John's

<sup>40</sup> See the discussion in W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: SPCK 1970<sup>3</sup>), 205ff.

<sup>41</sup> *Word*, 196.

focus on it. Nor do we believe the problem here can be resolved by the affirmation that John's theology has swamped his chronology, and the cross is *already* the ascent to the Father—that, as 20:17 ('I have not yet ascended . . . I am about to ascend') and related verses demonstrate at best a half-truth.<sup>42</sup>

Forestell's point may rather be that Jesus perceives this death, in obedience to the Father, as the *only* gateway to exaltation and the power to save, and, because he willingly submits to it, he can thus be said to lay down his life for the salvation of others. And in so far as he does it in unity with the Father, and as an expression of the Father's will, it simultaneously reveals God's love and desire to save.

But that way only begs the bigger question—*why* was *this* death made the gateway to exaltation? On Forestell's assumptions one might indeed wonder why Jesus needed to die at all? Elijah's manner of being 'lifted up' might have been expected to be more appropriate. The problem here cannot be avoided simply by saying John knew Jesus had been crucified, and that he was therefore in no position to offer an alternative. The point is that the shocking nature of the death calls for theological explanation. And here we detect conflicting motives in Forestell's response. In part he attempts to play down the humiliation of the cross and to see it merely as the locus of Jesus' ascension-glorification—as though John had never included the footwashing incident which so tellingly portrays the humiliation involved in the forthcoming act that will cleanse the disciples.<sup>43</sup> And yet he also wishes to stress that the cross is an act of self-sacrifice which, because costly to Jesus, the more effectively reveals his love.

But if there is no reason for the awfulness of this death, it is surely problematic. After all, would one not be tempted to consider perverse, rather than loving, a Father who made the gate to exaltation as difficult as possible merely so that the cost of that death to Jesus would be the more impressive a sign of Jesus own commitment and love? A modern reader might rush in to stress the importance of Jesus' total identification with man—one that is especially revealed in suffering—or to emphasize the love of God revealed in his willingness (shown in the Son) to submit to the worst that historical fate could inflict on him, but, while both affirmations may be true, neither is a clearly *Johannine* emphasis. One has only to remember that it is precisely *John's* Gospel that is most frequently

<sup>42</sup> For detailed justification see M. M. B. Turner, 'The Concept of Receiving the Spirit in John's Gospel' *Vox Evangelica* 10 (1977), 28f.

<sup>43</sup> See the brief but perceptive analysis by G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word 1987), 230–237.

(even if unjustifiably) accused of docetic Christology to see the weakness of the first explanation, and John's stress on the sovereignty of God, even *in* human responsibility, renders the second perilously incomplete as a *theological* account of the matter.<sup>44</sup>

If Forestell had not (correctly) argued that John has focused the cross as the supreme revelation of God's saving love, it may have been possible to agree with Bultmann that the death of Jesus is itself of little soteriological import in John. But having made his point, Forestell's own account successfully focuses the importance of the cross without explaining why *this death* of Jesus is necessary at all, or *how* it can reveal God's love. Forestell's insistence that the cross is the supreme moment of revelation of God's saving love *creates an interpretational vacuum*. The interpreter is bound to cast around for something to fill the void, and as the Christian tradition prior to John almost universally maintained God sent the Son to die on our behalf (*hyper hêmôn*), and 'for our sins' (1 Cor. 15:3 onwards),<sup>45</sup> *it is difficult to see how the interpreter could possibly overlook this as a probable explanation.*

More precisely, the formulae relating to Christ, or the Son, dying *hyper* ('on behalf of') men were traditional in the Church as soteriological affirmations that Jesus' death was an atoning sacrifice for sin.<sup>46</sup> That significance of Jesus dying for the sake of (*hyper*) others would be part of the *presupposition pool* of both reader and writer of the Fourth Gospel, and so potentially of immediate relevance to any statement to the effect that Christ dies, or lays down his life, *hyper* others. No feature in the discourse context of (e.g.) John 10:11, 15 suggests the presupposition should not be engaged here, and Forestell's complaint that similar language may be used of others (e.g. Peter at 13:37) is a red herring—no-one claims the first century Christian presupposition pool contained the proposition that the phrase 'to lay down one's life for another' was itself necessarily cultic, but that utterances to the effect that *Jesus* died on behalf of others meant his death was a redemptive sacrifice of some kind. As John nowhere offers a rival statement re-interpreting the *hyper* formula, we have to assume the traditional understanding would be engaged.<sup>47</sup> The same is especially true of 6:51c, the significance of

<sup>44</sup> On this see the admirable exposition afforded by D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (London: MMS 1981), part III.

<sup>45</sup> Hultgren can only deny this to Matthew and Luke, before John, and then not on convincing grounds.

<sup>46</sup> See Hultgren, *Christ*, 48f.

<sup>47</sup> We must reject as evasion Forestell's statements that 10:11 and 15 (etc.) do not *demand* a cultic interpretation. If he means that the *sense* of the words 'I lay down my life in behalf of the sheep' includes no overt cultic element he is, of course, absolutely right. But the *significance* of the words can only

which can hardly have been unaffected by how the eucharist was generally interpreted to relate to the cross. Of course John *may* have abandoned the traditional understanding, and used the language merely as a cultic metaphor for the price Jesus had to pay to reveal God's love, but both his intended audience and his subsequent interpreters would need clear indication of such reinterpretation before it could be accepted as a responsible reading.

It is even more difficult to see how it can seriously be maintained that John's readers would not be expected to understand Jesus' death in the traditional 'cultic' sense, when (a). John offers no *other* coherent explanation of how the cross can be considered the climax of Jesus' revelation of God's love, and (b). the writer of the Johannine epistles clearly reaffirms the traditional 'cultic' view (1 John 2:2).

In short, the emphasis on Jesus' *death* in John actually makes a combination of sacrificial and mediatorial views of salvation *entirely coherent*, if not *essential*. It is in this very different light that we need to see those alleged 'hints' or 'relics' of a cultic view of Jesus' death in John.

*Third*, Forestell's handling of the Baptist's witness in 1:29, 36, is less than convincing. Our complaint here is twofold: that he fails sufficiently to justify his interpretation of it, and that he underestimates its importance for John.

(A). With respect to the question of interpretation, Beasley-Murray is probably right that on the Baptist's lips, the confession 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' denoted the powerful apocalyptic messianic lamb that destroys the forces of evil (cf. *Test. Joseph* 19:18f.; 1 *Enoch* 89f.; Rev. 5:6f.; 17:14).<sup>48</sup> But (again with Beasley-Murray), we do not have to assume that John meant by the terms only what the Baptist could have understood by them. After all he explicitly takes Caiaphas's political but cynical comment that 'it is better that one man die for the people than the whole nation perish' to be prophecy, and true at a level quite different from that intended by the original speaker (11:49-52).

be gauged by combining the sense with elements from the presupposition pool shared by the reader and writer—which includes *both* the context and shared tradition: on this see further P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK 1989), 90-96 and 257f.

<sup>48</sup> *John*, 24f. On the pre-Christian provenance of the concept see J. C. O'Neill, 'The Lamb of God in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs' *JSNT* 5 (1979) 2-30.

Central to the Evangelist's affirmation too is probably his understanding of Jesus as the *apocalyptic Lamb* (as in Rev. 7:17; 17:14 etc.)—for it is unlikely on the basis of Isaiah 52:7 alone that the Servant would be called 'the Lamb of God' (that figure is only described as being unprotesting *like a lamb*), and similarly while John possibly considered Jesus to be the *Passover Lamb* (see especially 19:14, 36), the latter lamb was not referred to as an *amnos* (as in 1:29), but as a *probaton*; more specifically it was almost invariably called to *pascha*—the Pascal Lamb—so this would be the obvious way to refer to Jesus if the Passover Lamb was meant (as at 1 Cor. 5:7); and we may safely ignore most alternative suggestions.<sup>49</sup> It is true that the term used in Revelation for the lamb is *arnion* not *amnos*; but it is debatable whether this is significant (the terms are virtual synonyms), and *Testament of Joseph* 19:6f. uses *amnos* for the victorious lamb.

But while we are probably best to understand the primary reference of 1:29 to be to the *apocalyptic Lamb*, we need to note that John (like the author of Revelation) has probably fused the erstwhile separate concepts in the light of the cross. The triumphant Lamb proved also to be the lamb that *was slain* (Rev. 5:6). This would almost inevitably evoke the imagery of the Suffering Servant, and that in turn provides the best explanation of John's choice of *amnos* (rather than *arnion*), as Forestell rightly saw.

But having accepted that the use of *amnos* is most probably an allusion to the Servant of Isaiah 53, Forestell proceeds to a most improbable interpretation of the confession. In the first place he denies that *airein* in 1:29 has any connection with the Servant's *bearing* of the sin of many, arguing instead that the central idea is of God's provision of a means for expiating sin. And secondly, he wishes to interpret the resulting language not of an objective atonement at the cross—but as that revelation of God's love that overcomes our sinfulness. The first move is

---

<sup>49</sup> We may reject the views that claim the intended referent to be (a). the scapegoat—for while that animal was credited with the taking away of sin, it was not a lamb; (b). the guilt offering—for while this *could* be a lamb (cf. Lev. 14:12ff.) it was not necessarily or even prototypically so, and when referred to in the LXX it is called a *probaton* not John's *amnos*; (c). the gentle lamb of Jeremiah 11:19—for this had nothing to do with the removal of sin; (d). the lambs of the morning and evening sacrifice in the Temple (cf. Ex. 29:36ff.)—for there is no reason why these should be distinguished as 'the Lamb of God'; and (e). the God-provided lamb of Genesis 22—for Jesus was more liable to be presented as the antitype of Isaac than of the lamb, which in any case was not regarded as a sin offering.

exegetically indefensible. Once the *amnos* language is connected with the Servant of Isaiah 53, the most natural interpretation of the language of 'taking/bearing the sin of the world' is that of the vicarious suffering indicated in that context—as Forestell earlier admits.<sup>50</sup> Forestell may be right to suggest the linguistics of John's affirmation implies the Servant's suffering expiates sin, and such an interpretation could readily be understood as complementary to the notion of vicarious suffering in Isaiah 53, but the latter can only be driven from the context by violence.

The second move is no more justifiable. How is the first century reader supposed to know the Evangelist has abandoned the traditional sacrificial soteriology in favour of atonement and purification through the revelation of God's love in Jesus' word and cross-exaltation *alone—to the exclusion of any objective dealing with sin at the cross*? He certainly cannot be expected to detect the switch when he first reads 1:29, and nothing later serves to make such a clarification. Rather, armed with his traditional sacrificial soteriology, and finding that reinforced by the allusion to Isaiah 53 in 1:29, the readers (or hearers) are liable simply to assume the Evangelist believes the the cross is the supreme revelation of God's love because he believes that there, is his Son, God dealt decisively with man's sin.

In the final analysis it would appear Forestell is doubtful he will convince his reader that John has reinterpreted 1:29 to remove the sacrificial soteriology. According he never unambiguously repudiates the traditional interpretation of the verse, but rather suggests that if the language is indeed cultic, it is but a relic, and entirely subordinate to John's theology of redemptive revelation. That leads to our last observation.

(B). Forestell is too quick to insist that 1:29, even if cultic, stands alone in John and so is relatively insignificant. In the first place, the importance of the Baptist's witness in the Fourth Gospel is more than reaffirmed in 5:31–36; secondly, we must note that 1:29–34 is part of the chapters 1–2 which together have *programmatic* significance for the whole Gospel,<sup>51</sup> and thirdly, most important, 1:29–34 is the *first witness* to Jesus, and so, like the prologue, the one, above all, *through which the rest of John is inevitably read*.

Far from being insignificant, its position would suggest 1:29 is

<sup>50</sup> *Word*, 160.

<sup>51</sup> See e.g. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 31.



a doorway to the Johannine understanding of the cross. The other references to Jesus laying down his life for the sheep (10:11, 15), and dying instead of (*hyper*) the nation (11:50–52), would then need to be read by the light this passage affords.<sup>52</sup> And the description of the flesh and the blood that Jesus is to give for the life of the world (6:52–59) would seem to point in the same direction, for while the referent is Golgotha, the language itself is eucharistic—which means it is *sacrificial* language; for the bread and cup words of the Lord's Supper (in the traditions we have in the New Testament) allude to Isaiah 53:10–12.

In sum, we consider Forestell's focus on the cross as central to Johannine soteriology to be right. And he has well emphasized that John regards the cross as a supreme revelation of God's love, a revelation which draws us out of death into union with him, and into 'life' in the Son. For this we must be grateful. But in denying any traditional concepts of objective atonement to John, Forestell leaves himself unable to offer a satisfactory alternative explanation of why Jesus has to die at all, of how his death can truly be said to be 'for us', or why it should be considered the cardinal revelation of the Father's love. The earliest Christians (as Forestell admits) had an explanation of some sort for these things—as far as they were concerned the death of Jesus revealed God's love because in it the Son, in union with the Father, took into himself the divine righteous wrath against sin, and so became both expiation and (provided the word is used carefully) propitiation for us (and the writer of 1 John evinces similar views). John may not emphasize this explanation, but he can barely have failed to realize his readers were likely to assume it. What is more, his own description of Jesus as 'the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world', standing at the doorway of his Gospel (1:29, 36), could hardly be taken as less than a positive encouragement to understand Jesus' death in the traditional terms. We would conclude that it is then most probable John's subsequent emphasis on the cross as salvific revelation was intended to be understood as complementary to the traditional objective explanations rather than as a denial of them.

---

<sup>52</sup> A point also emphasized by Professor I. H. Marshall in written correspondence.